Duna male leaders are expected to be “men of speech” (anoa hakana) (Stewart and Strathern 2000c). They are called upon to use this skill in a variety of contexts, largely having to do with conflict resolution. This is especially the case in regard to their ability to make ceremonial speeches to mark the payment of wealth in compensation for killings and deaths that provoke, or can involve, further conflict between sets of people, particularly those of different territorial parishes. This category of speeches is known as tambaka, a shortened version of tamba haka, “speech for compensation.” In the neighboring Huli language area, the linguistically cognate term ndamba bi is translated by Laurence Goldman as “talk for closing down,” i.e., to finish a dispute (Goldman 1983: 62). Such speeches are still performed, and are carefully prepared in advance. The leader delivers such a speech in a rapid stylized and rhythmic form that gives it an almost musical quality, employing condensed metaphorical expressions, repetitions, lists of places, and aphorisms that give it a gnomic and ritualized aura suitable to the occasion. The aim is to achieve closure by definitely marking a settlement; or to open up an issue by making a strong claim. Speakers on either side of a dispute answer each other in this stylized way, after listening to debates and consulting with their peers.

In the precolonial past, leaders made tambaka for settling or ending bouts of intergroup fighting. This was called wei wiya, “putting the fight to sleep.” Leaders of the senior generation in the 1990s retained a knowledge of such speeches and provided examples. In one instance a leader adopted successively the roles of both sides in a dispute that was about the enforced death of a woman who had been accused of witchcraft. In this case, an autopsy was performed and indicated that she did not have the signs of being a witch (an engorged area of dark blood around the heart) within her. Her kin
thus demanded compensation for her death. Leaders had to be adept at negotiating and attuned to nuances of public opinion, all of which they tried to express in their choice of words. They have to show the same facility today in the regular disputes that emerge between people and that are heard in public moots. In Aluni these take place most often on Saturdays beside the Aid Post in the clearing originally established by the Australian colonial Administration that has since become a marketplace and general place of gathering. We consider some of these disputes later.

Compensation for offences of various kinds constitutes a cultural focus for the Duna. Disputes of many kinds, but in particular those involving physical injuries or deaths, can be mediated by the giving of wealth in the form of pigs and/or state-introduced money (the Papua New Guinea kina and toea currency), and in the past by payments of shell valuables, notably the cowries that were a hallmark of the position of leaders in the society (Stewart and Strathern 2002c). Before people agree to make these payments, they engage in considerable debate about the facts of the case, culpabilities involved, and the amount of compensation that should be paid. Strong feelings may come into play and people may threaten one another physically. The words of the leaders are important in either escalating or modifying and managing these feelings. Similarly, they play an important role on bridewealth occasions when they help to negotiate the payments between kin that must fulfill a complex set of obligations spanning two generations and involving extended sets of relatives on the mother’s and father’s sides of both the groom and the bride.

In the Aluni Valley each parish in the 1990s tended to recognize just one or two senior living men as having this role of the leader as speech-maker. We give here an example of the kind of speech used to end a period of fighting, given by P, a prominent older leader of Haiyuwi parish, followed by the speech another such leader (ML), of Yangone parish, planned to give for an occasion in 1991 that did not in the end eventuate.2

Speech 1

This speech begins with a conventional metaphor: “the yawa greens do not have bones.” A bone is equivalent to a cause of enmity between groups, and the meaning here is that the two groups do not have such an enmity. The speaker goes on to suggest that there was no deep reason for the fight, it was just something they entered into. The speaker next says that he will plant blossoming trees near his house, trees to which parakeets will come and cluster. The meaning is