

When Monsoon Asia met Melanesia (and Dutch Hollandia became Asian Jayapura)



by John Conroy

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My recently-published paper, *Monsoon Asia and Melanesia* presents a comparison between two 'stylised' historical entities. 'Monsoon Asia' represents Southeast Asia and particularly the Malay Archipelago – present-day Malaysia and Indonesia. 'Melanesia' is representative of the island of New Guinea, though the discussion revolves mostly around west New Guinea (in modern Indonesia). The Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua are seen as the historic meeting ground, or zone of transition, between Monsoon Asia and Melanesia. This is where 'tributary' relationships, imposed by Moluccan sultanates, were confronted by the 'ceremonial exchange' which typifies the 'big-man' political systems of Melanesia. West New Guinea also marked a dividing line where Asian 'wet rice' agriculture gave way to Melanesian production of starchy staples, such as tubers and sago. This divide had implications for social structure and political organisation, as well as for long-distance trade, since rice is more storable and transportable than Melanesian staple foods.

Over at least two millennia, Asians of the Malay Archipelago drew Melanesians of west New Guinea *into a world trading system* which extended via India and Persia into the ancient Mediterranean world, as well as north into Vietnam and China. Papuan slaves *were recorded on Java* a thousand years ago and *bird of paradise plumes were traded* to Persia much earlier. The civilisations of the ancient world which engaged in this trading system were politically stratified and exhibited highly specialised occupational structures — a significant contrast with the generally unspecialised, small and politically egalitarian Melanesian subsistence societies.

Europe was an end-point in this world trade system, but 16th century Portuguese and Dutch mariners came to the Archipelago directly seeking access to its valuable spice trade, and in particular the cloves and nutmeg of the Moluccas, west of

Papua. Over centuries the Dutch established nominal rule over west New Guinea/Papua through the agency of Moluccan Sultans, who had established a regime of 'trading and raiding' over the [Bird's Head region of Papua](#). In parallel with Seramese traders, Moluccans set up fortified and Islamicised Malayo-Papuan settlements on the western fringe of Papua. These communities are still identifiable after hundreds of years.

The Dutch historian J C Van Leur saw ancient trade as conducted by two groups – wealthy money-holders and travelling peddlers. Trade was not the principal interest of the former (Sultans and other rulers, in the case of the Malays) who were more concerned with 'war, booty and political tribute'. These prizes they obtained by force and the imposition of monopolies. The peddlers, a polyglot group from many nations, were the foot-soldiers of ancient trade, but as a specialised class they had no direct counterparts in Papua, despite the vigorous character of traditional Melanesian trade and exchange. The Melanesians of Papua, after hundreds of years — even millennia — of interaction with the world trading system did not develop a distinct occupational category of specialist traders.

Operating on the western fringe of Melanesia, these 'Malay' groups exploited the origin myths of Papuans and their desire for exchange relationships to establish trade partnerships, in which products of sea and forest, as well as slaves, were exported to the Malay world and beyond. Traditional power relationships were disturbed; some Papuan groups gained skills in metal-working and received luxury goods (Chinese ceramics, brass gongs, embroidered cloth) which they introduced as valuables into ceremonial exchange. Others must have become little more than slave reserves. Nineteenth century travellers to the eastern part of the Malay Archipelago, such as [Alfred Russel Wallace](#), noted the unequal nature of many such trading relationships, and their domination by a 'mixed intermediary group' of traders and faux-Sultans with their roots in the Malay Archipelago.

Only towards the end of the 19th century did the Dutch attempt to exert direct control over Papua. They made efforts to explore and pacify west New Guinea, suppressing piracy, outlawing the slave trade and bringing more Papuan groups under administrative control. In the 20th century they devoted growing resources to education and economic development. After the setback of Japanese occupation during the Pacific War, these activities reached a peak in the period 1949-62 when, following the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia, they attempted to prepare 'West New Guinea' for a separate existence. This venture failed and Papua was incorporated into the Indonesian state from 1963.

In 1963, the Dutch capital, Hollandia (soon to become Sukarnopura, later Jayapura), resembled no place in the world more than Port Moresby — as a

‘whitebread’ tropical town, relatively high-waged, white-administered, import-dependent and ordered along European lines. Apart from some formal wage employment, Melanesians participated in the urban economy to only a very limited degree. Other than selling their produce in the town market, they had no informal economy, and Hollandia was in no sense an ‘Asian’ town. By 1973, within the space of ten years, Jayapura/Hollandia had become an Asian town. It developed a flourishing informal economy in which Bugis and Javanese immigrants played the part of Van Leur’s ‘travelling peddlers’ to increase the range of local goods and services, reducing import dependence for basic consumer goods and pushing down cost levels closer to ‘Asian’ levels. Papuans played little part in this transformation and seemed destined (as **Chris Manning and Ross Garnaut predicted** at the time) to remain essentially a village people. Data on the occupational characteristics of indigenous (Papuan) and other ethnic groups from the 2000 population census appear to confirm the validity of the Garnaut/Manning prediction.

It’s not difficult to identify the counterparts of Van Leur’s peddlers in modern-day west New Guinea. But what of his dominant group, concerned not so much with trade as with ‘war, booty and political tribute’? Could Van Leur possibly have foreseen the circumstances of modern Indonesia’s Papuan provinces, rich in tropical timber, fisheries and mineral resources, and governed since 1963 by an administration top-heavy with senior military figures who commit the public resources of the Indonesian state to the cause of private enrichment?

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