Competitive Gift Exchange among the Mambila
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The importance of gift-giving in the establishment of political and social relationships in a number of societies has long been recognised by anthropologists, and the element of competition inherent in these exchanges has not been ignored. To the best of my knowledge, instances of dyadic relationships characterised by competitive gift-exchange have not been recorded for any West African society. Among the Mambila-speaking peoples of the former British Cameroons, relationships of this type are of considerable social significance. The aim of this paper is to describe the way in which these are established, maintained and developed through time; to give an account of both a large and small scale gift distribution; and finally to analyse some of the sociological implications of this institution in Mambila society, with special reference to the village structure. The effect of this institution on inter-village relationships will not be dealt with here.

The Mambila live in Adamawa Province on what is called the Mambila Plateau. They number approximately 18,000 and live in autonomous villages with populations ranging from roughly 200 to 2,000 persons. Most villages have a secular chief, an office introduced under the Native Authority system. All villages are subdivided into hamlets, each with its own headman, an indigenous office. The incumbent is always the oldest male resident. A hamlet includes a number of compound clusters made up of from two to six compounds in spatial proximity one to the other, some of whose male members are usually kin. The residents unite for certain ritual and secular pur-

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1. The research on which the paper is based was carried out in 1952-1954. The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Wenner-Gren Foundation and University College, London, for financing the research, as well as to Dr. P. M. Kaberry and Dr. Ian Cunnison for reading a draft of this paper and making valuable suggestions for its improvement.
poses. Here again the oldest male inhabitant is the head. The composition of the constituent compounds is complicated by the fact that there are no fixed residence rules and therefore links binding the residents may be of a number of different kinds. The most usual type of compound houses a core made up of a man, his wife or wives, most of his married sons with their wives and children, and his unmarried sons and daughters.

The Mambila are skilled and enthusiastic farmers, fortunate in having an abundance of fertile land. None of the villages visited were suffering from a shortage of land. The result is that they normally produce a considerable surplus of their two staple crops, maize and guinea corn, except in the few bad years when the rains either come very late or are otherwise inadequate. Some of their surplus grain is sold to the town-dwelling Fulani and Hausa as well as to the nomadic cattle-keeping Fulani. The demand being small, most of the surplus is turned into beer for their own consumption. To avoid possible criticism, I had best add that I am well aware of the difficulty of defining surplus in non-monetary societies, however it is my impression backed by statements of many Mambila informants that they could sell a far greater proportion of their grain than is actually the case and run no risk of being left with insufficient supplies fort their own use.

THE INSTITUTION OF COMPETITIVE GIFT-EXCHANGE

There is no Mambila term to describe the institution. The term bill refers to the two partners in the relationship and may be used by them in addressing each other, but normally proper names are used in direct address. Bill also may have the wider meaning of “friend”. For the purposes of this paper I shall restrict its usage to the first meaning given above. The terms “host” and “guest” will be employed when it becomes necessary to distinguish between the partner who gives and the one receiving. The occasion on which gifts are offered will be called a “feast”.

At about fourteen to sixteen a boy is said to be old enough to select as a partner a lad of about his own age. Factors influencing his choice will be discussed below. Girls too have this prerogative but little data on this relationship were collected. Gift exchange between women is of far less structural significance than that between men for a number of reasons which cannot be discussed here. It is not possible for a boy to select a girl as a partner, nor a girl a boy. Not all males choose a partner, only about thirty per cent of my informants had one. Why such a small number of males establish this type of relationship is not clear though some informants who had not done so said that at the
right age they had no specific individual with whom they wished to acquire a link of this sort. It might be tempting to argue that only the wealthy could afford to become involved in gift-exchanges, but this would not fit the facts since there is no important wealth differential between the members of a village. It should be added here that the establishment of such ties is not limited to certain kin groups since any boy is free to select a partner if he so wishes. Quite a large proportion of those who had once had a partner had him no longer. In some cases the partner had died, in others the relationship was broken. One reason frequently given for breaking off such ties was that one of the two had moved to another village too distant for the tie to be maintained. The most common cause of a breach is a serious dispute between the two partners. In one typical case an informant had courted the sister of his partner; the parents of the girl having refused to accept him as a suitor, in a rage he insulted his friend and refused to continue the relationship. Finally it is not customary for a person to have more than one partner during his lifetime.

The relationship is established when a boy offers a pot of beer to another and asks him to become his partner. The pots contain from four to five gallons. No special ceremony takes place on this occasion. The two have probably been friends for some time. The invitation is interpreted as a sign of friendship and not a challenge, even though as we shall see later an element of competition does enter into the relationship. It may be rejected, but this entails the risk that the candidate will be stamped as too mean to wish to give beer to others. Generosity being highly valued in this society no one wishes to have the reputation of being either unwilling or unable to offer drinks to his friends. If the offer is accepted, and it usually is, the proffered beer is shared between the host, his guests and their friends. Normally the guest and his followers sit on one side, facing the others. Either he or one of his friends is in charge of distributing the beverage and special care is taken to see to it that all present have an equal share. If the guest gives too much to his own group the host may become angry and break the relationship. At some future date, one or two years hence, the erstwhile guest invites his partner to come and drink beer with him. The host is expected to provide at least one more pot than was given on the previous occasion. The two take it in turn to entertain each other, each time the host being expected to offer more beer than previously done. While in name the “feasts” are offered to the guest, the host and his friends are given a share equivalent to that consumed by the guest and his group. The older kinsmen of the partners see to it that exchanges are not made too frequently since this would lead to the amount given becoming large too quickly, that is before the two are old enough to recruit enough persons to help them
in brewing sufficient to live up to their obligations. Age is the primary determinant of status in Mambila society and only those enjoying relatively high status are able to rely on the help of a large number of people to assist them on occasions of this kind.

At the outset when the amount of beer given is small, it is expected that it will all be brewed from the surplus stocks of grain belonging to the host. This is usually the case until the partners reach the age of thirty or thereabouts. At this stage the amount given varies from sixteen to twenty pots depending upon the number of exchanges that have taken place. Henceforward a man begins to rely on others for assistance. At first the fellow residents of his compound will help him by preparing beer for the feast. Later the residents of his compound cluster will also contribute. When he is approximately fifty years old his rôle in the hamlet will be important and therefore it will be considered fitting for all the members of that unit to assist him in fulfilling his obligations vis-à-vis his partner. Later the whole village will be drawn in when he wishes to entertain his guest. It is only at the age of sixty or more that a man has an important enough status in the context of the entire village to expect help from all its inhabitants. If a man of forty or fifty were to ask for it, he would be laughed to scorn, the people saying that while only a “small boy” he was trying to act the rôle of a “big man”.

The partner is usually chosen from among the residents of a neighbouring settlement. A member of one’s village is not usually selected for three reasons. The first that it is said to be advantageous to have a partner in settlements visited with some frequency so that one is assured of hospitality. Since a man should always be welcomed when stopping at a compound in his own village, there is no need to establish such ties within it. Secondly fellow villagers should cooperate and not compete against each other as individuals, though under certain circumstances sub-groups of the village, especially hamlets, do in fact act in opposition to each other. If a man selected a fellow villager as a partner, the element of competition in the relationship would be incompatible with that of neighbour. Thirdly, as mentioned above, when the exchange is one of long standing the whole village acts as a unit in preparing beer for the host to offer to his guest. If the feast were to be given for a fellow villager, the former would be both a donor and a recipient on the same occasion, and this is incompatible with Mambila ideals. It would of course be possible for the guest not to

2. Both boys and girls at about the age of twelve are given small plots of their own to cultivate. A part of their harvest should be given to the adult who is responsible for feeding them, the rest they may dispose of as they wish. Some is sold in the market and the money retained by the young owner, while a portion may be used to entertain one’s partner.
make any beer at this time, but then he would not be living up to his obligations as a good neighbour.

While it is said not to be desirable to select a member of one’s own local group as a partner, it is sometimes done. In cases of this kind the partnership will be amiably broken before the amount of beer to be exchanged reaches the scale where the entire village must cooperate in its preparation.

Two categories of persons must under no condition be selected as partners: fellow hamlet members and kinsmen. The former for the reasons given above when discussing the inadvisability of selecting a fellow villager as a partner and the latter because the competitive element inherent in the partnership is incompatible with the type of relationship that should exist between kinsfolk.

The Mambila gave me a number of reasons for selecting a specific person as a partner. The first, as mentioned above, is to be assured of hospitality when visiting his village. The second was that the selector liked the individual as a person and wished to establish a close relationship with him. Finally some informants said that they had chosen a boy because he was a close relative of a girl that they hoped eventually to marry. By establishing this link they could anticipate that their partner would support them when courting the girl. As a rule the choice is in the hands of the boy alone, neither his parents nor other senior kinsmen intervening unless the one selected has a very bad reputation or falls into one of the prohibited categories. The fact that the relationship is not extended to the kinsmen of the two partners may account for their neutrality on the subject.

While the reciprocal giving of beer is said to be the “raison d’être” of the relationship, the ties binding the two partners extend to spheres of social activities other than feasts. When a man marries, his partner is expected to contribute a small part of the cash required for brideswealth. He should also come to the wedding ceremony and has the exclusive right to joke with, and even fondle, the bride though neither then nor at any other time may he have intercourse with her. He may consult an oracle should his partner fall ill. He should attend his partner’s funeral. The two should help each other from time to time in house-building, farming, etc. Gifts are often presented by one to the other with no obligation that a counter-gift be returned.

When one of the two partners dies the relationship is normally broken, but it may be continued by a surviving sibling of the deceased if he so wishes. There is no pressure put on the brother to do so, even should the deceased have been in the position of owing a feast to his partner at his death. The link is never maintained after the death of the two original partners.

It should be noted here that while there are a number of possibi-
lities open to a Mambila to establish formal ties with a non-kinsman—as for example by marriages, by the institution of blood brotherhood, or by joining a permanent cooperative working group—none of these relationships include competitive gift exchanges.

**Description of Two Feasts**

During my stay in the village of Warwar a number of small scale feasts were held as well as one involving the whole village. As a general rule only one or two large scale feasts are held yearly. Here I intend to describe briefly one of the former category and, in rather more detail, the large one.

The first was given by a boy of about eighteen to his partner who lived in Vokude, about four miles away. He announced his intention to his “friend” on the market day preceding the one fixed for the occasion. Four days before the date set he took some maize from his own granary and gave it to his two sister to grind into flour. He himself brought the necessary water and supervised the brewing. In this he was helped by his two female and two male siblings. In all eight pots of beer were made but only six were given to the guest. The latter was accompanied by seven young men from his own village and the host had eleven friends present. The seven included four kinsmen, while six of the host’s group were relatives of his. I was the only person present during most of the festivities who was not between the ages of 16 and 20. At first two pots were brought out and given by the host to the guest. The latter filled a cup and gave it to the host who took a sip and passed it on to the oldest member of his own group. The next cup went to the guest who took a sip and passed it on to the senior of his followers. Before the two pots were empty all had had one or more cups. The members of each group drank in turn. The next two pots were offered by the host who again gave them to the guest who passed them on to the youngest member of his group for distribution and so it went until all the beer was finished. On two occasions persons wandering by were invited to partake by the guest, he being the owner of the beer.

Whenever any food or beverage is available a share should be offered to any passer-by as was done in this case. After the guests had gone one of the remaining pots of beer was consumed by the host and his young friends, while the other was given to the host’s father. In almost all cases of beer being prepared for a feast, more is made than is expected to be consumed during the gift-exchange. This will later be drunk by the giver of the feast, his kinsmen and neighbours.

The large scale feast involving the whole village was given by one of
the four hamlet heads in Warwar for his partner from Dembe, a settlement only a few miles away. The feast lasted for three days, but the preparations had begun a week earlier. Beer was brewed by almost all the households in the village. Less than five per cent of the total number did not prepare any, the reasons given being: they had not enough surplus grain, illness, or absence from the settlement. Even those not on friendly terms with the host brewed beer for him on this occasion. One informant who was at this time involved in a serious dispute with the hamlet head nevertheless made a very large contribution himself and saw to it that those living in his compound cluster did the same. He said that he could not let the “village” down by refusing to cooperate. His use of the term “village” in this context reflects the fact that when gift-exchange reaches the point where all the group cooperates in providing beer for the guest, the reputation of the unit as a whole rests on the ability of the host to live up to his obligations.

On the opening day of the feast about fifty men from Dembe led by the guest arrived during the late afternoon. They were met at the hamlet boundary by the host and some of his kin and friends. Four pots of beer were immediately given to the guest who himself distributed the first pot and asked a younger member of his contingent to divide up the rest. Again here those present were given a roughly equivalent share. The Dembe people sat on one side of the pots and the Warwar group on the other as is always the case except after much beer has been drunk and formality has broken down. After all had been consumed the whole party adjourned to the compound of the host where more beer was consumed. Later on more persons from Dembe arrived including some of the wives of those who had come earlier, more men, and a number of young men and girls. The total number of visitors was now about 120, roughly 80 males and 40 females. Later on small groups straggled in.

That evening chickens were cooked and given to the host who, with the help of some of the older men from Dembe distributed them to all those present. The night was spent chatting, drinking beer, chewing kola nuts, and dancing, the latter mainly by the young of both sexes. Individuals would retire into one of the near-by houses for a cat-nap, but seldom stayed away long, seemingly unable to remain away from the beer and festivities.

The following day the visitors wandered through all the village, were offered beer in the compound where it had been prepared. They had, by this time, broken up into small groups of about ten, and were always accompanied by a roughly equivalent number of local residents. In the afternoon all returned to the host’s compound where two live goats, a sheep and a dog were offered to the guest. Goat meat being
taboo to him personally, though not to all of the Dembe contingent, only the sheep, the dog, plus a number of chickens were cooked, and the goats were spared. Again the meat was distributed to all present. The night was spent as the previous one, except that fewer people took an active part in the festivities since a large number slept through most of the night. Nevertheless dances and beer drinks were held in many of the compounds of the village, unlike the first night when most of the activities were confined to the host’s compound.

On the third day more visits were made, more beer drunk, and more chickens were eaten. Late in the afternoon the guest, accompanied by the majority of the Dembe people began to wend their way home. But, before leaving, an important part of the feast had to be accomplished. Each time the visitors had been given beer to drink or chickens to eat a small stick was given to the host or in his absence to the most senior Warwar male present. All the sticks had been passed on to the host who proceeded to count them out in the presence of the guest. It was noted that 483 pots of beer, 47 chickens, 1 sheep and 1 dog had been provided during the three days. The kola nuts chewed and the tobacco smoked were not, and are never included in the reckoning. The sticks were given by the host to his guest to serve as a mnemonic device so that, when he returned the feast, he would be certain to know how much should be provided to fulfill his obligations. When feasts reach this size there is no attempt to offer only one more pot of beer than was given on the previous occasion. Rather the practice is to give as much as is required to satisfy those present. The host is able to keep a fairly close track of how much is being given by means of the sticks passed on to him. If as the feast is drawing to a close he becomes aware that he has not supplied the necessary amount, he calls upon all the residents of the village to provide more. Since most people have prepared a few extra pots, which they hoped to consume after the visitors’ departure, more will be forthcoming at his call. In the case above, the host did not need to ask for additional help, since when the Dembe partner had given the last feast only some 430 pots of beer and 30 odd chickens had been consumed. When the Dembe people reached the village boundary the host provided four more pots of beer which was considered to be a very generous gesture since these would not be counted in the total and therefore need not be returned on a future occasion.

All the food and beer offered during the three days was given in the name of the host to the guest, even if neither of the two were present. In their absence the giver would say that he was making the gift for the host to the guest, and the most senior male present from the Dembe group would accept it in the name of the guest.

At the conclusion of the feast I asked the host when he thought
that his hospitality would be returned. He answered that he did not
know, but probably in a year or two. He added that it might take
longer for the Dembe people to acquire a sufficient surplus to brew
enough beer. Under normal conditions this would not be the case,
since while the amount is quite large it only meant that a relatively
small part of the total surplus of grain in Warwar was utilised on this
occasion. Dembe, being a much smaller village, would probably
utilise a considerably larger proportion of its surplus, but giving such
a feast would not risk impoverishing the settlement. The erstwhile
host added that he was not certain that his partner would supply as
much as he himself had done and, if not, then he and all the Warwar
people would laugh at those of Dembe. This is the only sanction used
to make a partner live up to his obligations. I later learnt of two
instances when a man who had not been able to offer more than he
himself had received saw the relationship broken off and himself
jeered at. In both cases the scale of the feast was small and did not
involve even a hamlet, far less a village. When these large groups
become concerned it is of greater importance that the host be able to
live up to his obligations since if he does not do so he endangers not
only his own reputation but that of the group as a whole. It is impor-
tant to note that when the Warwar host suggested that perhaps his
Dembe partner would not be able to provide an adequate feast he
smiled and appeared to derive much pleasure from this speculation.
The competitive element however is kept in the background, since no
boasting or statements implying that the Dembe people were too poor
or mean to be able to provide suitable return gifts were heard during
the feast. No comments were made by either side as to the quantity
or quality of what was offered.

On other occasions when beer or food is given it is not uncommon
for the guest to criticise the amount and/or the quality. For instance
beer is given to those who have taken part in communal farm labour or
helped a man in building a house. The workers often comment wryly
about the amount of beer given to them and insist that more be made
available. Similarly when the groom’s party offer food and beer to
the bride’s followers, slurring remarks are often made by the latter.

There are two major factors which help to explain why criticism of
the host’s offerings is allowed at communal work parties and wedding
feasts, but not on the occasion of gift exchange. The first is that on
the occasion of gift exchange the host and guest enjoy equal status and
hence neither has the right to criticise the other. In the case of bridal
feasts and work parties the guests enjoy superior status in the context
of the situation and hence it is acceptable for them to make disparaging
remarks in reference to what they are being offered. However it
should be noted that in the case of a very senior male organising a
work party his offerings are not likely to be criticised since his status is so high that he has not become temporarily subordinated to those helping him.

The second factor which militates against criticism being levelled at the host during a gift exchange, but not on the other two occasions, is that in the first case the two groups are uni-bonded, that is to say linked only by the single tie between the two partners, the host and guest, while the two other types of feasts bring together persons linked by a number of ties. In the case of uni-bonded groups a breach of the tie and fighting is likely to arise if disputes develop, while this is much less likely when the bonds linking the participants are many. The Mambila are well aware of the fact that in the former case large scale feasts may result in fighting. As a precautionary step members of the host’s village collect the spears of all the guests upon their arrival and these are not returned until the visitors are about to leave. A brief description of the ties linking the participants in a wedding or work party will show how these occasions differ from those of gift exchange. Work parties are usually made up of persons from the same hamlet or village, and fighting between members of such a unit is deprecated. When outsiders join the group they do so because they already have links with the host, these being for the most part consanguineal or affinal kin ties. Should a dispute arise between kinsmen, fighting should be avoided. In most cases the bride’s group will not enjoy kin ties with that of the groom, but links binding it to residents of the groom’s village will not only exist, but be emphasised during the festivities. The bride’s group will make their first stop in the groom’s village at the house of a relative of the bride or of one of her party. If other kin live nearby they also will be visited. This acts as a public recognition of the ties existing between the bride’s group and persons inhabiting the groom’s settlement. Those visited will be held responsible for seeing to it that disputes do not arise between the bride’s and groom’s groups, and to act as mediators between the two if needs be. The criticism of the fare offered will also often emphasise previous links. A member of the bride’s group when showing dissatisfaction at the amount of food and drink offered will mention that when a male from her own village married a girl from the settlement of the groom much more was offered the guests. At least some, if not many, of the guests at a gift-exchange feast will be related to the host or his neighbours, but these ties seem not to be stressed. Individuals coming to the feast make no attempt to formally visit their kinsfolk. They have come as followers of the guest, residents of his village, and the solidarity of the whole group is maintained vis-à-vis the host’s settlement. In the major feast described above a sister’s son of the host, who had settled in Dembe after having previously lived in
Warwar for a time, remained firmly attached to the guest’s party and acted no differently in relation to his Warwar kinsmen than did any of his neighbours. No effort on these occasions is made to place an individual in an intercalary position to act as mediator in case of strife arising. The fact that the bonds of kinship and neighbourhood either do not exist or if they do are ignored in the context of the situation, makes it important, not only for the maintenance of the relationship but also to avoid inter-village fighting from breaking out, that criticism of any kind, a potential source of conflict, be prohibited.

During the festivities described above no beer or food was wasted, nor is it the custom to do so. Several years ago a man from Mang gave a feast and when his guest arrived at the village boundary poured out ten jugs of beer onto the ground. This act was meant to show that the host was so rich that he could afford to waste the beverage and still live up to his obligations. While this act elicited much comment, it has never been repeated. Most informants agreed that it was foolish and should not be done again.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COMPETITIVE GIFT-EXCHANGE

Before analysing the contribution made by this institution towards maintaining the Mambila village structure, it is important to stress what it does not do. At the incipient stage of the relationship neither the status nor the prestige of the partners is enhanced. It is only when large scale feasts are given that the temporary prestige of the two is moderately increased only inasmuch as they are the focus of the activities, but once the festivities are terminated the added prestige disappears. The advantage to a host is that his name becomes known more widely as a result of having lived up to his obligations with éclat. The fact that two men of roughly the same age, one having a partner and the other not, enjoy the same status within the village indicates that the giving of feasts is not a determinant of status.

However feasts do act to maintain the status system. One prerogative of high status in Mambila society is the right to give orders to those lower on the scale than oneself with the expectation that compliance will follow. In the organising of a large scale feast not only the host but all the senior males have the right to command their juniors to make beer for the feast. The compound head is responsible for seeing to it that his group makes its contribution, the same applies to the head of the compound clusters and of course the hamlet heads.

3. While kinship ties are ignored for most practical purposes nevertheless a man would not be allowed to have intercourse with a kinswoman on these occasions. Sexual relations with any relative are prohibited at all times.
The feast then is an occasion on which the senior males may activate their authority rôles.

The institution plays an important part in the integration of the village itself. There are few occasions on which the settlements acts as a unit. Large scale feasts are one. Here all the residents are made to realise their responsibility towards the group, and the necessity of their sacrificing some of their surplus grain stocks as well as labour for the benefit of the village. All have a common purpose, namely the brewing of enough beer and contributing the requisite number of chickens and animals to be slaughtered. During the feast itself the affiliation of the individual with a village is stressed. It has already been said that residents of the two settlements involved sit apart, one on each side of the pots of beer. An individual obtains his share as a member of the village and for no other reason. When the pots offered at one time are many the guest may immediately divide them up, that is give a certain number to the host's group to be distributed and keep some for his own followers.

The individual's identification with his own local group is also stressed during the dancing. At the outset members of the two villages dance in separate groups and this may continue during the entire feast, but normally after a time the dancers tend to become intermixed. The songs sung to accompany the dancing are also important in this respect. During the time when the large scale feast described above was taking place, the chief of Warwar had been and continued to be unpopular thereafter. On purely local occasions songs were sung voicing the anger of the people at some of his actions and jeering at his inability to obtain from the Native Authority what the villagers believed to be their rights. However when the Dembe people were present only lyrics praising their chief, extolling his virtues and abilities were heard. The strength, wealth, solidarity and large population of Warwar were the themes of others of the songs heard on this occasion. The Dembe contingent of course sung only in laudatory terms of their own settlement. Neither made any slurring references to the other.

Competitive gift exchange plays an important rôle also in the maintenance of the Mambila economy. It has been said that in all but very bad years a considerable surplus of maize and guinea corn is harvested. However when the rains fail then the yield is considerably lessened. Not a few informants told me that they were consciously planting more than they would need for their own families' use in order either to provide a feast for their partner or else help someone do so. When the yields are low due to bad climatic conditions this extra planting may mean the difference between hunger and sufficiency.

These feasts, like other ceremonials and rituals, help to overcome the tedium of everyday life. The day-to-day routine is highly repetitive
and acknowledged by the Mambila to be boring. It is only during the
festive seasons that excitement reigns and life is lived to the full.
When the farm work is demanding on both the time and energy of the
people, they are often heard to be discussing with pleasure the festivals
to come and those that had taken place already. For months before
the feast described above, informants were heard estimating the
amount of beer that they would drink on that occasion. A subject of
great interest to the young, made obvious by their conversation was
what the girls from Dembe who would come would be like; many
predicted the amorous exploits in which they would play a part. For
months afterwards the feast remained an important subject of conver-
sation and both men and women never seemed to tire of stating the
amount of beer that they had drunk and the food they had eaten.

Competitive gift exchange among the Mambila can then be said to
originate as a dyadic relationship with but little structural significance.
Through time, though retaining its dyadic element, it grows in size
until finally it includes all the residents of two villages. It plays an
important rôle in maintaining village solidarity and the local structure.

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