Chapter 6

The Duna in Regional Context

The Highlands Provinces of Papua New Guinea became a focus for intensive ethnographic research from the 1950s onward through to the 1990s, when conditions in many parts of them have become too disturbed to allow field projects to be safely pursued. This ethnographic interest stemmed in the 1950s from the very recent “discovery” of the region as a whole by the outside world and the realization that the Highlanders possessed vigorous and colorful ways of life, based on intensive horticultural regimens, elaborate exchanges, intensive religious rituals, and a flair for personal self-decoration with shell ornaments, bird of paradise plumes, and marsupial furs worn on occasions of feasting, peace-making, and gift-giving between rival groups and individuals (see, e.g., O’Hanlon 1989).

These indigenous social patterns were rapidly influenced by the same outside world from which came anthropologists interested in documenting the Highlanders’ indigenous lifeways. After the conclusion of World War II the Australian Administrations in what were then the two separate entities of Papua and New Guinea moved quickly to introduce the people to forms of cash cropping, the development of expatriate-owned plantations and their demands for local labor, political education, and the development of Local Government Councils followed by elections for Legislative Assembly positions leading up to Papua New Guinea’s national Independence in September 1975. These were all developments that occurred at relatively breakneck speed. Christian missionaries from many different churches had also been at work, in some places from the times of “first contact” in the 1930s or 1940s, altering people’s religious practices either sharply or gradually. For the younger generations, both the Administration and the missions set up schools in which the English language was taught as the first step toward the acquisition of
the new knowledge needed to become “modern.” The narrative of “progress” away from a “primitive” past was introduced as a part of the ideology underpinning all of this introduced change.

How do the Aluni Valley Duna fit in with this overall picture? They are essentially a people whose lives are peripheral to the centers of development. Geographically they live in an area extensively canvassed by mining prospectors, as we have seen, in between two huge mines, Ok Tedi to their west set up in 1984, and Porgera in Enga province to their east begun in 1991. Their imaginations have been filled with information about these projects and their lives changed by them, but no such project had up to 1999 been established among them. This circumstance goes a long way to contextualizing the events we have reviewed that took place in the 1990s in the Valley area. It is important to realize further that Ok Tedi and Porgera are not the only big mining areas in the region. The Southern Highlands as a whole has seen an explosion of these: gas fields in the area of the Huli people, and further to the south around Lake Kutubu extensive finds of oil, bringing in millions of kina of royalties to local groups and an intractable host of social problems and reactions involving escalating conflicts between local groups demanding compensation for all kinds of impacts and both the companies and the provincial and national government bodies. A huge scheme was set underway to build a gas pipeline from the gas fields themselves down to the southern coast of Papua and thence all the way to Townsville in northern Queensland, Australia. Closer to the Duna area there was a frenetic gold rush by indigenous small-scale miners at Mount Kare in Enga Province between 1988 and 1990 (Ryan 1991). Aluni Valley Duna have lived with fragmentary news from all these places in the hinterlands of their own existence since the 1980s.

There is a sharp contrast here with some other parts of the Highlands. One of the first areas to be subjected to intensive change in the Central Highlands was Mount Hagen. Here Catholic and Lutheran missionaries moved in soon after gold prospectors and Administration officers in the 1930s. Apart from some early gold mining at Kuta south of Mount Hagen by Danny Leahy, one of the first explorers from outside, mining did not become significant. Instead Hagen became a center for the production and sale of coffee and tea, both from large plantations and small holdings, and for general commerce, banking, and trading. While the people are dependent on the vagaries of world prices for coffee and on the vicissitudes of disease and weather that affect the crop generally, coffee does provide a fairly regular monetary income to most families within the Province. A necessity for this is the existence and maintenance of vehicular roads.