DISCOVERIES

IN THE BASIN OF THE UPPER SEPIK

Dr Richard Thurnwald

Mitteilungen aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten

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Annotations and footnotes by Barry Craig

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Note by Barry Craig:

Translated from the German by a post-graduate student of the University of Sydney in the late 1960s, whose name, unfortunately, I have forgotten.

Activities at home[1] take place indoors, regardless of the weather. But in the wilderness, the seasons bring their authority to bear with severity. Man can only meet the force of nature by adapting himself to it. During the northern winter months[2] the rainy season that covers the mountains and plains of the Sepik area with cloudbursts demands a special attitude if one wishes to use this most untempting time for travelling. All the streams and basins are filled to the brink of the high steep banks. Often they devour the sandbanks, flow over the edge, and flood the bush, the forest and the broad plains covered with wild sugarcane[3] as tall as trees.

The rain turns undrained land into bogs and firm ground changes into a sticky mess, a pulpy lime that is carried a great distance by the river and turns the sea yellow for a long way out. During the floods that heaven and earth dispense, it is best to make virtue out of necessity and to put to good use the water that could restrict one's activities. By using boats and canoes as transport, we could cope with the immense flooding of the land.

On the fifth of December [1913], we set off with a long, heavily-laden train of canoes tied together and pulled by two boats and the pinnace. On the canoes were oil and gasoline, as well as most of the native lads. The boats were laden with rice and tinned food and trade goods; the pinnace carried instruments, clothes and linen; the whole looked like a floating gypsy camp.[4] A crate served as a seat and a case as a dining table. Behind each crate lurked malicious hordes of mosquitoes.

From early morning to late afternoon the motors chugged along. Many days we travelled for ten or eleven hours without a break. Only evening brought relief from sedentary immobility when the men pitched camp overnight on the bank. We progressed slowly against the current which had been rising steadily since the beginning of this year's early rainy season. When we drew near to villages, canoes

[1] Germany
[2] European: January to March
[3] Neo-Melanesian: pit-pit
[4] See Melk-Koch 1989 *Auf der Suche nach der menschlichen Gesellschaft: Richard Thurnwald*, Berlin; Abb. 28, 30, 32.

appeared with painted, gesticulating natives who wished to exchange yams, sago, ethnological items, or human skulls for iron in the form of knives or axes.
A particular incident marked the reception in the village of Angerman.[5] I have a certain experience in receptions and was used to different types; here, however, was something new.

The night before, we had camped below the village and the news of my arrival had been spread in advance by two men from the village who were with me. The next morning, when our cavalcade appeared on the bank in front of the village, all the innumerable inhabitants were waiting there – men, women and children. Two big masked dancers were also standing there with their reed fringes reaching to the knees (similar to those of the famous Dukduk masks of the Gazelle Peninsula), with rattles on their wrists and ankles, and giant combs swaying on their heads. They were blowing, on short flutes, sounds like stylised pig squeaks. Here pigs seem to play a specific role in the beliefs of the people (as giant dancing masks in the form of pigs also show).

From the moment I stepped onto land, everyone began to dance, like a mechanical theatre into which you have dropped a coin – the men, women, children and the two masks. In addition, they were singing while the masks were squeaking on the flutes. The masks danced towards the great spirit house and looked around to see if I was following. I followed them with a great crowd of people and entered the spirit house. All the village men who had come with us fetched their flutes and now an ear-splitting squeaking concert began, as though there were five hundred pigs.

This reception had its antecedents: when I came through here in October, upstream on the way to Maiui,[6] five people from this village had joined me voluntarily. I took them willingly because one can learn all sorts of things from such passengers en route. They had especially enjoyed teaching me their dances. When I began the march to the coast, they accompanied me inland for a short while but returned the second day. The pinnace and the boat went back downstream later without me. Naturally they thought

[5] Angriman, just downstream from the mouth of the Karawari River.
[6] Nowadays the site of the Murui mission and Pagwi administrative centre, and the southern end of the road from Maprik.

that I had been killed. Now, however, I returned alive and from the other side. They thought there was something uncanny about this.
Incidents like the reception described brought variation to the monotonous journey. So too did one of the engines from time to time, when it tried to entertain through its obstinancy, efforts that, however, were not always appreciated. So we proceeded between flat reedy banks, clumps of trees and sparse woods, with distant ranges appearing at rare intervals. Even above Malu[7] the river was still almost as wide, but the woods became thicker on the banks and many of the numerous twists and bends of the river passed right by the foot of the hills.

Often the days were burning hot, sweltering and heavy. Threatening violet-grey clouds, traversed by downy wooly-white formations, appeared in the western and northern skies. The dark masses formed themselves into a curtain that crept nearer and nearer. Only in the south did the sun shine innocently. The sky seemed cut in half, into day and night. Vertical curtains showed what was happening elsewhere and what could be expected from the approaching black army that swallowed up more and more of the sunny, silvery cirrus clouds.

Suddenly a whirlwind would break loose and lift the tents that had been spread out in the boat over the cases as a protection against the sun and the rain. We had to hold them down with heavy oars. The river water splashed up and the boats rocked about considerably. Here and there, lightning rent bloody wounds in the monstrous darkness that tried to seize us with its black cloak. Thunder danced around or smashed into the chaos of sounds in a frenzied symphony that broke out around us. Rain rattled down from the heavens, drowning the noise of the motors. Unexpectedly ice-cold winds swept from the right, from the left, from in front, from behind, so that the men's teeth chattered. Such density of vapor arose that we could scarcely see the next boat in the cavalcade. It would rage thus for an hour. Throughout, the rain abated rhythmically and then got stronger again. The water streamed from the heavens for hours and the skies remained cloud-covered even longer. A refreshing coolness follows such thunderstorms but only for a short while.

[7] Malu is about 5 kilometres downstream from the present-day administrative centre of Ambunti.

The next day, at the same time, the same weather would be inflicted upon us. Sometimes the rain lasted into the evening and the night could not calm the downpour from above. Sometimes the weather broke loose with double the strength. The men often had to be awoken at night in order to empty the boats and canoes that had filled with rainwater. Then the mornings were often grey and cloudy and the day passed grey and rainy. Thus the wet season closed in upon us.

We travelled upstream for almost three weeks. At Christmas we reached a conical hill on the bank of the river that seemed suitable for the establishment of a base camp for the intended explorations.[8] One could have thought oneself transposed at this time to the dull and gloomy December days of Germany, when the rain falls from a grey sky. Since we wanted to build the camp first, we postponed the festival for two days and celebrated it after half the roof of the camp house had been covered with wild sugarcane. Thus, on the second festival day we gave presents. These were laid out by the men on two tarpaulins and consisted of clothes, knives, glass beads, paints, pipes and tobacco. The men obliged with singing that I recorded on my phonograph. It is not a good thing, at such a time, for one to think about home.

Even before the New Year, we had progressed so much that we could set out on our first exploration westward. Our next goal was the October River, which we navigated upstream in the motor boat for two days. This river comes out of the Dutch part of New Guinea and opens into the Sepik at the point where the latter changes its course from northwards to eastwards as it flows out from the central range. From the mouth of the October River I followed the Sepik upstream in the pinnace for another three days. A day's journey from this junction I found the West River – a tributary likewise coming out of Dutch territory. I navigated it in the motor canoe – that is, three canoes tied together on which was attached an engine. This unique craft is capable of easily overcoming strong cross-currents. The West River forked after a few kilometres into a south arm and a north arm, both of which soon became torrents.

[8] Thurnwald named this Weihnachts-Bg (Christmas Hill). It is on the west bank of the Sepik two kilometres north of present-day Kobabaru. At 104 metres, it is well above the Sepik's 40 metres ASL. A photograph of the camp is in Melk-Koch 1989, Abb.31.

From the top of the Papua Hills[9] near the mouth of the West River an impressive panorama of the surrounding ranges can be seen. From north to south runs the broad flat valley of the Sepik - roughly 25 kilometres wide, enclosed by low mountain ranges that further on rise to quite a height – in the east up to 1500–2000 metres and in the west to 2500–3000 metres. However, the main range lies to the south where there are mountains at least the same height as the western range, also with low foothills spreading out before it. On a clear afternoon one could see the outline of the Coastal Range 40 kilometres away, easily seen from Christmas Hill. The Coastal Range was at the most 15–20 kilometres away from Christmas Hill, encroaching far inland at that point.[10]

The banks are similar all along the upper course of the main river – steep and wooded on the outside of the curves, while on the inside, sandbanks or wild sugarcane and behind, young forest with numerous wild breadfruit trees. One frequently comes across signs of alterations in the river's course – new breaches and devastated woods, the mouths of old streams, and lagoons. Above the mouth of the West River, the branching of the watercourse is conspicuous. The sandbanks and islands visible at low water are flooded at high water, which often raises the river level two to three metres overnight. Then a river a hundred metres or more wide rushes downstream with uncanny speed, carrying before it giant trees, weathered trunks, branches and sticks. During the flood, driftwood that lies heaped up in huge deposits at the mouths of stream, on sandbanks, and on the corners and curves, is carried away and deposited in other places. New breaches are torn through, old ones barricaded up. Thus the river continuously changes its course and its appearance.

The settlements in this region consist of large isolated houses such as are known in British New Guinea, especially like those reported by D'Albertis on the upper Fly River.[11] Sometimes, further downstream, two or three of these houses may be seen close to each other. This reminds one of the community dwellings of the Gazelle Peninsula and South Bougainville. However, whilst in these other places the

[9] A photograph of his riverside camp near these hills (Papua-Lager) is in Melk-Koch 1989, Abb. 35.
[10] What Thurnwald could see to the north was the southern edge of the Border Mountains; the coastal range (the Bewani Mountains) is over 100 kilometres north of the West River.
[11] See D'Albertis, L.M. 1880. *New Guinea: What I Did, What I Saw*. 2 vols. London: Sampson & Low.

inhabitants always build more than one house, here everyone sleeps pressed together in usually the one house.

The houses,[12] often 20 to 25 metres long and 10 to 15 metres wide, are most imposing from a distance, because they are often 10 to 15 metres high and look like town houses; however, they aren't at all. One is soon surprised how poorly built they are. Two things are particularly striking: first, a whole forest of posts, innumerable thin saplings seven to ten metres high that support the living space, over which is erected a low roof of sago leaves. The houses are built up high not on account of the floods but for security against attack. Steep scaffolding supports the house which is as unstable as a house of cards. The other peculiarity of these buildings, that is characteristic of the whole region of the upper Sepik and its tributaries, is the following: the floor- and roof- support posts of the house are not forked at the top (as everywhere else) in order to support the cross beams; the cross beams are merely tied to the posts with rattan. Thus the cross-beams, on which rests the floor of the house, have no other point of support than the often carelessly-tied rattan, that slackens as it dries out and later breaks or is gnawed apart by rats.

For the European who wishes to climb into such a house, the ladder offers the first gymnastic exercise. Of course the rungs of the ladder also are fastened with rattan. In order to save work the rungs are placed far apart from each other and they slide about and are found in all possible positions, rarely in the correct horizontal one. Having climbed to the house successfully – often one notices only afterwards that one side of the ladder is rotten and only one of the two poles leans against the floor above – new problems present themselves. The floor above, made out of thin branches, is laid over with bark which may be displaced or rotten, and the stranger who does not know the geography of the house is in continual danger of disappearing down one of the unseen holes. Actually, these are useful for protection against malicious attack, I was informed proudly.

[12] See Melk-Koch 1989, Abb. 33. This is the same house that Leonhard Schultze Jena recorded in October 1910 (see Schultze Jena 1914 *Forschungen im Innern der Insel Neuguinea*, Tafel XVI for photographs and Tafel X–XIII for detailed drawings) near the junction of the October River with the Sepik. The two photos are so similar, showing the same fishing net, baskets and so on in identical positions, that it is probable that the photograph in Melk-Koch is not one of Thurnwald's taken three years later, but another of Schultze Jena's photographs taken some days apart.

First one enters a veranda that in many houses is only a kind of balcony projecting out, but in others is almost as big as the inner living room. At the end opposite the entrance is another veranda of similar size. The rectangular room between is enclosed by walls made of the mid-rib of the sago palm leaf, or sheets of bark. Sometimes this middle room consists of a gallery which one enters first, while one or two metres further on the middle room opens out. Square fireplaces are arranged symmetrically on both sides of the house – four, six, eight or ten on each side. They are arranged along the same lines on the verandas as well, as far as there is room. These fireplaces are surrounded by a construction of vertical poles to which are attached shelves and hooks for storing or hanging up possessions, supplies, weapons, and dead relatives. The latter were resting in great netted string bags. Previously they had been rolled in bast, hung under the roof, and allowed to decompose in the house. Thereupon the bones, especially the skull, are packed in a string bag together with a couple of personal belongings – penis gourd, pipe and similar things – and hung up in the house. Special value does not seem to be attached to these remains, for people were always willing to exchange something from the past for something useful in the present and offered the bones of beloved relatives more than anything else.

Under the smoke-blackened roof are put the trophies and memorials to good meals – skulls of pigs, crocodiles, wallabies, cassowaries, possums, bandicoots, flying foxes, shells of the tortoise, vertebra from snakes, and whatever else might have been dished up as a dainty meal. The fact that the house is also filled with all kinds of living creatures, the spoilt European finds superfluous. The fleas, however, are black, not red. The nose is also uncomfortably affected. Garbage is simply dropped beneath the house, a neglect seldom observed in the south seas.

The house provides relatively little space for the numerous inhabitants. People sleep close together on the floor without any covering under or over them and are kept warm through the often cool nights by body heat alone. There are often special platforms erected in the houses; men sleep either on those or in the gallery. The women sleep under the platforms or in the middle room. Compartments for the men alone, or men’s houses, found everywhere else in New Guinea, are not found here. Meeting places are in the clearings under the trees.

The life span of the houses described is short. The posts, often not even de-barked, rot quickly. The roof splits into two at the ridge and the separate parts begin to slip slowly downwards. The rain forces into the house through the cracks but the inhabitants do not seem to be easily disturbed by this. The floods soak the floor, the poles warp, but one still sees people climbing up the ladders and smoke rising from the broken-down roof. From my observations, a house would hold out three to four years. Deserted, it soon becomes overgrown with creepers or collapses like a house of cards.

The construction of new houses claims a considerable part of the activity of the natives. New houses are frequently built in old clearings where a garden lies fallow, for the making of new clearings – especially the felling of the giant trees – is a difficult task. A man once proudly showed me his work, a thick trunk one and a half metres in diameter, surrounded by a scaffold. He had worked for months with his little, not very regular, stone axe, blow after blow until he saw the giant fall. Usually they leave the great trees standing and content themselves with felling the little ones.

The places where a house has been are often used as gardens again. The frequent renewal of houses, though usually at nearby sites, involves a great deal of moving about within a relatively local area.

Many of the utensils used in the lower and middle regions of the Sepik are lacking here, especially the production of the clay pots that are quite artistic in the middle Sepik, the large sleeping baskets that provide protection against mosquitoes, and the large sit gongs, elsewhere very common. They do posses good hand drums in the hour-glass shape.[13] The spear is lacking among the weapons; apart from large daggers made out of the thigh bones of the cassowary, they use bows and arrows. The bows may be drawn by either hand.

Much care is devoted to the manufacture of arrows for whose tips different materials are used – bone, betel palm wood, but especially bamboo in which artistically barbed hooks are cut. Almost always one meets men equipped with bows and bunches of arrows. The mutual trust between sovereign house-communities seems to be no

[13] See H. Kelm, 1966. *Kunst vom Sepik II*. Berlin. Plates 221, 223-229 and 1968. *Kunst vom Sepik III*. Plates 521, 522.

greater than between sovereign states. Burnt-down houses, wounds, warnings, and permanent readiness for fighting are sufficient proof of this.

If the inhabitants of this district do not differ much from those further downstream in their lust for fighting, they are significantly weaker in their artistic accomplishments.[14] These are almost exclusively limited to personal decoration.

Mostly one sees netted bands and strings of round or oval white seeds (*Coix lacryma jobii*) that are fastened around forehead, neck or chest. The vertebra of snakes, or bones from the flying fox, strung on plant fibre, serve as loin belts. The men's hair is often braided into one or more little plaits. The men wear penis gourds, the women short grass skirts, otherwise the same decorations as the men. Their bodies, usually covered with filth, are frailer than those of the inhabitants of the middle region, who look very sturdy for New Guinea. Further, their physical type shows differences that are quite marked locally.

On our way to the mountains, the natives hid themselves, frightened by the appearance of the rattling motor craft. However, they appeared on our way back after they had seen that nothing had happened, and had found the presents I had left by their houses according to my custom. In the places where I had left these presents, I could be almost certain that with my reappearance the people would be lined up on the bank with food. They brought sago, sugarcane, roasted breadfruit kernels, betelnut, pieces of baked fish or pork, and tobacco. They smoke from large hollow gourds or thick bamboo pipes into whose distal opening they have inserted a thin bamboo pipe holding a cigar.[15]

According to my preliminary investigations, the whole territory covered on this expedition belongs to one linguistic group with relatively slight local divergences, and represents a cultural unity as well.[16]

[14] Thurnwald does not mention the carved and painted shields of the area, collected by Schultze Jena in 1910 and by members of the Sepik expedition of 1912-13 (see H. Kelm, 1966. *Kunst vom Sepik II*. Berlin, Plates 197-220).
[15] Again, Thurnwald fails to mention that arrows and smoking equipment are often beautifully decorated with pyro-engravings or designs etched with a rat's incisor (see Kelm 1966, Plate 241 and 1968, Plate 532).
[16] Thurnwald is referring here primarily to the peoples he met along the Sepik mainstream – the Abau.

I extended my explorations south along a large tributary[17] that runs by the slopes of the mountains bordering the eastern edge of this north-south part of the Sepik valley. It comes out of the foothills of the central highlands and flows into the Sepik a little below the October River. I could navigate its lower course for a day with the pinnace and motor boat. Then, however, I came across rapids with such frequency that I could proceed no further with the motors. With sixteen of my lads I climbed into the canoes I had brought with us, on which I stowed provisions and luggage, and continued the journey upstream.

In our four canoes we had a hard time struggling against the current that rose daily, gradually flooded the banks, and rushed violently through the rapids. Torrential rains poured from the heavens every night. Squalls suddenly roared down from the mountains, breaking off branches and rotten trees, making our sojourn in the tents during the pitch-black nights very tense. Resigned to fate, we awaited the blow from above. Instead, misfortune came from beneath. One dull morning I woke and found the river flowing under my bed; however, we were able to get everything into the relatively dry canoes.

There was, naturally, no question of paddling. We punted ourselves forward in the weaker currents with long poles, and through the ever-increasing rapids, tangled piles of driftwood and gravel banks, we had to drag the canoes with rattan ropes. If the water was too deep we had to pull ourselves forward close to the bank by grasping overhanging branches, fallen trunks, or the wild sugarcane. It was often safer, if more time-consuming and exhausting, to cut a rough path along the thickly overgrown bank and tow the canoes. Much care was required when changing from one bank to the other, for then we had to paddle, the water being too deep for punting. Inevitably, the current dragged the canoe downstream in spite of earnest paddling and was in danger of striking anchored driftwood. We therefore had to choose very carefully a place for changing banks. In some places, where giant trees and branches threatened us in the middle of the winding course of rapids, I preferred to unload the canoes and repack them on the other side of the critical spot.

[17] The August (Yapsie) River.

Sometimes the river splits into a network of channels. Sometimes swollen into a mighty river it rushes past a steep slope. The floodwater gnaws continuously at one or the other bank and softens the ground so that here and there the roots of trees are deprived of support. It sends runners into the land like feelers, digging channels, carrying away humus, depositing sand in its place and covering the earth. Pools of water remain everywhere after the heavy rain and the land becomes a morass. The forest wastes away as too much water and too little humus causes the old trees to die. Their pale, weathered trunks tower upwards like corpses' fingers, as though imploring heaven to save them. Thus the water seeks out a new bed in one place while it brings sand and gravel to another, upon which wild sugarcane sprouts. Little trees begin to grow, until a young forest thrives in which breadfruit trees are certainly not lacking.

Lateral excursions towards the mountains led through tall thick forests. Here 'big city life' prevails: a wild competition for 'a place in the sun'. A few trees as high as the heavens, then many middling careerists and, finally, innumerable miserable existences. All are striving towards the light. They grow too close to one another for expansion widthways, so they have to grow upwards to maintain their life. In the crowd, room for living is narrow and development to fullness impossible. But even the giants that tower to the sky are constrained – not by the little fellows but by parasites. These climb up them, embrace them, choke them, drain them, and spread in a network from tree to tree. Neither the pandanus nor the Doric columns of the eucalypts are spared.[18] Beware when a giant tree falls! It drags innumerable lives with it into its grave, like an old chieftain at whose death thousands of slaves are slaughtered. Patches of light in the dark forest remain its epitaph for a long time.

There is a great deal of animal life in the endless forests. The Hornbill, whose ponderous beak droops a little, flies with a mysterious whirring noise that reminds one of the sound of a bullroarer, through which the natives enable the spirits to talk. Cockatoos flutter squawking from tree to tree; or there is a heavy beating of wings as the frightened Crown Pigeon sweeps through the branches. The Cassowary drums as though beating on a great wooden slit-gong; the monotonous call of the Leatherhead

[18] *Eucalyptus papuana* is widely distributed in New Guinea.

sounds like someone saying a hundred times over in Saxon dialect: ‘O, ja, ja, so; O ja, ja, so.’ If he once stops his protestations, a Big-footed Hen goes: ‘qua, qua’, similar to a duck’s quack. Meanwhile the deep ‘u-ui’ of the Bush Raven is frequently confused by the men with similar calls of the natives. One bird pipes away to itself as though on a flute, while another calls its ‘ua, ua’ in semi-quavers followed by a quaver, quite different from the enticing call of the Bird of Paradise that is longer and fuller. Strange birds are the white Egrets that are startled away from both large and small river courses, often in great numbers. Sometimes the same birds fly for hours in front of the canoes. Once frightened they fly 100 or 200 metres further on, then land on the bank and wait till the canoe draws near again. Then they fly about the same distance again and wait for the danger. Since they always keep to the water and only seek the forest rarely, the chase continues endlessly.

Noiseless, but nevertheless noticeable, are the numerous types of insects in this district. Ever-present are the thousands of types of ants ranging from the tiny miniature ant as small as a pin head, to the gigantic winged ants, black and red, and unfortunately also the so-called white-ant (Termite) that spares nothing, even attacking the camera tripod and settling down in the tropical helmet. The mosquitoes that constitute such an unpleasant plague in the lower and middle course of the river are here bearable, even in the rainy season. They are nevertheless frequently superseded by other little creatures and by small flies – harmless in themselves but burdensome simply because of their great numbers, for you cannot keep them off when your hands and face are covered by hundreds of them. They prefer to buzz around damp places in the sun. Brown flying beetles often join them, coming out of the wild sugar cane. Failing these pests, tiny sand-flies provide a little spice to life, in which a crowd of other insects – especially bugs and beetles – participate. The huge, beautifully coloured butterflies contribute an aesthetic embellishment to the region.

So the jungle has its difficulties, its plagues, but it often has also powerful music and artistry in colour and form. When, after an exhausting, rainy day, the evening clears up, as it often does, and the sun forces its way through the tall scrub, radiating into the confused sounds of the awakened forest, then he who has a taste for such things can rejoice, even here, at the eternal art that man, when all is said and done, carries within himself.

I repeatedly came upon natives here. On the lower course of this, the Berg River,[19] are many settlements, always isolated houses. Further upstream, the small houses, likewise isolated, are usually built somewhat hidden away from the river's edge. As sago leaves are lacking, the roofs are covered with leaves of the so-called pseudo-sago. From these, sago starch is also prepared since above the mid-course of this river the true sago palm is no longer to be seen and neither is the coconut palm planted. Even tobacco is lacking up here.

Next to the pseudo-sago, the wild breadfruit plays the chief role in nourishment. In addition there are bananas, yams, tapioca and taro. Apart from pigs, animals of the forest such as possums, bandicoots, large lizards, flying foxes, and especially snakes, are all used as food. The natives collected sago and breadfruit in great amounts, especially for exchanging with the much-desired white glass rings. To this end they were unafraid of plunging into the swollen, raging river. They look for a couple of suitable logs amongst the driftwood on the bank, jump on them in order to break them loose, drag them out, fetch vines and bast from the forest and tie the logs together into a square raft, on top of which they attach another construction in which the bundles of sago flour are placed. Then the whole thing is pushed into the water, one hand holding onto the raft and the other hand paddling it into the river, rushing down with tremendous speed. They float as far as possible and are carried downstream for quite a distance until they are washed ashore at a bend in the river. Other natives plunge into the water, riding on logs; canoes are not possessed up here. Chattering from the cold, they creep out of the chilly water and, trembling with exhaustion and excitement, approach the camp warning me of their enemies in the mountains, who lurk behind the trees armed with bows and arrows and cut off the heads of those they shoot.

The people on this river belong to the same linguistic and cultural group as the inhabitants of the region visited on my exploration westwards.[20] Apparently there are also connections across the wide plains to the banks of the Sepik, which runs parallel.

The journey back proceeded quickly. The river had risen even higher and the canoes

[19] This was Thurnwald's name for the August (Yapsie) River.
[20] The Abau. See the Macmillan *Encyclopedia of World Cultures. Supplement*. 2002: 1-5.

shot through raging rapids in foaming water piled up with driftwood. Sometimes we covered in a half hour what had taken us almost a day when travelling upstream.[21]

The first of my two northern explorations started from the Hauser River, whose mouth I found not far downstream from the Christmas Camp. The greatest number of settlements in this district is found not on the banks of the broad open Sepik where each house is visible but on this tributary where a settlement can be hidden behind each of its numerous bends. One must not assume that there are settlements only on the banks of the main river where they can be easily reached. The seclusion of these dwellings afford the advantage of greater security from the never-ending tribal feuds and [conflicts arising from the] frequent migrations caused by the short life-span of the buildings.

The Hauser River, which I named thus on account of the many isolated houses on its banks, flows in a west-east direction roughly parallel to the October River and must come, like the latter, from the Dutch part of New Guinea. It was high water when I navigated it[22] and I could travel for a day and a half in the motorboat. I could have continued the journey even further but I preferred to investigate the region north in German territory. Therefore I turned off into a tributary opening into the left bank that, thanks to the high water, I could navigate in the motorboat for another half day. Here the high water had flooded the banks extensively, so that it was difficult to find a place to camp overnight.

An unexpectedly changed picture was revealed the next morning. The boat and canoes appeared to have been swallowed up by the earth. The water had fallen by three metres overnight and they lay below on the dropped water level, from which logs of driftwood towered like threatening cannons. The water dropped hourly and the boats had to hasten on the journey back in order to be able to slip between the logs and over the sandbanks.

I continued upriver with three canoes and fifteen men. The Green River – so called on

[21] From his account of interminable struggle, and although his map suggests he did not get more than 8 km south of the August-Sepik junction, he may in fact have got much further upstream (south).
[22] Commencing 24 February 1914.

account of its clear green water – flows from a northerly direction to begin with, then from the northwest, and finally from the north again.

The weather became hotter and hotter. The dryness of the air, the burning heat of the sun, and the coolness of the night were remarkable. Soon the mountains became visible. These are the mountains[23] from whose western and northern slopes the Dutch border river – the Tami River – originates. Through rapids, at first over gravel then over oily-smooth rock beds, and between mountain slopes, it continued. The water was crystal-clear. Even in the deep pools between the rapids, every little stone and fish could be seen. I was astonished to find crocodiles, even here.

In the tall forest on the bank, houses were often seen, isolated here as well, according to the custom. Often the tall houses are made more stable by being built beside or on one or two trees. The construction is thus given good support. Quite different are the tree-houses that are also found here and are shelters placed in the treetops. These have a special use – they are erected for hunting animals for food. The natives lie in wait for birds in order to shoot them with bow and arrow, or they set traps for possums.

On the middle course of the Green River,[24] I got a surprise one day. We were punting upstream in the canoes, as usual, when we heard the familiar cry: 'O iabō, o iabe' coming from the dark forest. This is the protestation of friendship. A crowd of natives clambered down the slopes armed as usual with bows and arrows and, wading into the water, hurried shouting after the canoes. We stopped and they approached. The surprise was that these were people of strikingly light-coloured skin, of roughly the same shade as is found in the Caroline Island, on Yap or Ponape; and one had brown beard and hair. I offered white rings and soon they carried up yams and bananas from a nearby garden and thus friendship was sealed through an exchange of presents. I also found many light-skinned people among those I met upstream. On the Sepik and October Rivers, I had likewise seen occasional light-skinned people. I could not consider them albinos. It was also out of the question that their light skins were a result of ringworm. I can only suppose that there had been some sort of foreign infusion in the past.

[23] Now named the Border Mountains.
[24] Probably in the vicinity of present-day Auya Nr 2, a Yuri-speaking community.

The attitude of the above-mentioned people also suggested that I was dealing with people of a different disposition. In contrast to the dullness of the inhabitants of the Upper Sepik and of the tributaries flowing west and south of it, the people on the Green River revealed a greater vivacity, curiosity and interest. The status of the women was also noteworthy. They appeared here always together with the men, whilst in other places they are usually hidden or run away at the approach of strangers. Indeed, on the Hauser River, the roles of the sexes seem to be exchanged completely. The women initiate the conversations, carry up the sago, yams and tobacco to exchange for the glass rings, with which they decorate the little children. The men stand by and smoke their pipes or are ordered about here and there by their women.

The reception in the next district was of a different kind. Suddenly a man with drawn bow and arrow at the ready was standing in front of a canoe travelling close to the bank and was aiming at us. As I usually did in such situations, I waved at him and showed him a ring. This is unexpected, but indicates the peaceful intentions of the visitor. In this case it resulted in the man relaxing his bow and then smiling confusedly and taking the ring. Thereupon he called to his relatives in the neighbourhood, who soon appeared if somewhat hesitantly. As we travelled on, many more came up and accompanied us, running continually along the bank. They threw themselves upon the glass rings as though they were of gold, like tigers on their prey, and I had to take care in trading that each one got his just reward and that over these valuables they did not strike each other dead before my very eyes. They did not desire the inconspicuous iron goods.

In spite of all the flattery and amiability, it was expedient to keep on one's guard, especially as the next day even more people appeared from the neighbouring district, so that finally over fifty people were staying at the camp.[25] They all accompanied me on the way back as far as the boundary of their settlements and broke into a wonderful rhythmic howl as farewell, which goes 'ā-ü, ā-ü, āü, āü, a ʾa ʾa ʾa-ühhh'. At the boundary, the others were waiting and brought me further and bid farewell at their

[25] His map indicates that he got as far up the Green River as present-day Kambriap and stayed there from 28 February to 2 Mar 1914 before turning back.

borders in the same manner.

Apart from the abundance of coconuts, I also found almonds there, which I had not found anywhere else in the interior of New Guinea. The headmen, who usually appear with two wives, seem to have a more influential role here than in other places. The language of the Green River is totally different from that of the upper Sepik. Although the decorations are richer, especially in the use of cassowary and bird-of-paradise feathers, and all objects are more skilfully and carefully made, a clear-cut cultural difference is not immediately apparent.[26]

My next exploration [in March 1914] led me to another watercourse that I found further downstream from the mouth of the North River, and I followed it towards the northern coastal ranges. This river, with medium current, consists of limy yellow water; therefore I called it the Yellow River. It flows in endless meanders through terraced land crossed by low hills ten to forty metres high and sloping towards the Sepik. If you look northwards from a height near the river, these hills are scarcely noticeable. The Yellow River is the easterly branch of the tributary, the other branch being further to the west.[27] It [the Yellow River] forks into two branches, one of which comes directly from the north with cold water (this is the one I followed), whilst the other [the Sibi] comes with warm water from the east and apparently reaches this junction after a wide detour around the mountains through the plain. Both branches have their source in the southern slopes of the Torricelli [Mountains].

The journey upstream in the canoes was monotonous. Between high forested banks and sandbanks covered with wild sugarcane, then by steeply-sloping banks ten to fifteen metres high, close to which the river had cut its channel. Kunai grass as I'd found on my coastal journeys from Maiui [Pagwi] to Aitape on the higher ridges, I saw here on the hills but not in significant amounts.

[26] The people of this upper part of the Green River are Yuri speakers and this language is an isolate. Languages to the north belong to the Trans-New Guinea phylum, whereas the Abau language of the Sepik mainstream and lower sections of its tributaries belongs to the Sepik family of languages. The inventory of cultural items is somewhat different, as may be expected from the differences in environment, but there are other differences as well. The Yuri were studied by Dr Hanns Peter in 1969.
[27] The westerly branch is the Sand (Kaigu) River. Thurnwald reports on his exploration of the Sand (and North) rivers in his 1916 Report.

The settlements have quite a different character here. One comes across actual villages with houses built in groups in a defined area. There are particular houses for the men, and the houses are not built in the unskilled manner that I described above. The buildings, erected on posts one or two metres high, are not particularly artistic but at least they rest upon thick, solid supports. The other cultural items are also richer and carved wooden figures and large standing slit gongs are found.[28] The villages do not always lie accessible to the river but are frequently somewhat inland. One can differentiate between lower and upper village groupings that speak different dialects of one language that is also different from that of the Sepik where the Yellow River joins it.[29]

I came upon the inhabitants of the highest village[30] so unexpectedly that they started a howling that sounded in the distance like the howling of native dogs, but the rings had their quick, calming effect here too, so that friendship was promptly established. Finally they brought a fern-frond and counted out on it for me 23 sections to signify as many days; after these, I should return. I marvelled that the people could count as high so easily, for on the upper Sepik there is often difficulty going further than three![31] Whether the number of days was in any way connected with the moon I could not say.

They tried to explain to me some sort of connection between myself, the white shining [shell] rings, and the sun or the moon. Whether they took me for the man in the moon, or the son of the sun, or were planning to eat me in three weeks, I do not know. Perhaps my next visit there will clarify this.

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[28] This reference to carved wood figures and slit gongs is curious as I saw none in 1969 in the southern Yellow River area. However, Heinz and Antje Kelm did fieldwork in the northern half of the Sand River in 1969-70 and illustrate a large slit gong (*Sago und Schwein*, 1980, Plate 31) at Kwieftim, an upper Sand River community that speaks Ak, which is closely related to the Yellow River (Namie) language. I have not located any illustrations of carved wooden figures from this area.

[29] The lower half of the Yellow and Sand rivers is inhabited by Namie speakers of the Middle Sepik Super-Stock; the Abau language of the upper Sepik mainstream is of the Upper Sepik Super-Stock, as is the BOUYE language of the upper reaches of the Yellow River.

[30] Probably present-day Maurom, a Bouye-speaking community. It seems that Thurnwald foreshortened his mapping of the Yellow River traverse. The junction of the Sibi and Yellow rivers he locates at about 3°51´ South whereas it is actually at 3°44´30´´South, 11 kilometres north of Thurnwald's estimate. His traverse of the Sand River was much more accurately mapped.

[31] Traditional systems of numeration in the region are more sophisticated than Thurnwald understood. See elsewhere on this website under 'Papers'.

On the return downstream the natives were again numerous and brought breadfruit, yams and sago. With ‘flags flying’ – my men had hoisted their loin cloths onto the punting poles – we returned to the base camp [at Meander Mountain] and began the journey back to Karadjundo [on the lower Sepik]. Everything had gone smoothly and without loss.

The journey home did not proceed very quickly. Contrary to expectation, we had only a weak current with us. The rain in the mountains had stopped by now and the water-level was dropping. The north-west and south-east winds seemed to be struggling for dominance. We saw how the north-west wind drove the clouds over the coastal ranges while even at this time (mid-March), the south-easterly seemed to be settling down in the Central Highlands. In the land lying between, now one, now the other, got the upper hand. Only below Malu was a stronger current felt.

The strongest current I observed was in January at the Christmas Camp, when the mass of water from the first great rainfall rushed down the river, bringing with it huge amounts of driftwood that often filled the whole width of the river all day and made navigation very dangerous. The rainiest months were December and February. January was clearer and March brought a change and was relatively dry. The rain fell mostly at night; the mornings were usually dull, while the afternoons and evenings were bright and clear.

An estimation of the population in the territory visited is difficult. The number of villages and people is frequently underestimated because many hidden settlements are overlooked and the natives hide themselves at the first appearance of strangers. Only on the journey back, or on repeated visits, was a surprising number of people to be seen.

I can only consider the population seen on the banks of the rivers, but doubtless the land between them is not uninhabited. To give a rough number as an indication, I would make the following estimations: October River, 300; West River, 100; Berg (August) River, 400; Lower Hauser River, 500; Green River, 800; Yellow River, 1200. From these rough estimates, it is obvious that the greater numbers are found north of the Sepik in the direction of the Coastal Ranges. The mountains, although by

no means uninhabited, are naturally sparsely populated. On the plains, the number seems to rise as one moves eastwards, that is to say, towards the area [the Prince Alexander Mountains] that I found, in October last year, to be extremely densely settled. But I must temporarily refrain from giving an estimation of the area between.

The above-mentioned districts are more easily accessible from the banks of the various rivers than from the coast. The means of transport on these rivers must be the canoe for a long time to come. The main streams can always be navigated safely with motor craft.

As far as the culture of this inland region goes, special investigation must be made. When one thinks of what the interior of the great Sunda Islands, especially Java, produces, we may also hope, in spite of all the differences – the chief one being the quite different work-skills of the indigenous populations – that the regions of this great interior will not remain unused. As a beginning, timber could be considered as a profit-making venture, for the rivers afford relatively easy means of transportation. Finally, one should not forget that the less humid climate with cool nights is healthier than that of the coast.