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THE PAPUAN SLAVE

For the civilised communities of the Malay world to the west, within whose trading orbit the western coasts of the Island of New Guinea lay, its most important resource was the body of the Papuan, the 'woolly-haired one'. And when the settler community in Australia established, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, sugar plantations in the tropics, Melanesians from further east, from what is now Australian New Guinea, the British Solomons, and the New Hebrides, achieved the same kind of value as the providers of unskilled labour. In practice, the slave for the entrepreneur of Islam, and the indentured labourer for the sugar planter of Christian Australia, were obtained in much the same way.

Malay contacts go back over a much longer period; and as described in the first part of the nineteenth century seem to repeat, along the western coasts of New Guinea, an early phase of the processes by which the Asian rice culture and mercantile economy had been extended into islands further west. The beginning of trading settlements under Javanese control may be as early as the fourteenth century. Trading posts were developed later from Ceram Laut and Tidore; the Dutch East India Company was not directly interested. The first post established by Europeans was that maintained for two years at Dorei by the British from 1793; and the interest shown by the Dutch in the 1820s was due in part to the fear that other attempts would be made.[1]

After the British occupation of Java, it was necessary for the Dutch to re-establish relations with their residencies in the eastern islands of their empire; and the establishment of British settlements at Singapore and Port Essington formed an apparent threat to their trading monopolies. In 1825-6 a Lieutenant Kolff,[2] in the *Dourga*, made an extensive voyage in the Arafura Sea. He described the slave depot on Ceram Laut, where Papuans were held 'until the state of the market becomes favourable'. Papuan slaves rowed the Ceramese galleys used for trading and piracy; they were fed on sago and dried fish, and very cheap. Ceram was the centre of the slave trade with

[1] P. van der Veur, *British Survey*, December 1962, pp. 5 and 6, provides a useful brief summary of these contacts.

[2] D. H. Kolff, *Voyages of the Dutch Brig of War Dourga through the Moluccan Archipelago, and along the Previously Unknown Southern Coast of New Guinea. Performed During the Years 1825 and 1826*, trans. G. W. Earle, London, 1840.

south-west New Guinea. As in southern Italy, in much earlier trading with Islam, and as along African coasts frequented by Moslem and European slavers, some residents of this coast were getting a stake in the cash economy by selling their fellows as slaves. Some had become Moslems; and some of the Ceramese traders had cemented trading relations by taking Papuan wives. Kolff says that a slave 'on the coast' in 1826 was worth five or six pounds sterling, or two pieces of white calico. Papuan slave crews of Ceramese vessels transported new slaves, trepang, tortoise-shell, massoy bark, birds' nests, and bird-of-paradise skins to Bali and even to Singapore.

At Cape Valsche, not far from where Cook had landed fifty-six years earlier, Kolff met with people who still retained the habit described by Cook, of throwing lime at strangers from bamboo tubes. For lime was the exorcising holy water of the coastal New Guinean, and its use to blind evil spirits (or inexplicable enemies who might be spirits) a cultural habit widely diffused. The Ceramese were known here; and the Chinese, Bughis and Macassars at least by repute; the lime was probably a precaution against white-skinned Dutchmen who would be taken for spirits from the land of the dead. A ship without arrack, iron or calico to trade was obviously seeking slaves for nothing. There was the usual pattern of attack and reprisal which marked so many of the first European contacts, some of the villagers using iron-tipped spears. The Dutchmen cut down coconut trees and burned houses —a form of reprisal which was to endure for a long time in New Guinea.[3]

Two years later another Dutch ship, the *Triton*, was attacked in Dourga Straits by the villagers who thought it was in search of slaves. Modera, who wrote the story, describes the agility of warriors swinging through the mangroves like monkeys. But to the north, near the Outanata River, a Papuan who called himself Abrauw (Abraham) and wore the kabaya and headkerchief, came aboard and spoke in Ceramese. In the village, apparently used only at the time of the annual trading visit from Ceram, was a rest-house for the traders. At Triton Bay to the west, a Moslem missionary was living in a Malay style house in the village. The important Papuans here all lived and dressed in the Malay style, sold other Papuans when they could as slaves; and themselves lived in fear of the Papuan pirate-slavers out of the Gulf of Onin (McCluer's Gulf).[4] At Triton Bay the Dutch established a settlement which was to last for ten years.

Both Kolff and Modera heard stories of the men of the Gulf of Onin, who were in the slave trade on their own account, and sold to the Macassar and Chinese traders as well as to the Ceramese. They were wont to sally forth from the gulf with up to a hundred and twenty vessels, and all men were potential merchandise; repute had it that they ate those for whom there was no sale. Here was a Papuan sophistication in the ways of the Arafura world,

[3] The last occasion on which 'cooking houses' was stated in court to have been used as a reprisal in Australian New Guinea was in 1961.

[4] Modera's story is translated in part in G. W. Earle, *The Native Races of the Indian Archipelago, Papuans*, London, 1853.

and in the commercial economy of south-east Asia. Kolff says that they imported from Ceram elephant tusks and large porcelain dishes. They had learned enough of the world of trade to mix it with the intruders, without apparently accepting either Islam or Christianity (both of which were established in Ceram.)

G. W. Earle, a very careful observer in these seas, wrote in 1853 of the implacable hostility of 'Papuans' to those 'who attempt to settle among them', so that wherever there had been no mountain fastnesses, the Malays had finally wiped them out. (In the wild interior of Ceram itself they remained, and are still there; and in other mountainous and forest areas of the archipelago.) 'This ferocity of character', wrote Earle, 'disappears, in great measure, when individuals are removed to other countries, for the Papuan slaves, who are found in considerable numbers among the brown races of the [Indonesian] Archipelago, are remarkable for a cheerful and obedient disposition.'[5] He says that Papuan half-castes abounded after centuries of slavery; and that the name Arafura (which he claims to have suggested to the Admiralty for this sea) was a corruption of the Portuguese *alfioras* or 'freed slaves'. He also mentions the propensity of the Papuans to savage warfare among themselves—a habit which had made it easier for the Malays to take the best lands of the archipelago.

Papuan 'ferocity' displayed in inter-village hostilities was possibly increased by the tensions within the small social groupings; by the competition for status in gardening and gift exchange; by the addiction to and the fear of sorcery. These must always have operated to some extent as centrifugal forces, tending to drive out the dissatisfied or the unsuccessful. On the other hand, the chances of a new life outside the group often did not exist; where they did, a migrant must live and hold his land on sufferance. There is something widely characteristic of New Guinea society in Margaret Mead's picture of the Manus screaming abuse at each other in Peri, their tiny village over the sea. Australian blackbirders told how sometimes young men from New Ireland villages would walk into the sea in their impatience to get into the boats and away. If most labour recruits had not been willing enough, the system of contract labour would have collapsed long since. A New Guinea slave in the new world of Arafura and the Indies, if his master was reasonable, might well have found a security unknown in his own village, and have lived in peace with more of his fellows than he could ever have met at home. So the coastal villages may have inherited conflicting traditions, of the attraction of the Malay world, and of fear of the slavers.

In 1828 the Dutch annexed the south-west coast as far as 141 degrees of longitude. The contacts of the north coast with Islam had been similar, perhaps even more intensive. When Dumont D'Urville called at Dorey he found that the inhabitants sent annual tribute to their suzerain, the Sultan of Tidore—'slaves of both sexes, tortoise shell, and the skins of birds of

[5] G. W. Earle, op. cit., p. 7.

paradise . . .' The Dutch claim to the north coast as far as Humboldt Bay (Hollandia), formally advanced in 1848, was made on the basis of their authority over the Sultan. The claim was marked in 1850 by the visit of the Dutch man-o'-war *Circe*, in company with the war-prahus of the Sultan, and the pirate vessels of the Singaji of Gebi, his vassal, who accompanied this hongi or tribute fleet. The Sultan was represented by a Captain Amir. Leading men at Dorey used Malay titles—rajah, singaji, capitein, etc.—and dressed in the Malay fashion. Calico was worn by women of ordinary rank. Artisans worked in silver and copper; iron was worked in the Asian manner with bellows of bamboo. Chinese traders from Ternate brought weapons and implements of iron, brass wire, china ware; and took away shell, trepang, massoy, and especially slaves worth '25 to 30 guilders apiece' on the coast. Bruijn Kops, a lieutenant on the *Circe*, wrote the official account. The men of Dorey, he says, traded in their own right as far as Timor. Slavery was so basic to the cash economy that the unit of value was the slave; each 'chief' in the area paid annual tribute of a slave, and had to lend three vessels to the annual hongi. Here the Moslem missionaries were from Tidore.

The tribute fleet also did some slaving; two hundred people from Kurudu, across Geelvink Bay, had been taken not long before; it was understandable that when the hongi appeared off the islands of the great bay villagers took to the bush. The hongi did not quite reach Humboldt Bay, although the Cyclops Mountains were seen; though it had not been there for sixty years, no doubt the ships of Malay adventurers had, in expeditions for birds of paradise which were continued into the valley and watershed of the Sepik by land routes probably long known to Malay shooters. This old contact with the Sepik area has left a tradition of Malay as a *lingua franca* on the Australian side of the border; and has influenced the development of Pidgin, which includes many Malay words.[6]

A Dutch garrison, of troops from Ternate, was established two years later on Humboldt Bay.

These stories are indicative of great social changes, at certain key points on the coast, from the kind of life we described in the previous chapter. At the slow rate of such change, New Guineans had learned to live as merchants and townsmen, had been integrated into the commercial economy and the unifying religion of Islam, and learned to regard the primitives from the bush villages as commodities; so that the gulf between urban and traditional society must have been deep. The process of integration into Asian society probably continued throughout most of the period of Dutch control of the Indies. It is not really surprising that a belated attempt by the Dutch to reverse this historic trend should have been so short-lived.

The mention of Chinese in the trade of these coasts reminds us of Chinese interest in the 'southern lands', and of their special adeptness in the business of cultural frontiers. Both Chinese and Malays seem to have oper-

[6] Kops' story was published in *Natuurkinde Tiidschrift voor Nederlandsche Indie*, 1851, and translated in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, Vol. 6, p. 303 et seq.

ated across the 141st meridian of longitude, which was finally fixed as the limit of Netherlands New Guinea in 1885. Chinese probably accompanied Malays on bird-shooting expeditions into the Sepik valley long before the Germans claimed it. Chinese traders were apparently established as far east as the islands off Aitape before the Neu Guinea Kompagnie was established there.[7] Among other evidences of early Chinese contacts with New Guinea is the type of leprosy found there.[8]

It is likely enough that Chinese junks and Malay prahus had visited the coasts of eastern New Guinea and the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago long before the nineteenth century; but such visits were probably comparable with those of the European ships which made sporadic sightings and visits over the centuries from Magellan's voyage in 1521. But such probable contacts have left no trace in recorded history. While the relations of the Manus of the sea villages to the Usiai of the land villages, or those of the Tolai to the Bainings, may remind one of those of the slave dealers of Onin to other Papuans, there is no indication that slavery in the east had ever been stimulated by the attractions of a cash economy. The Malay habit of making arrack or toddy from coconut does not extend far across the present border with West Irian. On the whole it is probable that the hypothetical visits to the east emphasised the cultural gulf between visitor and coastal villager in much the same way as did the recorded visits by Europeans.

There is a sameness about the stories from Torres onwards—of landings made for water or other essential purpose, with violence and counter-violence the usual thing in the brief adventures ashore. D'Urville at Orangerie Bay and in the Bismarcks, or Jukes along the coast near the mouth of the Fly, had experiences of the kind which had been recorded over three centuries. The indigenous tradition of war being that of sudden attack, the New Guinean was commonly accused of treachery.

The first interest in the people arose from the same need which had led to intensive Malay contacts in the west—that for the fit adult male as an unskilled labourer. Although there was some early trading in shell, bêche-de-mer and sandalwood, the most prized asset of the coast was the New Guinean himself. As seafarers, those of the Bismarck Archipelago could be used, for instance, to reinforce the depleted crews of whaling ships.

A focus of early contact was the enclosed sea round the Duke of York Islands, where a good anchorage at Port Hunter is a reminder that in 1791 Captain John Hunter, en route from Sydney to Batavia, called here for water; and when the watering crew had lime thrown at their eyes, commented on a reception so similar to that given to Cook west of Cape Valsche.[9] There were other good harbours close by, at Port Carteret (Lamisso

[7] See C. D. Rowley, *The Australians in German New Guinea 1914-1921*, pp. 73-4.

[8] I am indebted to Professor R. H. Black, School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, for this information.

[9] John Hunter Esq., *Historical Journal of the Transactions at Pork Jackson and Norfolk Island . . . from the first sailing of the Sirius in 1787 to the Return of that Ship's Company to England in 1792*, London, 1793, p. 228 et seq.

or Lamassa Bay) at the south of New Ireland, and at Blanche Bay, where Rabaul was to become the administrative and commercial centre of the archipelago. By the mid-century these seas were well known to sailors out from Sydney. The cessation of the East India Company monopoly in 1833 encouraged trade with China. The Solomon Sea, between Papua and New Britain, and the ocean north of New Ireland were good whaling waters.[10] The tradition of 'dead whale or stove boat' made necessary a high rate of replacements of crew; the methods of getting New Guineans for this work began the tradition of hostility of the coastal villages to visitors.[11] Two British men-o'-war under Sir Edward Belcher called at Port Carteret in 1840. When Belcher in the *Starling* anchored just to the south in English Cove, a native came aboard who 'spoke a little English. From him we learned that visits of British vessels from Sidney [*sic*] were frequent'. Tom Starling, as they called the visitor, showed his familiarity with European ships by asking to sleep on board.[12] Reference to his 'little English' suggests that some kind of bêche-de-mer English was already beginning to provide a means of communication, as Malay had done for a long time on the coasts of western New Guinea; though Melanesian Pidgin seems to have developed its special character later, on the plantations of Queensland and Fiji.

The blackbirding trade grew after the half-century to meet needs in the new Pacific cash economy similar to those which had been served by the slave trade; it was the same kind of trade, except that those engaged in it were subject to the anti-slavery laws. Britain had made trading in slaves illegal in 1807, and the United States in 1808. British slaves were emancipated in 1838. France followed ten years later; and Holland in 1863, though there is evidence of slaving along the coasts of Dutch New Guinea well after that. The United States, of course, did not free its slaves until 1865, after the Civil War. In this recent background, it is not so surprising that something rather like slavery should have been involved in the first economic ties between Melanesians and Australians. Slavery had been replaced with the system of 'indentured' labour, under which the relationship of the worker to his master was brought within the law through the legal fiction of the contract of employment—a legal fiction then, as so often now, wherever one party to the contract cannot know to what he is being bound. Wherever, as in the early blackbirding days (and as in many cases later under the ostensible control of colonial administration in New Guinea), recruitment was undertaken well outside the control of the law, there was likely to be little difference in practice between recruitment and slaving.

Yet what at first sight looks like the mere formality of signing a contract (in Pidgin, 'making paper') serves the practical purpose of affording the

[10] See W. J. Dakin, 'Australia and the Golden Age of Pacific Whaling', in Charles Barrett (ed.), *The Pacific*, Melbourne, 1950.

[11] For traditions of these contacts see R. Parkinson, *Thirty Years in the South Seas*, trans. N. C. Barry, Part VII. Although he refers to events in Bougainville and Buka, it is probable that there were similar occurrences along the coasts of New Britain and New Ireland.

[12] Sir Edward Belcher, *Voyage round the World 1836-1840*, London, 1843, Vol. 2, p. 72.

government officer an opportunity to check; and establishes identity so that the provisions on maximum terms of service and minimum wages and conditions can, if the government is really determined, be made to apply to the individual case. There is little evidence, however, in the first decades of blackbirding, of effective controls by the Queensland government to prevent the Melanesian from being seized by force. The fact that recruitment occurred beyond the boundaries of government authority meant that governments could not control it. They could have put it down, like the slave trade: but this they were not prepared to do. There is the interesting case of the *Daphne*, fitted out in the style of a slaver as defined in British imperial legislation, which was seized as such as Levuka by the captain of H.M.S. *Rosario*, and brought to Sydney in 1869. Her skipper had a licence from the Queensland government to recruit for Queensland; at the time of the seizure, she had aboard twice the number of recruits permitted, and they had been obviously taken to Fiji in the hope of a higher price. Sir Alfred Stephen, in the Vice-Admiralty Court of Sydney, found for the master of the *Daphne*. There was no imperial law against 'engagement' of Pacific Islanders to work for a term of years in a colony of the Crown. Even where there was doubt as to how the labourers had been procured, and as to their understanding of the contract, this was not slavery as defined in law.[13]

The background of centuries of slavery, where entrepreneurs of European countries had located resources without disciplined labour close by to develop them, makes the scandalous traffic in the bodies of the islanders more understandable. The Loyalties, New Hebrides and Solomons seem to have been more affected than the Island of New Guinea, or the Bismarck Archipelago. However, Bougainville and Buka, in the northern Solomons, which became in due course part of German New Guinea, provided many recruits. South-east Papua was another source: and blackbirding was the beginning of the labour trade out of New Ireland.

In both German and British New Guinea this traffic was forbidden in the first labour legislation. In the case of the Germans, who permitted recruiting for German Samoa, the object was obviously to keep the resources of labour for German purposes. That the British were at first more strongly influenced by welfare considerations is suggested by the law which prevented employment of native workers outside the administrative district of domocile. But this was soon relaxed. The restriction against recruiting for areas outside the colony carried over into the Papuan tradition, for economic as well as welfare reasons; so that when an Australian administration took over Papua, there was no need for new laws to prevent Papuans from moving freely into white Australia.

Blackbirding from Queensland ports had led both Sir Arthur Gordon, the British High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, and the Aboriginal Welfare Society, to oppose the demands of Australian states for annexation of

[13] For details see George Palmer, *Kidnapping in the South Seas*, Edinburgh, 1871. The judgment is given in Appendix B.

eastern New Guinea. Governments, and especially the Queensland government, which had won such a reputation for treatment of the Australian Aborigines, and which demonstrated in this trade no better intentions for New Guineans, should not be helped to establish power in the New Guinea area. When in 1884 the British government assumed the Protectorate of British New Guinea, the text of the official declaration read to coastal villagers promised protection of persons and lands. It is interesting that the only threat to either from outside was from Australian ports.

The most intense and personal involvement of intruder, whether Malay or European, with New Guineans, and one which has been basic in determining attitudes on both sides, has continued to be that of master to servant. Although the New Guinean had the legal protection of the contract, and the labour laws, and although in the last few years there have been the beginnings of workers' organisations in the urban areas, much of the quality of the initial relationship has remained—of owner to chattel, or to the 'unit of labour', in practice, as distinct from legal theory, purchased for the period of the contract from a recruiter. For a long time, in German New Guinea and the Mandated Territory, the practice of recruiting was much the same as it had been in blackbirding days; so that there was a long tradition of 'pulling' labour; and it did not really make much difference to the recruit whether he was employed far from home within New Guinea, or in Queensland or Fiji. The laws, and the intentions, were rather different in Papua; but the same hard requirements for economic gain to white employers produced similar results in practice. The overall result has been that most New Guineans who have had face-to-face contacts with white men have come to know them in the role of the kind of employer which has become traditional on tropical plantations—one quite out of conformity with the tradition of the democratic Australian. The background of this relationship, in that of master to slave, should not be forgotten, because some at least of the attitudes are the same; with power on the one hand and defencelessness and a deep resentment on the other.

For in New Guinea as in Africa the first interest of the white man in the villager was either as a potential convert, if the white man was a missionary; or as a potential labourer, if he were not. The system of migrant labour was considered the essential tool of economic development, because what the invaders knew as resources did not necessarily occur where there were workers who could be used to develop them. So the fit adult male was taken out of village society as the single 'unit of labour', to a hard barrack life and to work which appeared to him pointless; with all the deleterious effects on which the text-books of colonial administration have had so much to say, both for him and for the village group which must get along with fewer producers and young men to play their parts in ritual life; and especially for the family which must be left behind.

Colonial administration, both in German and British New Guinea, began with the regulation of migrant labour; and it remained a dominant concern

of subsequent Australian administrations. The aim as elsewhere has been to work towards a balance of justice with expediency. The compromise must have some appearance of legal respectability; but must not interfere too seriously with the efficiency of the plantation system and the mercantile activities on which the new cash economy depended. Perhaps the main impression one gains from a study of this legislation over eight decades is of this attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. For here a whole economic system has depended on paying no more in rewards to the worker than those which must be paid to him as a single man. The village bears, except where some employers have a longer vision of their own interests, the maintenance of the worker's family. Here is a direct denial of the Australian view of 'wage justice'. The system has also depended on a hard imposed discipline, characteristic of white management and coloured labour. Too often the formality of making certain labour incentives, such as the threat of violence, illegal, has made little difference in practice. In the circumstances of employment, the elimination of abuses has to wait on the growth of sophistication among the workers, and a greater understanding by management of where its interests lie. But a high proportion of contracted workers come from areas where villagers are as primitive as most of them were eighty years ago; and management is geared to watching the primitives rather than to leadership of the sophisticated.

Thus the New Guinean has long been conditioned to expect demands from the foreigner in his country to discharge services far from his home and his interests. It is true that the system of employment has been humanised; that going out to work today is for the whole regions like the Sepik valley, where there is little hope of earning cash at home, completely necessary; that the majority of New Guineans now feel at least some need for things only to be bought with cash. But it is significant that wherever there has been a way of earning cash other than going to work for the white man, the villagers have turned their backs on him and on the system of contract labour.

In this background, it is not surprising that the New Guinean should remain suspicious of both Asian and European, yellow man and white, especially where they appear as seekers after the labour of black men. Is it any wonder if the intruder seems to have used the New Guinean for his own gain? And this is precisely the point of view which the majority of governments in the world are anxious to put to the New Guinean in the campaign against colonialism. The result could very easily surprise Australians who assume that they are appreciated in New Guinea. It could also surprise the Indonesians; for though they are vociferously anti-colonial, there are signs that the villagers of West Irian have not altogether forgotten the part their ancestors played in the world of the Indies.

On the other hand, the common experience of colonisation by the white man offers to the Indonesians a special opportunity of winning over the New Guineans, by the genuine concession of social equality. To make this they

have only to adhere to the principles proclaimed of a multi-racial, multi-religious Indonesia. Such an offer may well prove more attractive to New Guineans, involving as it does acceptance into the wider Indonesian community, than Australian economic and administrative help without access to the wider Australian community—that is, of course, if New Guineans have to make a choice between the two. They are probably clever enough to play one off against the other. It may be that the great Asian movement to the south-east will be resumed; so that a few centuries hence the check brought about by the establishment of European colonies may seem no more than an episode.