



Introduction

OF STORIES AND STONES

One of the rewarding experiences in the course of anthropological field-work is the realization that something which at first appeared to be entirely fortuitous is in fact regular or predictable. For me an example of this was when I finally saw that the informants I was working with and the district where I was living were not selected for me at random. After I declared my intention to learn, among other things, myths and historical narratives, my initial hosts in Belau arranged for me to visit Ngeremlengui, a district on the west coast of Babeldaob island, to meet an elderly man widely known to be an expert in these and other matters. While I did anticipate that the kind of stories I would hear would be structurally determined by the social position of my informants and by the political position of the district, I did not at first acknowledge that my being there to record them was also determined. Perhaps anthropologists like to feel that they select their field sites carefully and rationally and that they control the sorts of data they collect—that beyond this everything else is a matter of good luck. In my case, I can only accept the good luck part of these conditions, since I had little or no input into where I would live and who would be my teachers.

So it was my self-perception of fortuitously being in the right place at the right time that proved false; I ended up at the proper place for the work I had set out to do. The stories I taped during the two years I lived in Belau depict Ngeremlengui as the highest-ranking district in the archipelago and posit the superior status of my principal informants, who held titles belonging to the district's capital village, Im-eiong. These stories are, in short, the view "from the top down," since they identify the history of Belau as a whole with the history of

Ngeremlengui district, the history of Ngeremlengui with the history of Imeiong village, and the history of Imeiong with the history of its four high-ranking houses. Now one response to the obvious ideological skewing that characterizes the narratives I collected is to attempt an equally ideological correction, that is, to try to filter out this bias in order to construct a neutral account. I say equally ideological because this method presumes that there is a true story hiding behind the subterfuges of history-work, just as according to Freudian theory there is a psychologically significant latent dream behind the masking activity of "dream-work." A second option, and the one upon which this book is based, is to try to uncover in the narratives and myths themselves the principles of this skewing and, rather than filter them out, make them the focus of analysis. Fortunately and predictably, this enterprise was facilitated by the fact that people from lower-ranking villages in the district told stories in systematically different ways, so I was able to grasp the relationship between these two narrative perspectives. But in the end, the history remains the account told by high-ranking people, for the differential power to construct history is a fundamental feature of hierarchy.

Many of the stories I learned focus on several types of stones, including backrests of chiefs, village boundary markers, gravestones, anthropomorphic monoliths, and various classes of exchange beads. At first these stories set in "ancient times" and the stones located on abandoned sites seemed to have little relevance for contemporary villagers and their difficult transition from inherited to elected leadership and from traditionally defined to legislatively apportioned districts. The time-consuming task of taping, transcribing, and studying mythological accounts of the origin of the islands, the birth and rebirth of the Belauan people, and the fashioning of district polity was, to my mind, a fascinating supplement to more clearly defined investigations into the contemporary district's sociopolitical life. In fact I regarded research into mythology and megaliths as a much-needed break from the stress of other ethnographic work. Weekend hikes to photograph the roads, platforms, and graves of abandoned villages and the anthropomorphic stones and other monoliths which dot the landscape also provided me with a ready topic of conversation with my friends and teachers, who regarded my persistent quest for these "reminders of the past" (*ngesechel a cherechar*) and "matters of ancient times" (*tekoi er a irechar*) with only nodding approval.

It soon became apparent, however, that this compartmentalization of "ancient" and "contemporary" research was an artifact of my own false assumption that villagers, too, had a largely antiquarian interest in

these stories and stones. Gradually I realized that many of the factional disputes between rival chiefly houses and between high- and low-ranking villages were replaying patterns well documented in myths, chants, and narratives. I also incorrectly supposed that failure to explicitly mention or be actively interested in some archaic god, sacred stone, or ancient path of relationship implied that people were not engaged in constructing their social reality on the basis of these categories. But before I left the field, I had concluded that my ethnographic writing must first lay out these traditional lines of political tension and the general cultural principles for understanding the past before the contemporary scene could be described, while realizing that the two tasks would have to be closely intertwined.

So in addition to listening to stories, I also spent much time systematically exploring the territory of the district in search of abandoned village sites, stone remains, overgrown taro swamps, and paved paths. It was during a violent rain squall in 1978 that I first wandered into Ngerutechei, an abandoned village a short distance from Imeiong. Clusters of towering bamboo and betelnut trees lining the elevated stone path through the low-lying swampland marked the location of the site. Since on this initial visit I was traveling alone, I did not know the names of the house platforms, gravestones, and upright monoliths that I could detect beneath the underbrush. After making a sketch map of these various stoneworks, I retraced my steps and made my way out of the village. Crossing a tree-trunk bridge over the stream separating Ngerutechei from the hillside to the west, I climbed up the trail toward Imeiong until I reached a broad stone square named Chemeraech (Morning Star), a resting spot which affords a spectacular view of the terraced hillsides of Ingesachel and Uluang, the looming Roismenglui range, and the densely forested lowlands surrounding Ngerutechei.

My standard procedure on such hikes was to be as observant as I could and then, upon returning to Ngeremetengel village where I was living, to ask my friends what it was I had seen. On this particular occasion I asked about Ngerutechei, thinking that perhaps I could elicit some stories about the history of this place or even record genealogies of people who had lived there. To my surprise, my principal informant, a man originally from Imeiong now living at lower-ranking Ngeremetengel, told me that Ngerutechei was a "holy" (*chedaol*) village, that in ancient times a group of gods called the Ruchel met at a stone pavement named Uchuladebong (Origin Point from Which We Go Forth) and there distributed titles to the four chiefly houses of Imeiong, and that because of this the "sacredness" (*meang*) of all Belauan villages remains to this day in Imeiong. At first this seemed to be a

strange claim, since Imciong village is presently much smaller than Ngeremetengel, and the important chiefs of the district live in Ngeremetengel rather than in Imciong. I was also informed that at the rocky peak of Roismenglui range, clearly visible on my walks, a goddess named Milad (Was Dead) landed after a great flood, and that she gave birth to four children in the form of stones at the foot of the mountain. These four children were to become "cornerposts" of the Belauan political order—in fact, Milad's eldest son was Imciong, the capital of the district where I was living.

For two years I pursued these matters in greater depth, in order to find out what it meant to talk about the Ruchel gods, why they met at Ngerutechei, who the four chiefs were whose titles were instituted there, what kinds of political relations were entailed by the notion that the "sacred remains" at Imciong, and what the link was between the four-part order established by Milad in the pan-Belauan context and the four-part order constituted by the Ruchel gods for Imciong village. The sacred remains of Ngeremlengui include not just individual stones and stories, however; a entire political order gradually emerged from these studies. This polity organized interdistrict relations such as warfare and alliance and legitimized itself in myths about Milad. But this quadripartite political order was not the only one mentioned in the narratives I collected. An archaic order of villages founded by another goddess, Chuab, predated the era of Milad, and was based on a linear linkage, or "path," of villages located along the eastern side of the archipelago. I found these stories and associated lithic evidence fascinating, since standard ethnographic descriptions of Belauan polity mention, rather, a dualistic opposition between two federations combining, respectively, villages on the eastern and western coasts.

So, although my original intention was to write an ethnography about changes in the language of social relations and in the system of ceremonial exchanges among houses, I decided to complete *The Sacred Remains* first, since this study of myth, history, and polity is the necessary foundation for understanding events in the ethnographic present.

TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF HISTORY

In grasping the importance of relating these stories and stones to contemporary political institutions and activities, I realized that the textual and lithic evidence I was assembling suggested the need for rethinking more generally the term "history" as an anthropological category. This section sketches the theoretical rationale for the semiotic framework used in the chapters which follow. I take history to be a universal cultural category differentially manifest in societies, in which the rela-

tionship between past, present, and future states of a society is expressed by signs in various media which are organized by locally valorized schemes of classification. This definition is designed to take advantage of the triple ambiguity of the English word "history," which can mean (1) what happened in the past, that is, historical *events*; (2) records from the past surviving into the present that are necessary for reconstructive knowledge, that is, historical *evidence*; and (3) narratives or other representational vehicles constructed in the present about the past, that is, historical *discourse*. This definition is also intended to open up three areas of discussion to cross-cultural understanding: (1) the different ways history is connected to notions of time, (2) the distribution within a given society of power to control the significance of events by creating or destroying historical evidence and by constructing historical discourse for specific ideological ends, and (3) the variety of representational media for coding historical consciousness.

Rather than setting up a rigid substantive definition of what history is, derived from our own scientific tradition, and taking that as the universal standard for labeling some societies as "without history," I am suggesting that what is needed is the ethnographic study of the modalities of history along the dimensions enumerated above. Essential to this enterprise is the assumption that historical consciousness is not a phenomenon restricted to observers or analysts, but is also an indigenous category relevant to the thoughts and actions of social actors that cannot be ignored even in the most objective external accounts of a society's past. As the American historian Becker points out,

The actual event contributes something to the imagined picture; but the mind that holds the imagined picture always contributes something too. This is why there is no more fascinating or illuminating phase of history than historiography—the history of history: the history, that is, of what successive generations have imagined the past to be like. It is impossible to understand the history of certain great events without knowing what the actors in those events themselves thought about history. (Becker 1955:336)

But to this it is necessary to add that a culturally sensitive account of history must include not only the study of what "actors in those events" thought, but also how subsequent generations recorded, remembered, reconstructed, and reinterpreted what the original actors did or said.

I have specifically avoided using the term "ethnohistory" for this enterprise, for several related reasons.¹ It is unfortunate that, in contrast

¹ See McBryde 1979 for an excellent survey of definitional and disciplinary aspects of ethnohistory.

to parallel forms such as ethnoastronomy and ethnobotany, the term ethnohistory does not normally indicate indigenous forms of knowledge, discourse, or social practice. In fact, the term is widely taken to mean exactly the opposite of an “emic” category, and in two distinct senses. On the one hand, some historians consider ethnohistory to be the utilization of oral traditions, rigorously filtered through the tests of source criticism and washed of ideological bias, as independent confirmation of the true historical record (see Cohn 1981:246): “And here the historian using oral traditions finds himself on exactly the same level as historians using other kinds of historical source material. No doubt he will arrive at a lower degree of probability than would otherwise be obtained, but that does not rule out the fact that what he is doing is valid, and that it is history” (Vansina 1965:186).² But in order for ethnohistorical material to be admitted as historical evidence, the poetic, stylistic, or semiotic constitution of these linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena must be selectively deformed, and oral traditions in particular must be separated into myth and history (see MacGaffey 1978). On the other hand, ethnohistory is sometimes viewed as the history of the asymmetrical contact between societies that produce historical records and those that do not. For the Pacific historian Dening (1966:25), ethnohistory is “the description of illiterate societies by literate observers at the time when contact between the two had not changed or destroyed the illiterate society. On every continent this period of contact and change has been caught in the journals and letters of explorers, administrators, traders and missionaries.”³ This view implies the additional assumption that contact situations are in principle distinct from the ways societies experience themselves through time in the absence of imposed, Western forces.

2. It is not the case that Vansina simply ignores the existence of history outside the world of the historian; in fact, he insists that such indigenous “historiography” must also be submitted to the tests of evidence: “It follows that oral traditions are not just a source about the past, but a historiography (one dare not write historiography!) of the past, an account of how people have interpreted it. As such oral tradition is not only a raw source. It is a hypothesis, similar to the historian’s own interpretation of the past. Therefore oral traditions should be treated as hypotheses, and as the first hypothesis the modern scholar must test before he or she considers others. To consider them first means not to accept them literally, uncritically. It means to give them the attention they deserve, to take pains to prove or disprove them systematically for each case on its own merits” (Vansina 1985:196).

3. In his distinguished history of the Marquesas, Dening (1980:42) is just as adamant in rejecting the status of history as a cultural category: “The *historical* reality of traditional societies is locked together for the rest of time with the historical reality of the intruders who saw them, changed them, destroyed them. There is no history beyond the frontier, free of the contact that makes it.”

I would rather rehabilitate the term “history” and stress that the inclusion of the intensions and intentionality of people who create and interpret their own past is essential, rather than supplementary, to adequate ethnographic study. And the fact that “history” would then label a cultural category as well as an established scholarly discipline should be an indication both that our own historical discourse participates in broader cultural principles and assumptions, and that the historical study of other cultures is always the study of historicizing activities within those cultures. That the discipline of anthropology has, in general, failed to recognize the cross-cultural relevance of history is strange, especially in light of the fact that many other familiar Western categories such as kinship, economics, and religion are all too frequently found fully instantiated in other societies. As Rosaldo points out,

The anthropologist’s failure even to perceive history in pre-agrarian societies is in part an artifact of synchronic analysis. But a more subtle factor has also influenced the received wisdom of anthropology, for certain theories have held that because so-called primitives lack Western historical consciousness they have none at all. The latter stance is curious in light of the anthropological insistence on the universality of such institutions as marriage, the family, and incest. Indeed, in many other cultural realms—including ideas of the person, shame, kinship, rites of passage, sacrifice, witchcraft, and religion—wide variations in form and content are acknowledged at the same time family resemblances across cultures are also recognised. Why should the sense of history be an exception to this general rule of anthropological analysis? (Rosaldo 1980:92)

Perhaps one reason for this situation is that, for many Western scholars, historical inquiry is in fact a quest to eradicate the confining influence of the past, or more generally, to insure our immunity from any form of culturally transmitted limits to individual perception and consumption (Gross 1981–82:66; Sahlins 1985b:52–53). Freedom becomes release from the past, as is argued by the British historian Plumb:

Each one of us is an historical being, held in a pattern created by Time, and to be unconscious of our historical selves is fraught with dangers. History, however, is not the past. The past is always a created ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies, or inspire classes. Nothing has been so corruptly used as concepts of the past. *The future of history and historians is to cleanse the story of mankind from those deceiving visions of a purposeful*

past. The death of the past can only do good so long as history flourishes. (Plumb 1971:17; emphasis added)

But even those who view the past as more than a “deceiving vision” are prone to deny the existence of history outside of the Western tradition. One of the most blatant examples of this is the work of the philosopher Collingwood, who establishes on purely logical grounds what history is, and then, not surprisingly, fails to find it instantiated in the cultures of the world outside the Greco-Roman tradition. For Collingwood (1956:9–12), history is the inquiry into those actions performed by human beings in the past of which we do not presently have adequate knowledge, by means of examination and interpretation of evidence existing in the present, for the purpose of self-knowledge. In imposing this definition on the ancient Sumerian civilization, for example, he rules that their stelae and official inscriptions are not strictly speaking historical, first, because these monuments and writings lack the “character of science,” and second, because the events recorded are deeds of gods rather than men. Similarly, Roman pottery acquires historical character only because modern-day scholars use it as evidence in scientific reconstruction (Collingwood 1965). So “history proper,” that is, the rigorous rethinking in “incapsulated” manner of the purposive thoughts that produced evidence surviving from the past, did not actually emerge until the twentieth century (Collingwood 1970:115–16).

On the positive side, Collingwood’s contribution is to have expanded the range of evidence which can be used by historians in their studies. He saw worth, for instance, not only in surviving written documents but also in artifactual and folkloristic remains. But since he refuses to see history as belonging to the consciousness and discourse of social actors who create, modify, and invent these remains, this openness to anthropological evidence becomes merely a revival of the Tylorian doctrine of “survivals,” whereby evidence from “primitive culture” is used by others for tracing the inevitable path of progressive rationality.

The reason why anthropology is an important study for civilized men is not, as might have been thought in the heyday of imperialism, because civilized men have to rule over savages and must learn, therefore, to understand them. It is because the civilized man contains a savage within him, in the special sense in which any historical present contains within itself its own past, and must therefore study this savage—not savages in the abstract, but the savage that he himself in this sense is—for the same reason for

which all history is studied, namely to make possible a rational human life in the present day. The problem of anthropology is a special case of the problem of self-knowledge; and history is the only way in which man can know himself. (Collingwood, in Van der Dussen 1981:186)

By restricting the sphere of historical thought to a reflexive modality of the present consciousness of people who did not create or preserve the original historical evidence or who are not part of an indigenous continuity of historical reconstruction, this approach clearly dismisses two of the most interesting problems in the study of other cultures: what kinds of categories operate in the cultural construction of history, and how historical knowledge is recorded, transmitted, and manipulated.

If Collingwood sees history as a form of reconstructive self-knowledge, yet refuses to admit the existence of such consciousness in the cultures of the world which do not share our scientific worldview, Lévi-Strauss’s approach to the subject of history takes an inverse position, namely, of combining a sense of the relativity of scientific thinking with the exclusion of history from the set of possible forms of cultural categorization. Lévi-Strauss is primarily interested in discovering (some would say inventing) variations in cultural schemata which are unconscious structures revealed in the course of historical transformation. There is thus an implicit distinction between synchronic structures, that is, patterns which remain stable through time, and events, the “irreducible contingency of history,” which impinge on these structures in the course of their contextual realization.

All systems, linguistic and otherwise, are in constant imbalance with themselves; this is the driving force of their internal dynamism. However, in my view, this is not exactly history, or at any rate not all history. It is the dimension that we call diachronic in our jargon, it has to do with the evolution of structures, and everybody accepts the existence of this dimension. But beyond this there is something else that we can never handle through reduction. History stands before us as something absolute before which we must bow. (Lévi-Strauss, in Lévi-Strauss, Augé, and Godelier 1976:50)

So although all structures are inherently synchronic, and “the degree of historicity” (Lévi-Strauss 1983:1218) confronting them is a constant, societies can be graded along a continuum according to the degree to which they remain impervious to the singularities of causal conjunction

or else interiorize history as “the motive power of their development” (Lévi-Strauss, in Charbonnier 1969:39; cf. Friedman 1985). The former “cold” societies, exemplified in the so-called totemic groups of aboriginal Australia, deny the cumulative effect of historical contingency by applying atemporal, static, or cyclical forms of classification—though Lévi-Strauss does claim that these societies value the past as the template for understanding the present. The latter “hot” societies explain themselves as the product of cumulative, evolutionary processes by means of cultural codes such as calendars anchored in the linearity of absolute chronology (Lévi-Strauss 1966:258).

As should be apparent from this sketch of his position, Lévi-Strauss makes two contradictory analytical divisions, the first between classification as a universal cultural propensity and history as the residual, acultural facticity of social phenomena; and the second between atemporal and temporal types of intensional categorization of this first distinction, that is, myth and history as two ways of looking at the past (see Beidelman 1971).⁴ I think that this confusion is indicative of a more fundamental problem concerning the relationship between cultural schemata and their social implementation. For Lévi-Strauss, it seems that classificatory schemata categorize some “stuff” which is itself irrelevant as far as anthropological analysis is concerned. That is, the events, words, and practices so organized are necessary to the contextual realization of the “savage mind” in us all, but these manifestations are merely the meaningless content of synchronic, paradigmatic principles. But additionally, cultural schemata are implicit, unconscious structures not subject to valuation by actors operating according to their dictates. Conscious models born of actors’ intentional awareness are dismissed as ideological smokescreens blocking analytical penetration.

In contrast, the argument advanced in this book depends on seeing, first, that cultural patterns in Belau classify tokens which themselves have important contextual meanings that are grounded in their indexical properties and realized in social processes; and second, that classificatory models do acquire symbolic valuation, so that their application or instantiation in a given instance can have strategic or rhetorical effect. To put it simply, adequate anthropological analysis requires locating the reciprocal meaningfulness of abstract schemata and their contextual content.

4. Lévi-Strauss also wants to argue that history, considered now as a form of analytical discourse, functions as a modern mythology in that it locates events in a “natural” order of things (see White 1975:51).

SIGNS OF HISTORY, SIGNS IN HISTORY

In particular, this book tries to understand the eventfulness of Belauan culture precisely as one of its intrinsic qualities and, in so doing, looks for modalities of history in signs other than strictly linguistic ones. For Belau, as well as for other cultures, the investigation of the coding of historicity is a matter of studying classes of signs—physically manifested vehicles that bear culturally endowed meaning. Signs function in two ways: as *signs of history* and as *signs in history*. Here the expression signs of history refers to representational expressions which, through their iconic, indexical, and residually symbolic properties, record and classify events as history, that selective discourse about the diachrony of a society. These signs of history can originate either in the spatiotemporal context of the events to which they refer or, at any later time, as the self-conscious reconstruction of the past. Duby (1980:8–9) illustrates a clear example of the former case in medieval Europe: “They would carefully save some object that, during the rites of investiture, one hand had placed in another . . . to signify the transmission of a right—such as those boughs, knives and rocks occasionally found in the archives attached to some parchment . . . , the object appearing as a more appropriate commemorative monument than the written word to a world that could neither read nor understand Latin.” The “aura” (Benjamin 1968:221) derived from their contiguity with the original ritual context makes these objects appropriate signs of history.⁵ These signs signal that some event of note occurred but do not offer any intensional description or categorization of what kinds of events, actors, or processes are at issue (White 1972:9). This is the primary function of the second variety of signs of history, for example, the composition of an epic poem depicting events from earlier centuries or the minting of a postage stamp commemorating the centennial of a famous person’s birth or death.⁶ In both of these varieties, the importance of the sign lies more in the value of what it represents than in the material quality of the signifying vehicle.

And the phrase signs in history refers to those signs of history which,

5. C. S. Peirce (1977:35) calls these historical signs “vestiges” and points out that these objects (e.g., the “boughs, knives and rocks” of the example above) not only carry meaning derived from their context-specific origins but also come to take on the character of resembling some quality or feeling associated with the events in question.

6. I note with sorrow a report in the *New York Times* (1 September 1986) of the minting in Belau of a postage stamp as a memorial to Haruo Remeliik, the assassinated president of the Republic of Belau.

as objects, linguistic expressions, or patterns of action, themselves become involved in social life as loci of historical intentionality *because* of their function as representational vehicles. These objects are frequently considered to be concrete embodiments or repositories of the past they record, that is, to be endowed with the essentialized or reified property of historicity. In our own tradition, the distinction between signs of history and signs in history is syncretized only in special contexts. Imagine a struggle between bureaucrats of New York and Philadelphia over ownership of the original copy of the Declaration of Independence. In these rare or marked cases, social action focuses on an object whose value derives from its function as being itself a token embodiment of historical discourse. In general, we tend to carefully preserve our signs of history, especially those of the first type, by putting them in hermetically sealed environments—time capsules, archival vaults, guarded museums—so that future events or generations cannot intentionally or unintentionally change their physical shape. In a sense, their indexical quality of being derived from the context of past events is maintained as emblematic of historicity only through the preservation of their semiotic form in a decontextualized environment; so formal stability guarantees their continued legitimacy as authentic signs of history.

But in Belau and in many preliterate societies, signs of history are frequently at the same time signs in history. That is, they are extensionally deployed in social action, and by encoding the layered course of historical change they make possible an intensional sense of cultural continuity through time. When functioning as historical signs, several kinds of objects and expressions are labeled by the general ethnosemiotic term *olangch*, “external sign” or “mnemonic marker.” These include carved narrative pictures, named ceramic and glass valuables, anthropomorphic monoliths, prescribed seating patterns, names and titles, ceremonial protocols, stone grave pavements, and oral narratives. Skill at reading signs is divided into two arts, the first involving knowledge of “external signs” (*olangch*) and the second involving predictive interpretations of “prophetic signs” or “portents” (*ulauch*). An informant clarified these two terms by distinguishing the epistemic status of their respective signifieds. For *olangch* we already know what it stands for; for example, a drawing of a boat stands for the boat itself, which is something we know clearly; similarly, a chief’s personal hammered turleshell piece (*cheluib*) is the *olangch* of his good faith and can be used as a pledge for a financial loan. *Ulauch*, on the other hand, are secret and represent things which might be the case: “We wait for it to occur, and when it occurs we say ‘so there!’ The words of a person are the *olangch* of his thoughts, not the *ulauch*.” Not only do these signs code historical

events, but they can also come to play a vital role in social action, because they are constantly modified, manipulated, contested, and concealed. There is, in other words, a constant interplay between the “sedimenting” power of contexts of action and the “typifying” function of historicizing representation; and it is this dialectical reconstruction that I mean when I refer to history as a cultural category.

A famous comparative example of this latter syncretic pattern is the Golden Stool of the Ashanti people of Africa described by Rattray (1923:287–93) and Fortes (1969:138–91). When it “descended from heaven” amidst celestial rumbling and dark clouds during the reign of the fourth Ashanti king around 1700, the Golden Stool was pronounced by the king’s high priest to represent the “soul” of the nation. The stool was then endowed with historicizing function by the practice of adding various objects to it. When it first descended to earth, the king affixed four bells to the sides; then chiefs and members of royalty removed body hair and fingernail fragments, which were made into a paste that was smeared directly on the stool. During the reign of the tenth king additional regalia were attached to the Golden Stool. And then later, after a pivotal battle, golden masks formed from the stool of the defeated chief were hung on the sides. Representing the permanence and continuity of the Ashanti as a nation, the Golden Stool also indexed the historical depth of the chiefly line. Lineage stools functioned as signs in history as well.⁷ Carried in ritual, anointed with sacrificial blood, and guarded in consecrated houses, these stools symbolized the juopolitical constitution of the Ashanti lineage system and marked the genealogical legitimacy of succession to lineage headship.

A second illustration of the link between signs of history and signs in history comes from Tahiti, where a system of elevated stone pavements called *marae* served as local ancestral temples and as centers of cultic worship. The iconic linkage between segments of localized rāmages and these *marae* structures is analogous to the system of lineage shrines described by Fortes for the Tallensi. As Sahlins (1958:165) describes the Tahitian case:

The rāmages system was reflected in the system of ancestral temples (*marae*). Each family had a temple. The largest temple in a district, that of the senior family, was considered the parent temple from

7. The British learned this in 1900 when the Ashanti silently prepared for war after Sir Frederic Hodgson reportedly said, “Why am I not sitting on the Golden Stool at this very moment?”

which the others branched off. . . . When a household divided and lands were partitioned, a stone from the old temple was used as a cornerstone for the new. The latter was reconsecrated to the same god as the old, while the head of the segmenting group took an hereditary title associated with the older temple.

This practice of actually removing a piece of the stone foundation to mark ramage segmentation is also found in the expansion of religious cults from one island to another. At the ancient cultic center of Taputapuatea on the island of Ra'iatea, eight boulders representing eight chiefs who ruled the land stood at the *marae*. Called “stone memorials of kings,” these pillars were lined up in squares parallel to the main structure. Together these stones iconically represent the linkage between political segments. Their historicizing function was noted by the missionary Orsmond (in Henry 1928:135), who observed simply, “Several squares were thus sometimes formed showing the antiquity of the *marae*.” And when the cult dedicated to the god Oro spread from the western portion of the group of islands to the large island Tahiti, a stone was taken from the religious center at Ra'iatea to be the cornerstone of the new *marae*, also called Taputapuatea, which Captain Cook visited in 1777.

In each of these ethnographic examples, physical objects, rather than linguistic discourse, function as both signs of history and signs in history. Furthermore, both examples illustrate the important point, stressed especially by Prague School theorists, that synchronically manifested signs can represent the sedimentation of diachronic processes. But in addition to linguistic and material signs, history can be recorded by the structure of society itself, as Fortes (1945:224) so elegantly demonstrates in his work on Tallensi clanship: “We see how the lineage structure at a given time encapsulates all that is structurally relevant of its past phases and at the same time continually thrusts its growing-points forward.” In this passage Fortes moves significantly beyond Evans-Pritchard’s earlier effort to define the relationship between temporality and the interaction of social groups for the Nuer. For Evans-Pritchard, certain sets of social relations such as age sets and lineage segments provide a convenient reference point for the Nuer’s concept of “structural time,” just as the cyclic movements of nature provide a reference point for “oecological time” (1940:95). But Fortes notes that structures of social relations are not just reference points for some previously defined notion of time but are the “incapsulating” signs of history that code a definite kind of temporality.

And it is here that we encounter a central concern of Belauan history

as well, that continuity, permanence, and invariance are a principal modality of the society’s—or at least the dominant segment of the society’s—understanding of the relationship between event and structure. In our own notion of history, the focus is frequently on the efficient causality of events in transforming society from state A to state B (Benjamin 1968:263); on the representational transparency between historical discourse and “real” depicted events (Barthes 1986:138–39); and on the relative position of events along an absolute linear framework of temporality, a continuum itself external to the events so categorized, which are thought to be “in time” (Collingwood 1926:150). The problematic of Belauan history is different: how can events, with their context-dependent and pragmatically valued quality, be recorded so that, on the one hand, the structure of society—in particular the hierarchical arrangement of its parts—can be invariantly reproduced, and so that, on the other hand, this repeated structure gains value from the cumulative weight of layered events. In other words, the trick of history is to maintain both the invariance of structure (for example, that the position of the capital village in a district is a matter of timeless, cosmologically grounded legitimacy), and the value of temporal precedence (for example, that the chiefly line traces its migration back to a point prior to that of other, lower-ranking lines). As will become clear, these two dimensions are played out rhetorically and politically in instances of Belauan historical discourse.

THE CLOSELY GUARDED STORY OF NGEREMLENGUI

The present volume is in part an attempt to understand a single sign of history, namely, a text recorded in the Belauan language in 1971 as part of the historical research program conducted by staff members of the Palau Community Action Agency (PCAA, Ngeremlengui File). This document summarizes the position of Ngeremlengui in Belauan polity and links certain customary practices and concepts to the social changes of the modern period. Since the narrator of this text became, seventeen years later, my principal informant, I was in a position to return to it again and again over the course of my two years in the field. Now I do not believe that a single document can be said to encapsulate the essence of a culture, a village, or even an individual, but it proved to be such a powerful source of insight and puzzlement for me that it can function also as the stepping-off place for the ethnographic analyses of this book.

The story of Ngeremlengui has been closely guarded, since the old people told us: do not discuss the internal affairs of the village, for then every village would know it. Ngeremlengui is a district composed of thirty-eight villages. When all these villages are combined together we call it Kerngilianged (Dwelling As In Heaven). Kerngilianged refers to all the villages combined together, and it implies that they are all of one spirit, and that these villages share common laws which were instituted by [the goddess] Milad and by the Ruchel [messenger gods].

I too have guarded the story of this village, but I can no longer keep it concealed because we are now recording Belauan stories. Today we are approaching the final turning point for this village, so now I can inform others about Ngeremlengui.

The reason that Ngeremlengui has been at peace up until the present day is that we have never discarded these laws, for we know that the sacredness of Melekeok, Oreor, and Imiungs remains here in this village. That is, we obey the person who carries the position of leadership, and we also remind him of those things which are mistaken with reference to our human existence. But today the things that are going wrong stem from this very point: the most important factor which keeps this village at peace and harmony is that we do not respect high-ranking people or brave people. Rather, we hold the greatest respect for the sacredness which is in the village, and this is the very same respect we hold for the general public of Ngeremlengui. No matter how far away we go, we will still respect it because this sacredness is the real original cause for the life of this village and for proper behavior in it. But it is very difficult to conceal something which a person does not know about, since no one ever told him so he could possibly know about it. They just locked it up. This was not a lie, though, for they knew: keeping the village together begins with respect.

Our primary respect is for the public, because we know that the sacredness of Melekeok, Oreor, and Imiungs are all located here. So we address the four leaders of Ngaraimeiong council [in Imeiong village] as Chuong (Respected), since they are to be greatly respected. And here [in Imeiong] there are no female titleholders but rather the wives of the [male] titleholders are to be respected. When these four wives of the Chuong are gathered together, the senior women from Ngerturong house or the senior women from Klang house will guard the seats where they are sitting, for this is something which was pronounced by the Ruchel [gods]. The Ruchel declared these wives of the Chuong to be taboo and their every need will be seen to by the senior women.

This is something which has been cherished up until the present day.

Something else which really makes this village well behaved is the law of marriage, whereby a low-ranking person is permitted to become the spouse of one of these Chuong titleholders. When a child from one of the Edeuteliang (Three at the Other End) villages is born, they instruct her: if you are well behaved, you can become the wife of a Chuong. The significance of this is that, should she become the wife of a Chuong, then she would also become respected. They also instruct the children: the important thing is not just that you marry into Imeiong but that we all become thereby respected.

Now you have no doubt heard it said that this word *kuoll* (to be respected) is an expression which no longer has any significance. But when we respect the public, then we will respect the households and the children. You absolutely cannot scold a child or step over a sleeping child, since you do not know if this child will come to have sacredness or not. And those people who speak for the village should be obeyed, for the people know that sacredness has fallen upon a person who speaks for the village. And those speaking for the village who follow their own will in respect to this law will always be brought to ruin, or else they will fall from the office which concerned this very sacredness, about which they exercised their own personal judgment.

And Ngeremlengui does not stand alone, for we also respect the two other sacrednesses [of Melekeok and Oreor], which are united with the sacredness of Ngeremlengui. And these villages and the people in them know that their sacredness remains (*meang a medechel*) in Ngeremlengui, and should there be a violation they will be cursed by their own sacredness. This does not imply, then, that Imiungs will be cursed. Rather, the village that violates the sacredness itself will be cursed. If this principle is rejected, it is not the words of the people of Imiungs that are being rejected.

I truly believe that this sacredness really exists. And I truly believe these stories and have thought very carefully about what I have just spoken. (PCAA, Ngeremlengui File; my translation)

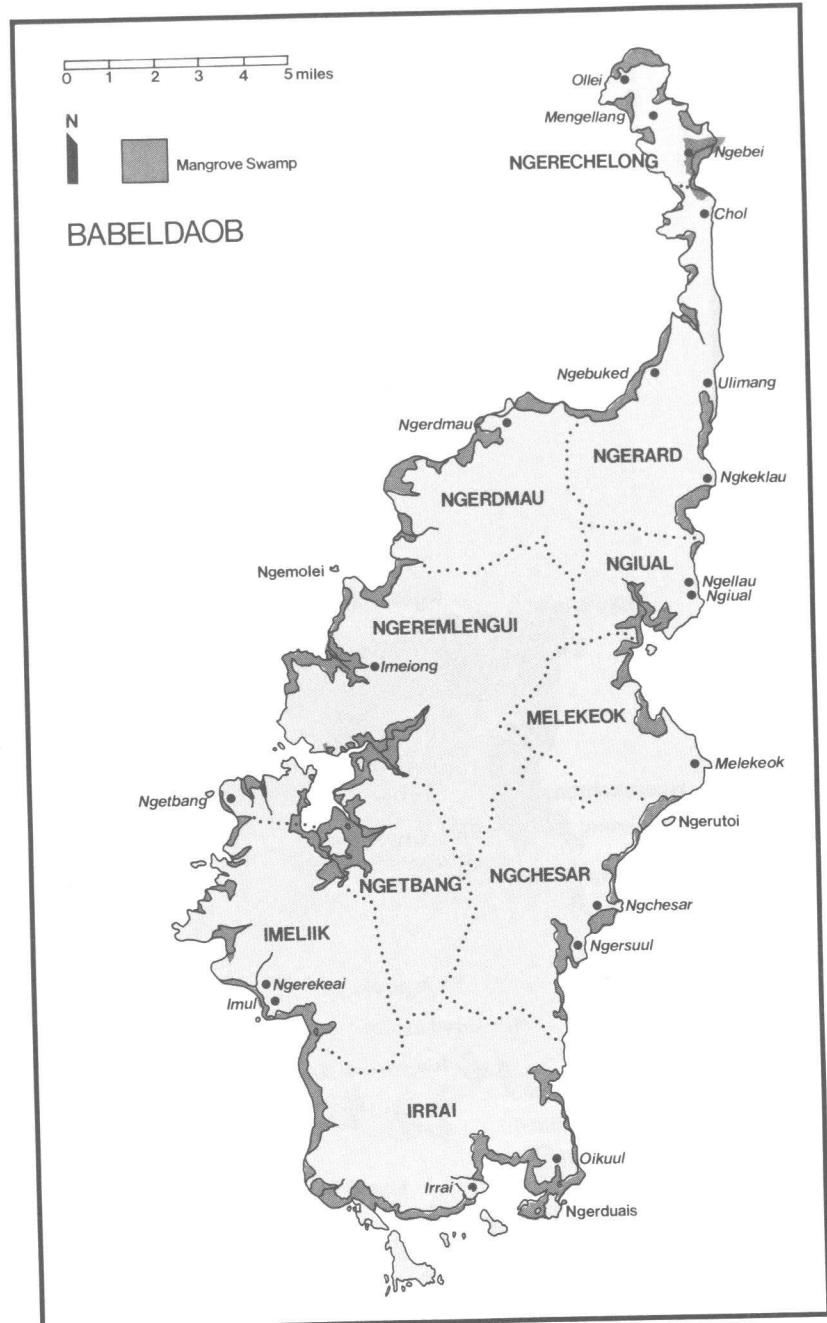
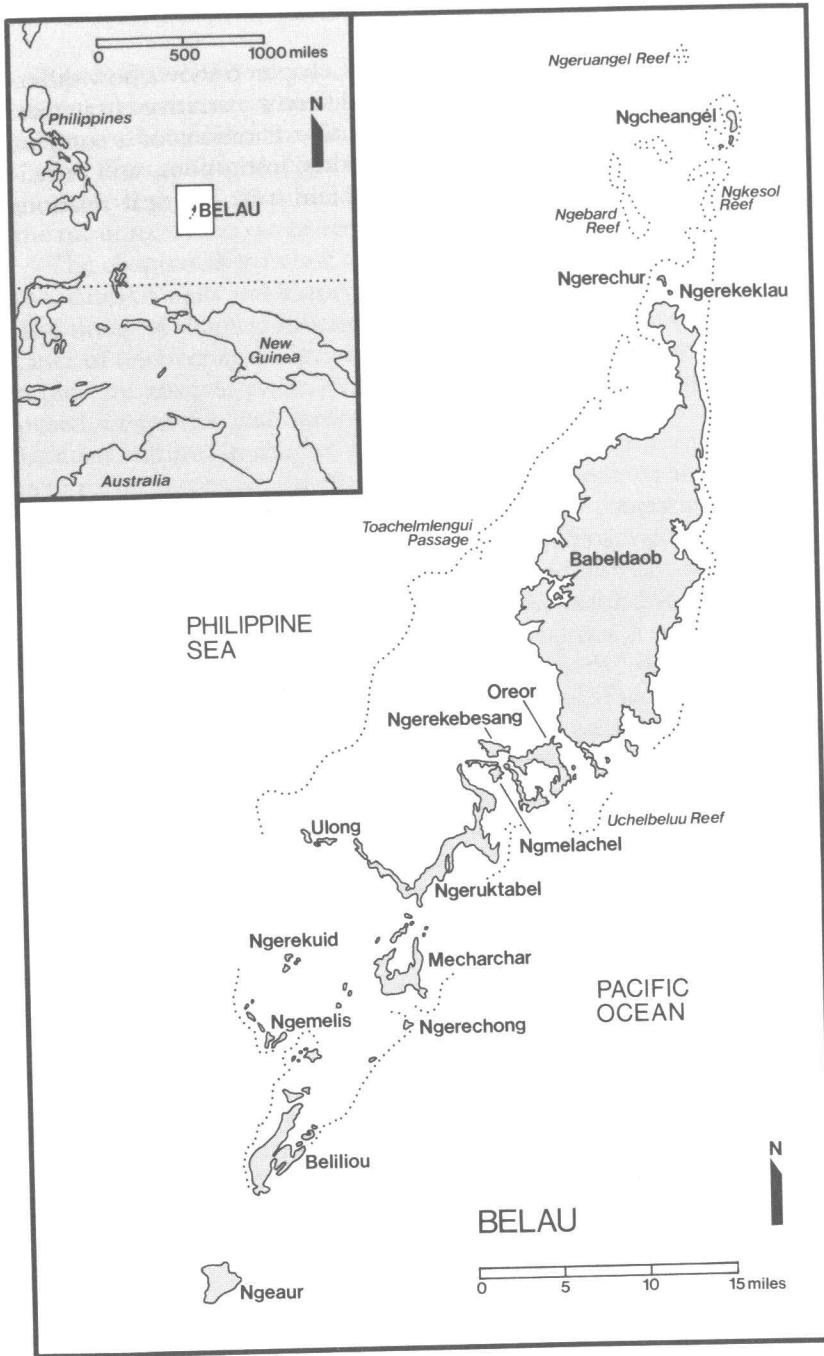
Clearly for this narrator, the telling of this story for the record is no simple recitation of historical recollections but is itself a sign of an important transition in Ngeremlengui's relationship with the changing Belauan political world.⁸ This narrative is thus a directional marker

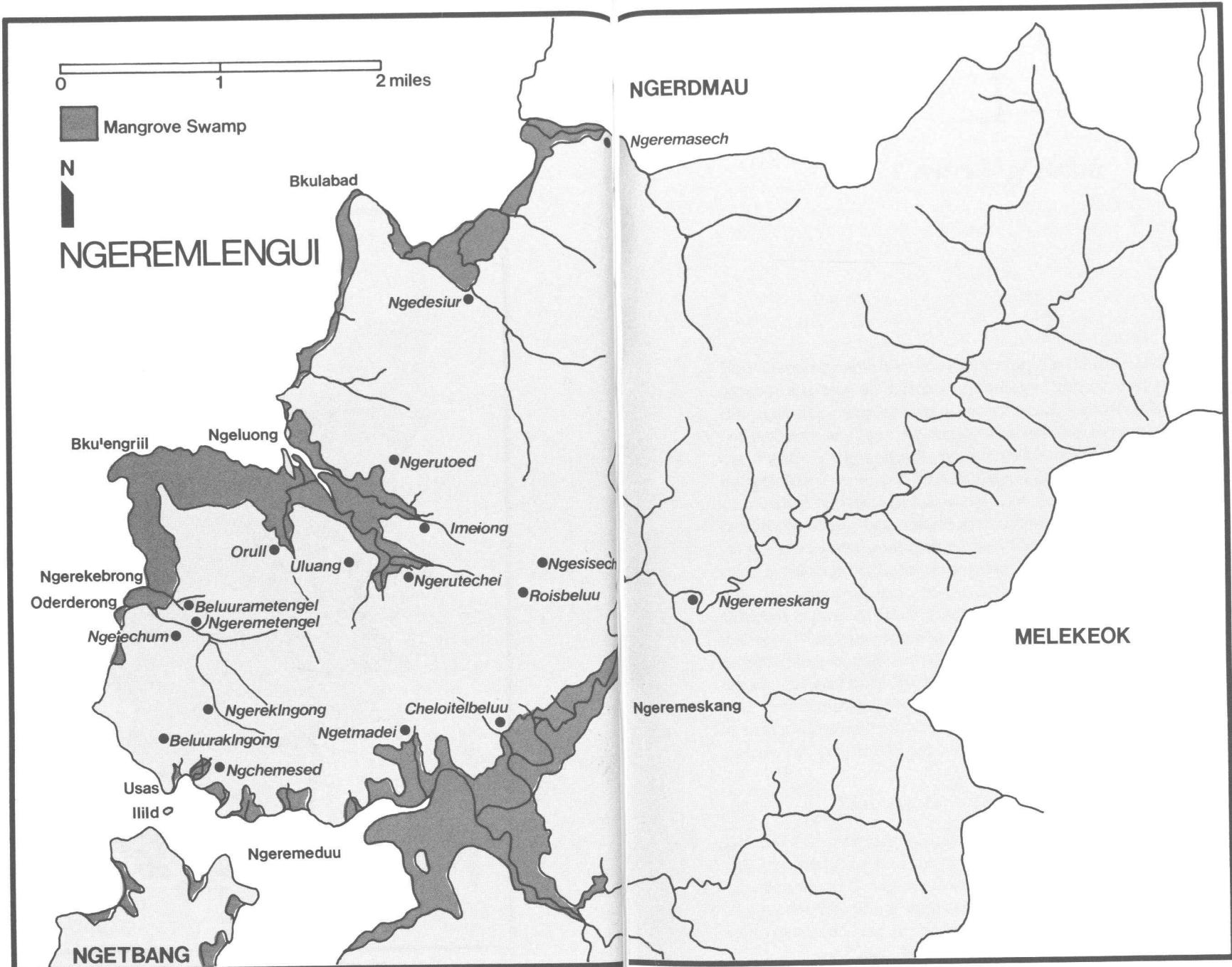
8. Cf. the remarkable indigenous account by a Fijian chief of the principles of that society's "custom," in Milner 1952:351–61.

(*olangch*) by which we can set our path through the complexities of the district's history: rank, respect, and sacredness; titleholders, leaders, and senior women; districts, villages, and houses; Imiungs, Melekeok, and Oreor; Kerngiliangled, Ngeremlengui, and the Edeuteliang; Milad and the Ruchel gods—these will be our guideposts in the task of unraveling the meaning of the sacred remains.

The chapters that follow take up these and other themes relating to the issues of signs and history, events and structures, stories and stones. The order of chapters is designed to be a demonstration of the importance of uncovering indigenous categories of history: many of the same topics are covered twice, first from the perspective of externally imposed categories and second from various perspectives internal to Belauan culture. In chapter 1, Belau is situated in terms of the Pacific geographical context, the Austronesian cultural context, and the Western historical context. Chapter 2 continues this contextualization by synthesizing ethnographic material about traditional political institutions, including the organization of villages and districts, the functioning of titled chiefs and their political councils, and the manipulation of valuables in intervillage activities involving warfare, concubinage and collection ceremonies. Chapter 3 marks a turn toward analyzing Belauan historical categories and presents a detailed account of the relationship between four models or diagrams (to use the convenient Peircean vocabulary) which organize social relations, namely, “paths” linking elements in a linear order, “cornerposts” joining four terms in a coordinated structure, balanced “sides” combining similar, yet opposed, members of symmetrical pairs, and “large/small” gradations placing elements in hierarchically ranked series. The cultural understanding of these four diagrams reached in chapter 3 is then explored in greater depth in the next three chapters. Chapter 4 links three of these diagrams to mythological narratives about the transformation of Belauan polity: the progression of political eras, such as the “polity of Chuab” and the “polity of Milad” noted above, as well as a third era based on an ideology of two “sides of heaven” factions, is shown to correspond to the rhetorical application of models of paths, cornerposts, and sides. Chapter 5 is a case study of the political organization of Ngeremlengui district, in which the ranked relationship between capital village and member village turns out to correspond to the differential valuation of these same cultural diagrams, with the high-ranking village stressing the quadripartite order and lower-ranking villages the linear model of paths. Implications of this distinction in political rank are discussed again in chapter 6, where contrasting narratives of village foundation are analyzed. Rather than reducing narrative variants to ar-

rive at a neutral account of district history, chapter 6 shows how different positions in rank correspond to different narrative strategies. Finally, chapter 7 deals with narratives and explications of a complex sequence of events in which all these models, institutions, and principles are played out in the context of interdistrict political relations among Belau's capital villages.





MAP 3