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LETHAL DANCE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Pulling the leaf wad plug out of his bamboo tube, Bambilai shook out the glossy red Bird Of Paradise tail plume. He joined the growing gathering of newly washed and oiled clansmen preparing for that night's ceremonial dance. Men discussed everyday affairs, the potential power of rival dancers, and where each of the clansmen had obtained the necessary body decoration for the upcoming performance. Some of the men had hunted successfully in the virgin forest where the human settlement ended, others had borrowed well from other clansmen, drawing on trade relations built up during the year. The range of paraphernalia assembled was consistent with their pre-arranged theme, although telling individual differences were apparent to anyone skilled in the social semiotics of dance. Each participant weighed the sheen and brilliance of the others' furs and feathers, the rarity of jungle plants, and whether the golden crescent and other shells and beads were plentiful. And each dancer begged audience approval, desiring appreciation of his "grease" or radiance of health and magnetism to attract more of such power symbols.

The most powerful and awe-inspiring dancers draw women to them, and create new allies for future dances, exchange relations central to the economic system, and warfare (or, more likely, nowadays, for local government considerations). Though the dancers are concerned with their own appearance, they take great pains to insure that the clan group dances intact and maintains a common front, for men are evaluated less on the basis of individual merits than on the merits of their clan as a whole. And, from a religious standpoint, the men would dance as a unit to demonstrate that their living dead (ancestor spirits) were present and supportive of their efforts. Indeed, it is only with the assistance of ancestor spirits, and thus by virtue of the sacrifices made in their honor, that a

clan is able to pyramid its strength and wealth. In a strong sense, dances parallel² warfare, pitting one group against another, and are also a corollary of warfare in that relations created at ceremonial dances become the main alliances of war.

THE HIGHLAND SETTING

New Guinea Highlanders are intrinsically competitive and live within the fold of competitive societies. The competition is all the more intense because there are no rigid hierarchies (Strathern 1966) or hereditary offices (Berndt 1962). Political enclaves and factions are relatively small; they are led by self-made leaders who must compete with one another. A principal sphere of competition for big-men is ceremonial exchange, and less dramatically the numerous smaller transactions that fill daily economic activity. A second domain of competition between men and groups is ceremonial dancing. Frequently, ceremonial exchanges and dancing are combined into a single event.²

Men controlled warfare in the bygone days just as they control ceremonial exchanges and dances today, and indeed they perceive the control of the latter as a logical extension of the former. What is essential about the dance is that the message is conveyed in terms of acts and substance, implicit recognition that all communicative media are not equal. The characteristic decorations of dancers and the forms of dance, which emphasize power and strength, communicate more and in a different way than words alone. Dance and dancers do not simply state that they are powerful, but perform acts of power and strength. They index a social state and are thus that much more convincing than language alone.

There is also something intrinsically important about the use of the body as opposed to words. As Rappaport (1979) suggests in another context:

I...propose that the use of body defines the self of the performer for himself and for others. In kneeling, for instance, he is not merely sending a message to the effect that he submits in ephemeral words that flutter away from his mouth. He identifies his inseparable, indispensable, and enduring body with his subordination. The subordinated self is neither a creature of insubstantial words from which he may separate himself without loss of blood, nor some insubstantial essence or soul that cannot be located in space or confined in time. It is his visible, present, living substance.... As "saying" may be "doing" may also be an especially powerful -- or substantial -- way of "saying" (p. 200).

More than simply drawing a strong connection between physical acts and social efficacy, this viewpoint expresses the indigenous Highland view of the power of acts over speech. It is no accident that in very many Highland languages a single verb embraces both "to know" and "to see." And if we embrace the advanced theoretical perspective of Bourdieu the point has even deeper significance; for Bourdieu writes that the "principle generating and unifying all practices, the system of inseparably cognitive and evaluative structures which organizes the vision of the world in accordance with the objective structures of a determinate state of the social world...is nothing other than the socially informed body" (1977:124). In other words, the socially informed body becomes the perfect medium for unifying thought and practice, the individual and the social, which allows for the construction of an individual aesthetic that is also a social commentary. This further points out that in human societies the relationship between form (e.g. the use of dance and body decoration) and function (to index the state of political affairs) is open to history and creativity.

DANCING AND FIGHTING

Highlanders are frequently involved in ceremonies where pigs and shell valuables are exchanged. These "gifts" are couched in terms of compensation for

allies or former enemies as a result of their losses in past combat. They have the spirit of war indemnities. An ally who has lost some of its men fighting on behalf of the main combatant will receive death compensation. "Exchanges are ostensibly made to keep the peace; but they contain a latent rivalry, expressed in the size of the gifts, in speeches, and in decorations themselves" (e.g. type and size of bird plume). These payments invite reciprocal exchanges between groups (Strathern 1971:14).

The entire process of dancing against one's enemies and potential allies is an aggressive action, and is so viewed by the participants even as they appreciate its other qualities. Without the presence of guests, the dance is essentially meaningless, being drained of its social content. Dancers dress like warriors. Over cleaned skin goes charcoal to heighten the vision of strength and spirit participation. Blackness is felt to be a sign of ferocity and stealth, necessary for successful combat. Dancers -- perhaps assisted by a helper -- will paint red and white geometry to blend with the features of the human face. The dancer's nose is made more prominent, the eyes are enlarged by color contrasts. The head is transformed by large headdresses or elaborate wigs. For the Simbai Valley people, the most prized part of their costume is the bonnet wig, enlarging their short stature by several feet once the feathers are set into place on the top. The bonnet is encrusted with iridescent green scarab beetle thoraxes strung onto bamboo spits and set on a turban-shaped frame. In other areas of the Highland, wigs adorned with feathers are the custom.³

For any dance ceremony, the guests are a key element precisely because the structure of the dance is to recreate the rivalries of warfare. The Australian Administration penetrated the dense, steep terrain of the interior only after the finale of World War II. The first act of the administration was to seize control by prohibiting endemic warfare. In the most easily accessible areas, the Pax

Australianus (as pacification was called) was established in the late 1940s. In the Bismarck mountain area, pacification came in 1956, though not without some bloody encounters. And, finally, the most remote areas of the Highlands have only been contacted in the late 1970's, though not longer now under the auspices of Australia but an independent Papua New Guinea Government. Ironically, there has been a resurgence of warfare in the regions pacified first in 1945.

Throughout the Highlands, warfare was rarely if ever fought to appropriate the land of a neighbor. When the loser was routed from his homeland, the territory remained deserted for a number of years and then was slowly repopulated by the previous owners. In this way, the ownership of land remained relatively stable over long periods of time despite the disruptions of frequent wars. It was only at the border of the two territories where boundaries were not clearly established by the presence of gardens (because of the tendency of clans to concentrate in the center of their territory) that land shifted back and forth between rivals. Indeed, planting at the border commonly provoked warfare. It was one of the ways that a clan could signal hostile intentions.

In Highland social systems, the center of gravity is the clan or group rather than the individual. Accordingly, if members of one clan murdered a member of another clan, revenge was likely to be taken on any of the members of the perpetrator's clan. The system of balanced reciprocity was, in other words, calculated on a clan basis. Prior to pacification, men would frequently be slain or injured for walking across enemy clan territory.

Young men preparing for a dance today are well versed in the stories of war, for the outcome of past encounters is inscribed in present status and authority of the different clans. Endless hours are spent recounting the glories of the days before pacification, and young men know the details of wars they could not have witnessed. Inter-clan aggression, which is part and product of coming-of-age for

men, is nowadays channelled into gambling (particularly dice and card games), sports such as soccer (which often assume a violent spirit never intended by their inventors), and dancing.

In a calculated attempt to harness and control, the Australian Administration developed the Mt. Hagen and Goroka Shows, where clans stream in from across the Highlands in full regalia to compete. As in other contexts of dance, a key element is that the aggression exhibited by dancer-warriors is not an uncontrolled, anti-social rage, but a highly ritualized form of social practice. That is to say, the dancing is stylized, repetitive, stereotyped, and highly distinctive. There is a full sense of identification between the dancers and the dance: the dancers are identified with the dance. The dance is ritual because it does not simply have an audience, in the same way that all drama does, but a congregation which participates as an act of social definition. Dancing in this sense is a cultural mode of communication which operates simultaneously on several channels and with different types of signs. In one dimension, the dance reveals the current psychic, social, or practical state of the participants; in the other dimension, the structure of the dance and the activities which surround it are a backdrop, themselves amenable to manipulation in the quest to communicate and create social situations. Note that there is no intrinsic linkage between dancing in the present ceremony and fighting in a future war, other than a symbolic connection where the dance functions as a promise, and those who have danced but failed to fight are held accountable by the community at large. Note also that it is the difference in time between dancing and fighting, and thus the introduction of risk, which crystallizes the social relation. The time lag between the promise (made by the dance) and its fulfillment is always social time, to be manipulated by the parties in the pursuit of their own interests. To put this in a pan-primate perspective, it is between the relatively automatic, instinct-based reactions of non-human primates

and the total arbitrariness possible for human agents that the coherence of social practice is constructed. It is for this reason that human aggression seems to encompass all of the forms of aggression available to non-human primates and then some. It is also for this reason that dancers not only pledge support in future rounds of fighting, but do so with a degree of delicacy that explains where they stand on the continuum from provision support to unconditional assistance. They indicate their position in terms of the possibilities for variation within the context of the ritual. For example, it is always possible to vary the number of dancers such that an ally who sends a small contingent probably harbors an equally small commitment (unless, of course, this message is countervailed by another message -- in this case a meta-commentary). Or, another group of allies may dance particularly strongly to indicate their willingness, perhaps eagerness, to sponsor a war. As the concept of meta-commentary tries to illustrate, the communication may be multi-layered, this layering either made possible directly by a linguistic channel or indirectly by analogy to this channel. In essence, the gestures, postures, and ornamentation of the dancers are cultural. Their meanings are determined by a socially informed body and the meta-communication which languages make available.

This structure allows Highlanders to selectively appropriate the behavior of different animals. Thus, Highlanders say that they imitate the Birds of Paradise in their elaborate displays and songs. Paradise, unique to Papua New Guinea, are the most prized feather; they are wild because they come from the jungle where humans do not inhabit. Hard to shoot with bow and arrow, living in remote areas over great areas, hunting the Paradise demands archery skills and the assistance of the ancestor spirits. The Bird of Paradise clears a tree branch and puts on daily displays to attract females. Their cultural corollary is the building of dance grounds, the grand display of plumage, and the chorus of cries sounded by the males. Birds of Paradise are graced with iridescent body capes, tail and head

wires, and tail plumes. Highlanders are intimate with the habits of the paradise and by paralleling its behavior they exhibit the wild and thus only barely controlled part of their own nature. One of the primary aspects of the art forms of dance and ornamentation is that they mediate between men and nature, so bridging the chasm which culture has created.⁴

In practice, ceremonial exchanges, ordinary business dealings and warfare compensations are intertwined. This interdigitation of exchanges is possible because all are base on the principle of reciprocity. Thus, an exchange given in one round of presentations will be reciprocated in the next. The Stratherns explain:

...there is a further factor involved in the relations between exchanging groups, which is important: where groups are in a reciprocal exchange relation they are likely to have been both allies and enemies to each other on different occasions in the past. They are rivals, and in their exchanges they try to outdo each other by the total size of their gifts. Rivalry is built into the...transaction as a premise, since the main gift should exceed the solicitary gifts in value and should also exceed previous gifts given by those now receiving. We are dealing with groups which confront and test each other over time with demonstraitons of their wealth (Strathern and Strathern 1971:48-49).

In essence, though the ceremony pivots around dancing and its clear implications for alliance, much much more goes on which influences the outcome of the dance, and the future strategies which flow from it.

WARFARE DECORATIONS AND DRESS

All of the decorations worn for formal ritual occasions are meant to communicate to members of the clan, and to outsiders, information concerning the strength of the wearer. In so doing, they mark off a ceremonial occasion from those of ordinary affairs which are more concerned with pragmatic affairs, such as the tending of gardens, rather than the process of social differentiation. On these

ritual occasions, the relationship between the hosts and the guests is one of both friendship, as indicated by the invitation and the offering of food, and hostility, as demonstrated by the nature of the dancing and dressing. Naturally, the relative proportions of friendship and hostility will depend on the seriousness of previous warfare, and the projected state of future relations. The consolidation of common interests in the present may override disagreements and deaths of the past. There is a direct connection between the elaborateness of the finery donned by the dancers and the seriousness of the wars conducted previously. There is thus a strong association between the donning of headdresses and situations of hostility. Strathern (1971) notes that the warriors's entire body was charcoaled because, in local eyes, such darkening of the body made the warrior appear frightening and powerful. Poison is associated with the darkness of the color black, and poison is often brewed in stone hollows in which charcoal remains. Accordingly, black is connected with the two major forms of inflicting death: sorcery and violence. Since warfare springs from the motive of revenge, black is also related to revenge, to the reestablishment of an equilibrium between clans.

THE MECHANICS OF WARFARE

Many Highlanders believed that was was essential to their well-being. As women determined themselves as women by working in their gardens, so men exemplified themselves as men by engaging in warfare and related activities. In many instances, the ancestors demand that the living avenge their death. Unappeased ghosts may harass delinquent kinsmen, by not shielding the living from the attacks of evil spirits or assistance in the fertility of the gardens. Recall that almost all deaths in New Guinea societies are attributable to actions of other men,

be this action actual physical attack or the poison administered by sorcerers. Once an incident sparks a war, the bigmen from both groups call upon their allies to join them in battle. And those who danced together now join one another on the battle field. After the call has been issued, the men of the central clan cluster and their allies prepare themselves with feathers and paint and assemble on the field of battle. Ritual preparations leading up to the convening on the battle field are frequently elaborate.

War leaders conduct divinations to determine the course of the battle. Often this involves incantations which call upon the wisdom of the ancestor spirits. Through the intermediary of a shaman the ancestor spirits identify those opponents upon whom the propitiants should concentrate their arrows.

In many instances, the fighting begins by agreement of both sides, on a battleground of common choice. Both combatants may, in fact, have spent time and energy the previous day clearing the field of debris. The warriors of both parties meet with arrows and spears in a skirmish, and having exhausted their energy and munitions, retire for refreshment. New groups of warriors replace the retiring outfit, the fighting being intermittent. As the fighting intensifies and the combatants draw closer and closer, the warriors underline their bravery and agility by dodging spears and arrows. Both groups use barbed arrows, especially designed for warfare, whose points break off when they become embedded in the flesh. After a day of fighting, the two sides withdraw, sometimes because the afternoon rains have unleashed their torrential downpour. A series of such engagements may continue for weeks on end, with neither side gaining a clear advantage or, for that matter, suffering more than light casualties. Most deaths do not occur as a result of formal encounters, but as a consequence of ambushes and raids when a small party is set upon by much greater numbers.

Maintaining the support of allies becomes increasingly difficult as the

fighting drags on. Not only do allies become tired of participating in a fight not of their making, but they are unable to make exchanges and carry on their necessary business. Victories in many cases go to the allies who can continue to mobilize and motivate their allies the longest. In very large measure, then, the entire nature of fighting strategy depended heavily on an antagonist capacity to judge the level of commitment of allies. In this respect, judging a groups commitment during a festival, and the cementing of the alliance, was central to the political fortunes of the clan. It is little wonder then that clansmen took the dance ceremonies very seriously. For defeat generally meant being forced to flee to the clan homeland for the ground of a distant ally, and to suffer the indignity of being treated as a guest for the years to come.

When the opposing forces have exhausted their desire to fight or one side has been defeated, the combatants can call a halt to the exchange of raids, injuries, and deaths by agreeing to a truce. This may be a permanent halt or a temporary respite between rounds of warfare. Throughout the Highlands, pigs are exchanged to terminate the fighting. Other potent symbols, such as replanting of rumbim which was uprooted to signal a state of war, may also be activated. Pigs are the food of formal exchange or the cultivation of human relationships, while plants indicate that the clan has returned to a state of gardening and material reproduction, rather than the time out of time that is warfare.

RETALIATION AND COMPENSATION

Throughout Papua New Guinea, the establishment of Australian control led to the creation of patrol posts or government outstations. This led to the appointment of local headmen in the early years, and later to elected local

government councilors whose main office included reporting fights and bringing disputants to patrol headquarters for trial. This action served to repress fighting as the perpetrators were either jailed or fined. Nonetheless, such action did little to relieve the causes of fighting or to give any solace to the victims.

A principal reason why western remedies had little effect on war in the Highlands is a difference in principle. A fundamental premise of Western law, upon which the law of New Guinea is based, is that an injury or death may be due to entirely accidental causes. But for the people of the Highlands, the question is not whether a clansman was struck down by malaria or some other sickness, but why he was struck down and not some other individual. The general understanding is that misfortune is always due to sorcery, spiritual cause, or other forms of intervention. This is especially true when a young man or a woman in her prime is struck down. Such deaths, like those which result from direct physical action, demand revenge and redress.

After noting that there have been many recent outbursts of war and vengeance fighting, the resulting demands for compensation, Brown (1979) quotes the following passage from the Papua New Guinea Newsletter of 2 July 1975:

After more than 50 years of fighting and bitter feelings, members of the Niniga and Kumai clans have settled their differences as a mark of respect for Papua New Guinea's Independence year. At a meeting in Minj (a Highland's town) recently, attended by 4000 warriors, the Ninigas made a settlement of 200 pigs, four cassowaries (a large flightless bird used in compensation payments), and K2000 in cash (about US\$3000), and the long-standing fued was over. Most of those present could not remember what the years of fighting were all about and only a few old men remembered the day when a Kumai man was killed in a food garden by a party of Niniga warriors. It was thought to be a Niniga garden, but no one could really remember after so long. Certainly no one remembers the man's name (a sign that a certain era has passed in New Guinea chronologies). Assistant District Commissioner at Minj, Don Simmons, who attended the ceremony, said the compensation payment was the second by the Ninigas. The first, made many years ago, consisted of 500 pigs and traditional riches but was considered inadequate. Fighting had continued until this meeting and compensation payment had been arranged. Mr. Simmons said the two clans would now live in harmony and understanding.

One of the most distinctive features of fighting in the Highlands is that almost every culture has its own means of initiating offenses, assembling support, counting and assessing damage, etc. The Maring, for example, conduct a major festival, called a kaiko (meaning dance), which confirms the termination of hostilities. At the conclusion of a war between major enemy clan clusters, a preliminary truce is made. In the following few years, the two sides accumulate sufficient pigs to hold a major slaughter. Territory abandoned during the hostilities is reclaimed and new planting stakes are put in to mark off boundaries. Preparations for the kaiko include the planting of special gardens and fattening of pigs, as well as the assumption of taboos and ceremonies of fertility. The ritual lasts for an entire year, with a variety of special events. The events embrace ritual sacrifices to the ancestor spirits, songs to commemorate the war, and elaborate dancing in full regalia. It is ironically the creation of the dance which generates new alliances and establishes the terms for the next rounds of warfare. The killing and sharing of pigs is the culmination of the cycle of war and peace, indicating that a clan is wealthy, has strong clearly-defined relations to allies, and has paid its compensation.

CAUSES/EFFECTS OF WARFARE

Because of the intimate and intrinsic connection between a clan and its membership, warfare frequently starts following violence of some sort between members of the two clans. The likelihood of warfare is directly correlated with the number of previously fought wars. The most proximate "causes" of warfare as deduced by local people are:

1. the marriage, or taking of a woman, without the consent of the woman's agnates.

2. sexual misconduct between members of opposing groups, the woman's group feeling that their integrity has been violated by the act. In modern terminology Highlanders, sometimes describe such acts as "rape" even when they occur with the woman's consent, for given the groupism which pervades Highland society, a woman's consent was not, strictly speaking, hers to give.

3. shooting a pig which has invaded a garden, stealing crops, or poaching game and appropriating wild resources. Given the extremely strong attachment between clansmen and their ancestral lands, an attachment which is rooted in the clan cycle of material reproduction, such actions as stealing crops represent a symbolic invasion as well as a material one.

4. the causing of death through sorcery. As noted earlier, one clansman may cause the death of a member of another clan through the use of magic.

In a strong sense, the underlying motivation for warfare in all of New Guinea Highlands is land. This does not mean land in the simple sense of appropriation for increased productivity. Rarely is land directly taken from the defeated and in many instances such appropriation would not offer any opportunity for increasing productivity. Different clans usually live in similar ecological zones and they grow exactly the same products. Warfare over land centers on land as a structural element in a complex of structural relations, constituting social reproduction. By social reproduction, I mean the capacity of a clan to physically reproduce and more importantly -- because more problematic -- to reproduce a way of life. As the main source of male continuity, land represents and embodies the temporal continuity of the clan. Throughout the Highlands, mythology, ritual ceremony, and common wisdom depict men as the great trees of the primary forest, their roots deeply entrenched in the soil and their permanence assured. This is reflected also in marriage practices where the woman moves to the clan lands of her husband upon marriage. There is also a material attachment through the cycle of reproduction. In this cycle, the membership of a clan bears a common identity because they have eaten food from the same land, land upon which the bodies of

the dead have been buried and returned to the earth. Note, here, that the conception that stealing food is justification for warfare stems from the premise that the eating of food is a means of making kin relations. In other words, the theft of food, quite apart from its material aspects, is a symbolic statement of disregard, a form of insult which challenges the sense of honor of the clan. Women are also intimately related to the clan's social reproduction, for they are not only the means of increasing its numbers, and of providing labor for the raising of gardens and pigs, but an essential gift of exchange between clans. Clans related by marriage bare an intrinsic connection. They dance at each other's festivals, serving as allies in warfare and friends in peace. It is for this reason that the taking of a woman is a cardinal offence against the clan as a social body. It is also why the consent of the woman is very irrelevant to the matter at hand.

It is here that the cycle of war and peace and the creation of allies through dance join hands at a deeper level. It is precisely at dance festivals when men come from many clan clusters, and display their wealth and attractiveness as allies, that theft and "rape" are most likely. This is why the circumstances for the generation of allies and friendships is also the forum for the making of conflict.

THE RESURRECTION OF VIOLENCE

An observer who toured the Highlands in the late 1950s and early '60s could easily come away with the impression that warfare had come to a decisive end under Australian administration. Below this surface of tranquility, many of the indigenous problems were reasserting themselves, unrelieved by the move into modernization, and perhaps even exacerbated. Indeed, Maggitt (1977) notes for the Enga that the increasing frequency of fighting "was strongly rooted in conditions

engendered by the earlier period of imposed peace and the extension of public services" (p. 156).

Not surprisingly, the resurrection of warfare as a legitimate means of resolving problems has placed renewed emphasis on the festivals and dances of the modern era. This resurgence of warfare was actually a simple transformation of previous conditions, to the extent that the period of peace could be seen in retrospect as a hiatus between hostilities. As soon as peace was imposed, a flood of legal cases began to engulf the newly created courts and adjudicators. People viewed the courts as the modern equivalent to battle, with each side pressing home its claims for compensation in land or money or pigs. This turn to legal debate also fit into the Highland tradition of oratory, where big men mobilized community sentiment by virtue of their speaking abilities.

However, the courting process soon began to break down in some areas. The limits of the court system became apparent first in those areas which were pacified first. As this modern form of warfare failed to resolve the problems resolved by war, people quickly returned to the older forms of dispute settlement. Thus, warfare is again commonplace in some areas of the Highlands.

FOOTNOTES

1. The archaeological record indicates that men first crossed from the Asian mainland into New Guinea some 30,000 years ago. The earliest site date from about 25,000 when even the highest New Guinea mountains, stretching 15,000 feet upwards, were glaciated. A decisive turn in the history of the island came about 5000 years ago when the sweet potato was introduced. This allowed larger settlements to flourish in the Highlands and was no doubt instrumental in the rapid population diffusion.
2. Fuller accounts are given of ceremonies and festivals can be found in Allen (1967), Berndt (1959), Simpson (1955), Power (1967), and Forge (1966).
3. For Highlanders, dances are meant to express their desires for health, strength, and fertility -- fertility in the complex sense of total social reproduction. Paradoxically, dances not only try to solicit ancestral assistance and the help of allies, but also to demonstrate to the world at large that these goals have already been achieved. As a compounded communication, the dance is both a form of propitiation and a celebration of success. Decorations at dance embody these dual purposes. There is an internal logic to dance ceremonies which stipulate that insofar as the dance is an indication of health and strength, individuals who have been beset by illness or economic misfortune should not join in. In some cases, a dance celebration is delayed because a clansman of the host group had died. As Strathern and Strathern (1971:134) note: "...self-decoration is the antithesis of mourning. In mourning the body is neglected, dirtied, even mutilated by the tearing-out of hair and the amputation of finger joints; by decoration it is enhanced and made attractive."
4. A more complete account can be found in Bulmer (1968), Gilliard (1953), and Forge (1967).

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