

# *Ethnographic Representation and the Politics of Violence in West Papua*

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**Abstract** ■ This article examines how ethnographic representations of violence inflect contemporary understandings of West Papua and influence its politics. It describes how colonial depictions of perpetual warfare in the highlands became paradigmatic for the region. Recent forms of extreme tourism draw on these images in offering encounters with ‘lost tribes’ that undermine the credibility of West Papuan political actors. Similarly, an American mining company paid the Indonesian military for protection against the West Papuan resistance movement while ignoring the violence of state actors. However, the collapse of Suharto’s New Order Indonesia has facilitated the reinterpretation of *merdeka* (freedom) as social justice, suggesting alternative ways to conceptualize West Papua’s relationship to the Indonesian state. Recent efforts by West Papuan activists to mobilize the discourses of human rights and indigenous politics are contingent on displacing the narratives of violence that dominate popular understandings of West Papua. This article shows how ethnographic representations may have negative consequences for indigenous politics.

**Keywords** ■ accountability ■ adventure tourism ■ ethnographic representation ■ human rights ■ indigenous politics ■ Indonesia ■ lost tribes ■ Melanesia ■ millenarianism ■ politics of violence

It is instructive to think about how we come to know places. My only visit to the Indonesian province of West Papua was in 1989.<sup>1</sup> While conducting dissertation research in Papua New Guinea, I joined some friends on a trip to their land across the border. At one point during the journey, I found myself walking ahead of my companions. Turning a corner, I came across two members of the paramilitary group *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM), or Free Papua Movement, sitting beside a fire. As we exchanged greetings, I anxiously explained that I was an anthropologist living in a nearby village on the Ok Tedi River. When my friends subsequently encountered the OPM members, they hurried to catch up with me and kept me in their sight for the remainder of our visit to West Papua.<sup>2</sup>

Arriving by plane from Jakarta to Biak, or by ferry from the Moluccas, West Papua lies at the tail end of a long archipelago of gradual differences. Indonesian nationalists emphasize continuities across the islands and the shared historical experiences that produced them. West Papua may be the

outlier, but it is still imagined as belonging to the nation. Writing about the post-Suharto era, Benedict Anderson argues that provisions for regional autonomy will allow Indonesians to welcome West Papuans 'back to the common project and deep horizontal comradeship from which they should never have been excluded' (1999: 5). When I had the opportunity to ask the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who was a political prisoner for many years, what he would say to the West Papuan refugees with whom I work, he asked me to tell them he was sorry they also suffered under Suharto. In his view, the hardships experienced by the refugees were not unique and consequently should not be a barrier to their re-incorporation within the nation.

West Papua looks very different from the border with Papua New Guinea. Being Papuan or Melanesian rather than Indonesian is a central political claim and a key feature of identity politics for West Papuans, whose attitudes towards Indonesians have been shaped by the racialized discourse that discriminates against them. West Papua identification with Christianity is also a means of reinscribing their differences from other Indonesians, although this essentializes Indonesia as a Muslim nation and ignores the extent to which religious difference is associated with tension and conflict elsewhere in the country (King, 2004: 34). Even claims about language differ in West Papua. Although Anderson (1991: 177) argues that Indonesians view West Papuans as fellow citizens because they speak the national language, the Muyu refugees with whom I work deny sharing a common tongue with Indonesians, referring to their version of Bahasa Indonesian by its Dutch colonial name, Malayu or Bahasa Malayu.<sup>3</sup> One acquires a radically different view of West Papua depending on whether it is approached from an Indonesian perspective, emphasizing continuity and integration, or the view of West Papuans, who stress separation and difference.

Both perspectives, however, are mediated by the politics of violence.<sup>4</sup> Although violence was central to New Order Indonesia (Siegel, 1998; Steedly, 1993), and widespread in regional conflicts that intensified after the fall of Suharto in 1998 (Bertrand, 2004; Headman, 2008; Mote and Rutherford, 2001; Sidel, 2006), the politics of violence in West Papua has distinctive features that have endured since the colonial era. In *The Devil's Handwriting*, George Steinmetz (2007) rejects the claim that there is a causal relationship between ethnographic discourse and colonial policy.<sup>5</sup> However, this article shows that colonial representations of indigenous violence continue to inflect contemporary understandings of West Papua and influence its politics. More generally, it illustrates the potentially deleterious consequences of ethnographic discourse for indigenous politics, a relationship that has been the subject of intense anthropological debate in recent years (Borofsky et al., 2005).

I begin by examining how colonial era depictions of perpetual warfare in the highlands became paradigmatic for West Papua. Contemporary forms of extreme tourism draw on these images in offering terrifying

encounters with 'lost tribes' that undermine the credibility of West Papuan political actors. The politics of violence is also evident in conflicts associated with the Freeport-McMoRan copper and gold mine in West Papua. New standards for transparency and accountability forced the American mining company to disclose the payments it made to the Indonesian military to protect its operations from the West Papuan resistance movement, while shootings on the road to the mine revealed the violence of state actors. However, political changes since the collapse of Suharto's New Order Indonesia have encouraged new interpretations of the concept of *merdeka* (freedom) as social justice, suggesting alternative ways to conceptualize West Papua's relationship to the Indonesian state. The success of recent efforts by West Papuan activists to mobilize the discourses of human rights and indigenous politics is contingent on displacing the narratives of violence that shape the politics of West Papua.

### Perpetual war

Perhaps the most influential images of West Papua are from the 1963 film *Dead Birds* by Robert Gardner. Dani warfare is the subject of the film and the source of some of its most arresting scenes and lasting impressions as scores of men from opposing factions gather on the battlefield at regular intervals to carry out a ritualized form of combat. The title of the film is drawn from the Dani term for trophies of war, especially weapons or ornaments taken from the bodies of persons killed in battle.

Gardner was invited to make the film by Victor DeBruyn, the head of the Bureau of Native Affairs in Netherlands New Guinea, who in 1960 visited the United States to seek support for the Dutch colony (Heider, 2001–2002: 62). Sponsorship of ethnographic research and filmmaking was part of the larger colonial strategy of emphasizing the differences between West Papua and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago to justify the continued Dutch presence in the region. DeBruyn suggested that Gardner make a record of tribal life before 'development and pacification programs had irretrievably altered traditional culture in the remote and still uncontacted areas' of Netherlands New Guinea (Gardner, 1972: 31).

Several aspects of *Dead Birds* continue to influence representations of West Papua. The first example is the film's naturalization of the Dani. It alternates between scenes of human activity and animal behaviour, implying the Dani live in a state of nature. The film includes images of a grey heron among the sweet potato vines, a hawk perching in a tree, a cormorant on the river, ducks taking flight, swallows flitting through the twilight, and doves in the forest, all of which are intended to echo or foreshadow human activity depicted in the film (Heider, 1972). By relating a Dani myth that contrasts the mortality of birds and men to the immortality of the snake, which can shed its skin and live again, Gardner (1972: 35)

hoped the film, by depicting a society living close to nature, would reveal universal truths about how 'we all, as humans, meet our animal fate'.

Another important dimension of the film's representation of the Dani is conveyed by its omniscient narrative voice. Gardner adopted one of the dominant conventions of ethnographic filmmaking at the time by focusing on the struggle of 'a very few very individualized people facing a strong natural or cultural problem and surmounting it' (Heider, 2001–2002: 62). The film focuses on two main characters, an adult man named Weyak and a young boy called Pua. Not only do Gardner's voice-overs provide the only explanation of the events depicted in the film, but he also implicitly claims intimate knowledge of what the Dani think and feel. For example, after presenting an image of the men fighting the film shifts its attentions to the boy Pua, and the narrator purports to know his thoughts: 'Pua wonders, in the dry safety of his house, if any man from Wupakainma has been killed' (Heider, 1972: 47).<sup>6</sup> In another scene, Pua watches men turning the soil for a new garden and Gardner suggests he is 'thinking of the day when he himself will be a farmer' (Heider, 1972: 44). Later in the film the narrator intones, 'Weyak relaxes, glad to have a day not spent watching for the enemy' (Heider, 1972: 63). The Dani do not speak for themselves in *Dead Birds*; they are silenced by these voice-overs.<sup>7</sup> Although the film crew had access to a Dutch patrol officer who spoke both Malayu and a pidginized version of Dani language known as 'police talk' (Heider, 2001–2002: 66), Gardner did not want the Dani to know their images were being captured on film because he thought this would alter their behaviour and make the film less authentic (Ruby, 2000: 102). Consequently the film was made without either the voices or the informed consent of the Dani.

The film also depicts the Dani as though they were engaged in a state of perpetual war. Karl G. Heider (1972), the anthropologist accompanying Gardner on the Harvard film project, argued that Dani warfare was ritually domesticated, limiting the number of people wounded or killed in battle. This was in keeping with the functionalist view of warfare in New Guinea prevalent among anthropologists at the time (Vayda 1961; Rappaport 1968). Heider hypothesized that 'Dani society is ultimately based on this ritual war, and that without it there would be no Dani; if war were suddenly stopped the society would collapse' (1972: 34). He argued that the end of warfare would turn the aggressive impulses of the Dani destructively inward against themselves. Not only did the Dani continuously engage in war, but warfare made the Dani who they are (Heider, 1972: 35). The image of a society engaged in perpetual war was also conveyed by the film, including Gardner's final words of narration: 'They kill to save their souls and perhaps to ease the burden of knowing what birds will never know and what they, as men who have forever killed each other, cannot forget' (Heider, 1972: 75).

Subsequent research by Heider caused him to revise his initial analysis of Dani warfare. First, the Dani also engage in a form of combat far more lethal than the balanced version of negative reciprocity depicted in *Dead*



**Figure 1** ‘Men and women dance to celebrate the killing of an enemy’. Cover image for Robert Gardner and Karl G. Heider’s (1968) photographic essay, *Gardens of War: Life and Death in the New Guinea Stone Age*. Photo courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

*Birds*. It entails a large-scale assault intended to rout one’s opponents and drive them from their land, which the attackers subsequently occupy (Heider, 1972: 4). Heider (1972: 24) later described Dani warfare as a system composed of ‘a long phase of ritual war, interrupted by a secular attack that rearranges alliances, and is followed by another phase of ritual war fought along the new frontiers’. When Dutch intervention ended Dani warfare several years after the film was made, Heider’s hypothesis that Dani aggression would destroy their society was proven false. Scholars working elsewhere in the highlands of West Papua subsequently learned that people were often relieved by the end of warfare, which they had been unable to achieve on their own because they lacked the political structures necessary for negotiating a permanent truce between warring parties (Koch, 1974). The identification of warfare as the defining feature of their society is no more appropriate for the Dani than it is for Euro-Americans.

It is constructive to think of *Dead Birds* in terms of the politics of time, which identifies the ability to define and manage the time of others as a fundamental form of political power (Rutz, 1992). The Dutch colonial administration justified its presence by treating the people of West Papua as though they lived in the past rather than the present (Fabian, 1983). This permitted them to identify West Papuans as insufficiently modern and consequently in need of external supervision. That none of the film crew were able to interview the Dani in their own language presumably contributed to the perception of difference that was reified by the politics of time. The ability of the Dutch colonial administration to control the politics of time was central to their claim to have continuing obligations in West Papua.

*Dead Birds* sets the scene for subsequent representations of West Papua. It depicts West Papuans as living in a state of nature and treats them as representatives of our collective human past. As members of a Stone Age society, they are not regarded as coevals but survivors from another era who must be brought into the present, thereby legitimating a variety of state interventions (Kirsch, 2002). By focusing on ritualized warfare in the highlands, the film also established perpetual violence as the norm for West Papua.<sup>8</sup> By filming in a location considered 'remote and still uncontacted', the pursuit of lost tribes and other uncontacted peoples continues to be associated with West Papua regardless of the passage of time and changed circumstances. Because ethnographic film is often seen to depict an unchanging ethnographic present rather than recognized as an artefact of a specific historical moment, *Dead Birds* continues to reinforce the view that the Dani live in nature rather than history. Gardner deliberately avoided all traces of the Dutch colonial presence in the film, which might have encouraged the film's audience to think in historical terms. Finally, the narrative voice-over which silences the Dani rather than allowing them to speak for themselves remains paradigmatic for West Papua rather than an exception, as observers continue to assume they know what West Papuans think and feel without speaking to them.

### **Terror in out-of-the-way places**

The influence of these images of West Papuans in *Dead Birds* remains evident in contemporary forms of extreme tourism in which Euro-Americans pay thousands of dollars to participate in staged encounters with lost tribes. 'Exclusive: First Contact!' screams the headlines on the cover of *Outside Magazine*. Michael Behar's (2005: 98) essay, 'The Selling of the Last Savage', describes his travels through West Papua with an American tour operator who advertised an opportunity to meet 'uncontacted native tribes who have never seen outsiders'. Central to these encounters is the myth of the lost tribe, the special status of which only exists by virtue of its lack of contact with the outside world (Kirsch, 1997). Behar's account in *Outside Magazine* also depicts West Papuans as fierce, innately violent, and preferring to live in isolation from the rest of the world. Tourists responding to these ads pursue social distinction by visiting a place they believe to be on the cusp of significant change (Errington and Gewertz, 1989: 45).

Behar describes the sceptical reactions of the anthropologists he interviewed about the possibility of finding people who remain unaware of the outside world in contrast to popular myths about such interactions. He also reports the tour operator's dismissive response that his anthropologist critics 'are just lecturers at nice universities who have tenure and cushy jobs . . . If they think I've staged this . . . I give them an open invitation to see for themselves' (quoted in Behar, 2005: 112–13). Behar's expedition took video images of these rain forest encounters using a night vision



**Figure 2** ‘Then all hell breaks loose. There’s hysterical screaming and shouting. It’s the natives, who leap through the back of their bivouac. Twigs are snapping in every direction. I hear bare feet slapping the mud, more yelling, and bursts of frantic, hyperventilated babble. Within seconds the natives have surrounded us, almost entirely camouflaged by the jungle’. Michael Behar (2005: 105), ‘The Selling of the Last Savage’. Photo courtesy of Stephen Dupont.

camera that depicted everything in shades of green. In the video, five or six West Papuan men suddenly appear out of nowhere and rush the tour members with their bows raised, only to return a few moments later to shyly pose for photographs, albeit with their backs to the camera. They were extravagantly dressed for the encounter, wearing cassowary feather head-dresses and palm frond decorations more appropriate for a ritual or ceremony than hunting in the rain forest. The shelter in which they were camping when the tourist party walked by was newly constructed from fresh palm fronds and leaves. The video reminded me of the teenage cult horror film *The Blair Witch Project* given its shaky camera work, the panic and confusion of the participants, and the disoriented moments of recollection that followed each encounter during which the participants anxiously tried to make sense of their experiences.

A similar expedition to West Papua, organized by the same American tour operator, was subsequently featured in an essay published by the journalist Lawrence Osborne in *The New Yorker* (2005). Osborne interprets the distressed response of the Kombai people whom he met during his visit as evidence they had never encountered outsiders before. In contrast, anthropologist Rupert Stasch (2005), who has conducted research with the neighbouring Korowai people, suggests that the Kombai response indicates that the tourists were being intrusive or were simply unwelcome. As with the making of the film *Dead Birds*, the visitors assumed they could discern the thoughts and emotions of West Papuans simply by observing them and without speaking to them (see also Stasch, 2005).<sup>9</sup> Osborne apparently found the encounter terrifying, and in response to my comments on the

film, which were forwarded to him by a colleague, he wrote that 'I went on the trip and it sure as hell wasn't *The Blair Witch Project*. I thought I was going to die!' (Deborah Gewertz, personal communication, 2005). It is not surprising that Behar and Osborne were frightened, as such experiences are what makes this form of adventure tourism marketable.

The stereotypes of primitive violence re-enacted in these tourist encounters also obscure the violence of the state. It is telling that the first Korowai man Osborne meets has the nickname Brimob, the acronym for the Indonesian mobile defence forces, which he acquired when he allegedly shot a soldier in the eye with an arrow. Yet it is the journalists participating in these encounters who remain blind to the political implications of their work. These tales of terror in out-of-the-way places perpetuate rumours about the presence of uncontacted peoples (or lost tribes) who are inherently violent, reinforcing the rationale of the Indonesian state for appropriating their land and resources in the name of development and modernization (Kirsch, 2002: 65–66). By keeping West Papuans in the 'savage slot' (Trouillot, 1991), and in particular by representing them as dangerous and violent, these narratives also legitimate the continued militarization of the Indonesian province. By attributing violence to West Papuans while ignoring the violence of the state, they also impair the efforts of West Papuan political actors, as I discuss below.

### Smoking guns

The media continues to exploit these stereotypes of West Papuans in their coverage of political and economic conflict over resource extraction. Consider the following vignette on globalization published by the *National Geographic*, influential arbiter of American perspectives on the world and avid promoter of U.S. business interests abroad (Lutz and Collins, 1993), which purports to describe the West Papuan response to the controversial Freeport mine in West Papua:

At Freeport-McMoRan Copper and Gold Inc.'s 24,700 acres of mines in Irian Jaya, some 14,000 people use huge trucks and excavating machines to hollow out mountains. But what impressed me most when I visited several years ago was fleeting glimpses of local Amungme people who had little contact with the outside world until Freeport-McMoRan arrived in the early 1960s. Some Amungme became miners, mastering new equipment. Others resisted intrusion, using bows and bone-tipped arrows to attack mine workers and buildings. A few sometimes took things from Freeport employees. Why take boots that are of no use unless you work in a mine? To get manufactured goods. These Amungme saw that outsiders had many novel possessions and wanted their share (Swerdlow, 1999: 3).<sup>10</sup>

The encounter between high-tech miner and low-tech native is reduced to caricature by depicting the latter's effort to challenge the mining project with bow and arrows. Barefoot natives are apparently mystified by



commodity production and seduced by the fetishistic prospect of shoes, turning them into thieves. However, the account avoids asking who the real criminal is: the apocryphal native in the miner's boots, or the corporation filling its coffers with copper and gold plundered from the disputed territory of West Papua while polluting the Ajkwa river, collaborating with Indonesia's brutal Kopassus forces, and persuading *National Geographic* to represent its sins as a slapstick tale of cross-cultural comedy?<sup>11</sup>

Contrast *National Geographic's* assessment of globalization in West Papua with concurrent events associated with the same mining project. On 29 April 1996, a \$6 billion class action lawsuit was filed against Freeport-McMoRan in New Orleans, where the company is based. Amungme leader Tom Beanal alleged that the operation of the mine resulted in 'the violation of human rights, environmental destruction, and cultural genocide' (Leith, 2003: 112). However, the case was dismissed after two years of hearings when the Court ruled that Beanal and his lawyers failed to provide sufficient evidence to support their allegations (Duval, 1997). At issue was their inability to demonstrate the financial link between Freeport and the Indonesian military.<sup>12</sup>

Critical new information became available several years later. Transnational corporations like Freeport-McMoRan face increased scrutiny from NGOs that focus on corporate accountability and transparency, including Amnesty International, Global Witness, and the international campaign to 'Publish What You Pay' (see Global Witness 2005). In response to the Enron accounting scandal, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 established new financial reporting requirements for the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that compelled Freeport-McMoRan, which trades on the New York Stock Exchange, to reveal the details of its financial relationship with the Indonesian military. In August 2004, Freeport acknowledged the company paid the Indonesian military \$11.4 million during the previous two years for security at the mine (Bryce, 2003).<sup>13</sup> Documentation of these payments may well be the smoking gun missing from earlier claims filed against the mining company in the U.S. District Court in Louisiana, suggesting that legal claims against Freeport might be revisited in the future with greater chance of success.

Rumours that Freeport would cease making regular payments to the Indonesian military began to circulate well before the decision was made public in 2004.<sup>14</sup> Critics of the mine have long argued that these transactions effectively subsidized the Indonesian military's violent repression of West Papuan political aspirations (Leith, 2003: 232). It has also been suggested that rumours about Freeport's decision to stop paying the military may have been the trigger for a violent attack on a company convoy that took place on 31 August 2003. Several vehicles transporting staff members from the international school in the mining township of Timika were ambushed by armed gunmen who killed three people, two American teachers and an Indonesian employee of the mining company, and wounded a dozen others (Bryce, 2003). Freeport and the Indonesian

government initially blamed the killings on the OPM. However, subsequent investigations of the shootings pointed out that Papuan independence groups do not have access to the automatic weapons and ammunition used in the attack. The site of the assault is also tightly controlled by the armed forces, making it unlikely that the perpetrators could have entered and exited the area without being detected (Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights-Indonesia Support Group, 2004).

Although the collapse of Suharto's New Order Indonesia did not reduce military activity in West Papua, it increased the military's need to justify its continued presence in the province. This includes the funding of and subsequent crackdown against opposition groups, demonstrating that a robust military is required to safeguard state interests, a tactic familiar from its activities in East Timor (Rumbiak et al., 2005). In these actions, the military exploits images of violent resistance in order to advance its own interests; it is widely believed that one of the motives for the smoking guns on the road to Timika was to warn Freeport against stopping its payments to the Indonesian military (Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights-Indonesia Support Group, 2004). However, the plan was unsuccessful, and eventually backfired when allegations of Indonesian military complicity in the shootings delayed plans for collaboration with United States in the War on Terror (Rumbiak et al., 2005).

Rather than recycle images of West Papuans futilely brandishing their bows and arrows against the mine, *National Geographic* might have presented the testimony of the Amungme plaintiffs against Freeport-McMoRan in the U.S. District Court in Louisiana as an alternative example of globalization.<sup>15</sup> The smoking guns on the road to Timika confirmed the occurrence of terror in out-of-the-way places, but suggest that such violence cannot be explained without reference to the Indonesian military. In these examples, claims about the violence of West Papuans not only reproduce stereotypes but exploit them for political gain, with Freeport using the Indonesian military to insulate itself against its critics, and the Indonesian military exploiting claims about the violence of West Papuans to protect its profitable relationship with the mining company.

### **New forms of political activism**

During Suharto's New Order Indonesia, West Papuan dissent was violently suppressed. In the absence of civil liberties, there were few channels for the expression of political views. A movement based on cultural activism led by the West Papuan anthropologist Arnold Ap during the late 1970s and the early 1980s ended after his death at the hands of the state (Zubrinich, 1997). West Papuan abilities to attract international support has been limited by restrictions placed on access to the region by anthropologists (Kirsch, 2002: 54), journalists (Matbob and Papoutsaki, 2006), human

rights workers, and diplomats (McWilliams, 2007: 15). For more than three decades, the *Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, or Free Papua Movement, was the primary vehicle of West Papuan political resistance. Its paramilitary organization replicated the militarization of the state and guerrilla violence was central to its political tactics in West Papua.<sup>16</sup> Outside of Indonesia, however, political leaders living in exile in the Netherlands, Australia, and elsewhere in the Pacific simultaneously attempted to establish a diplomatic profile, although their efforts were compromised by the violence of their domestic counterparts and their own political disagreements.

The tactics of the OPM in West Papua were endorsed by its supporters, who saw violence as the primary means of resisting the state. The documentary film *One People, One Soul* includes the performance of a song about their armed struggle: 'Oh, the brave commandos/are willing to die/from a bullet on the battlefield/as a sign of loyalty to the flag of the morning star' (Burns, 1987).<sup>17</sup> The OPM also organized a number of protests and symbolic flag-raising in urban areas. In 1984, the OPM coordinated the mass exodus of more than 10,000 West Papuans across the border into Papua New Guinea with the hope of generating international attention and support. The majority of the political refugees still reside in Papua New Guinea (Kirsch, 2006; Glazebrook, 2008). A faction of the OPM was also responsible for the 1995 kidnapping of several European university students in the highlands of West Papua, which backfired by alienating foreign supporters of the independence movement (Start, 1997). Despite a history of political infighting among its leaders, the OPM has maintained broad popular support throughout West Papua (Tebay, 2005: 5), which the refugees in the border camps of Papua New Guinea express rhetorically in their claim that 'We're all OPM!' The primary objective of the OPM has been to gain independence from Indonesia for a democratic state of West Papua (Tebay, 2005: 5).

For a brief period after the fall of Suharto in 1998, however, the opportunities for political debate opened up dramatically (Rumbiak, 2003; King, 2004; Chauvel, 2005). Political dissent was mobilized through NGO efforts to document human rights abuses and environmental problems, and to bring these concerns to the attention of the public through legal action. Formal political participation also increased, although the pro-independence resolutions of the Papuan Congress provoked a harsh response from the state, including the assassination of the popular West Papuan politician Theys Eluay by members of the Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) and mass killings at a public demonstration in Biak (Chauvel, 2005: 106; Rutherford, 1999).

However, international efforts to enlist political support for the West Papuan cause have also proliferated post-Suharto: the West Papuan situation has been debated at the European Union (Rumbiak, 2003); the United States Congress has been asked to revisit the 1962 New York Agreement that facilitated the territory's transfer from the Netherlands to the

United Nations and the contested 1969 U.N. Act of Free Choice, which awarded control over West New Guinea to Indonesia; the United Nations has been asked to include West Papua on its list of decolonizing nations; and the recently-established U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues adopted a resolution expressing support for the West Papuan political struggle. Despite objections from Australia, regional political forums in the Pacific increasingly include delegates from West Papua. ELSHAM, the West Papuan Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy, has been especially effective in its promotion of human rights as a means of transforming political possibilities in West Papua, including the provision of human rights training to rank and file Indonesian soldiers stationed in West Papua (John Rumbiak, personal communication 1999) and members of OPM paramilitary camps (Rutherford, 2005: 163 n.40). ELSHAM also promoted the call to transform West Papua into a demilitarized 'zone of peace' by withdrawing combat troops, eliminating independent militias, and banning Indonesian military participation in commercial activities (Tebay, 2005: 26). However, efforts to engage the Indonesian military and state on these issues have failed (Tebay, 2005: 24).

The shift from militarized resistance to human rights campaigning is in keeping with international trends. Indigenous political movements increasingly stop short of claims regarding self-determination and independence in favour of more limited claims for sovereignty or autonomy within the boundaries of existing nations and reparations for past injustices (Niezen, 2003). The turn away from violence and militarism is especially pragmatic in the context of the post 9–11 War on Terror given that West Papuan activists hope to enlist support from rather than alienate the United States. The earlier militarism of West Papuan resistance would be anathema in today's global political climate.<sup>18</sup>

In keeping with the emphasis on human rights and more robust efforts at international diplomacy, West Papuans have also re-interpreted the central concept of *merdeka*, which is usually translated as freedom or liberation.<sup>19</sup> In West Papua, the notion of *merdeka* has commonly had millenarian overtones associated with both Christian theology and autochthonous religious movements. Although anthropologists refer to these activities as cargo cults, the West Papuan activists reject this identification. As Danilyn Rutherford notes, 'when Papuan nationalists tap the power of the province's Christian institutions, they are doing so in a different fashion than their millennial predecessors and competitors. . . [but] they all, in some fashion, have sought to tap this official category [of religion] as a source of legitimacy' (2005: 153–54). The Christian association of *merdeka* with independence draws on the prevailing assumption that both self-determination and territorialized nations are manifestations of divine will (see Kirsch 2006: 185–86). Consequently many West Papuans view their lack of sovereignty as simultaneously a political and a religious problem, and treat their campaign for independence accordingly (Farhadian, 2007; Glazebrook, 2008).

More recently, however, *merdeka* has been invoked to convey a broader sense of social justice, implying a gradualist rather than a millenarian approach to change (Golden, 2003; Glazebrook, 2005; Tebay 2005). Brigham Golden (2003) argues that these new interpretations of *merdeka* are based on a 'moral crusade for peace and social justice' he compares to liberation theology (see Giay, 2007: 35). They focus on the quality or character of social relations rather than the establishment of a new state. They also articulate an alternative to the New Order ideology of *pancasila* or 'unity in diversity', which concealed 'assimilationist policies that promoted the interests of national elites . . . at the expense of politically weak sections of the citizenry' (Rosengren, 2002: 25), especially West Papuans. The new interpretation of *merdeka* asserts that social justice should become the basis for incorporating difference within the state.

Whether the supporters of *merdeka* as social justice will accept a permanent solution to the problems in West Papua based on Indonesian proposals for regional autonomy rather than eventual independence is unclear (see Tebay, 2005: 20–21). However, the interpretation of *merdeka* as social justice can be seen as compatible with their larger political ambitions given that equality and respect for human rights represent desirable advances. Nor are the two forms of *merdeka* necessarily exclusive; demonstrations against the state often invoke both the nationalist and social justice versions of *merdeka*, although such protests have regularly been met with violent reprisals by the Indonesian military, which views any display of the West Papuan flag as a sign of separatist ambitions and therefore a direct challenge to their authority (Rutherford, 1999).

The politics of violence that has long defined West Papua's relationship to Indonesia is increasingly challenged by the new generation of activists. The political opening after the fall of Suharto enabled them to begin their transformation from a paramilitary force to proponents of demilitarization. This change is in keeping with concerns about human rights and the reconceptualization of their struggle in Christian terms. It also confirms that the violence of their earlier resistance movement was a historical reaction to Indonesian militarism rather than an expression of West Papuan character. These changes may ultimately benefit West Papuans through the 'politics of sympathy' by yielding stronger international alliances (see Keck and Sikkink, 1998), but only if they can successfully displace the narratives of violence that continue to dominate popular understandings of West Papua.

## Conclusion

Steinmetz (2007) argues that the primary reason why there is no causal link between ethnographic discourse and colonial policy is that colonial relations are beset by internal contradictions.<sup>20</sup> However, similar contradictions became political resources in the case of Indonesia and West

Papua. The Dutch emphasis on the differences between West Papua and Indonesia was part of their strategy to retain a colonial foothold in Southeast Asia. Indonesia subsequently exploited these narratives of difference in consolidating its control over West Papua. This resulted in a series of perduring images of West Papua: of Stone Age populations living in a state of nature, of perpetual warfare, and of uncontacted populations that resist their incorporation into the state. Even though these images have their origins in outdated anthropological paradigms, they continue to influence politics in West Papua. Claims that West Papuans are inherently violent or that conflict is the norm for West Papua are used to justify the militarization of the province and the violence of the Indonesian regime.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Indonesia claims that West Papua is an integral part of the nation and emphasizes continuity across the archipelago. Indonesia exploits these contradictory perspectives to delegitimize indigenous political aspirations and maintain its control over West Papua.

This discussion is also intended to contribute to recent anthropological debates about the political consequences of ethnographic discourse.<sup>22</sup> In the controversy provoked by Patrick Tierney's (2002) *Darkness and El Dorado*, which purported to describe the harmful consequences of scientific research in the Amazon, one of the fundamental questions was whether the naturalization of indigenous violence has detrimental political effects.<sup>23</sup> Does it matter that Napoleon Chagnon (1983) identifies the Yanomami as 'fierce people' in contrast to Bruce Albert's claim that *waiteri* refers to 'the virtues of humor, generosity, and bravery' (Ramos, 1992: 50)? Chagnon's (1983) ascription of fierceness to the Yanomami was the cornerstone of sociobiological research on the 'headman effect', which predicts that violent individuals have greater reproductive fitness. His argument is cited as one of few concrete examples of culturally-specific behaviour (Yanomami 'fierceness') being enhanced through reproductive selection. What were the political consequences of reifying claims about the innate violence of the Yanomami for their land rights and cultural survival?<sup>24</sup> The answer to this question was largely obscured in the anthropological debates concerning this 'fierce controversy' (Borofsky et al. 2005), but the evidence presented here suggests that the relationship between ethnographic discourse and indigenous politics warrants further anthropological attention.

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## Notes

- 1 Formerly known as Irian Jaya, the Indonesian province was officially renamed Papua in 2000; I use the designation West Papua in accordance with local preferences.
- 2 See Danilyn Rutherford's (2004: 186, 186–87) discussion of how Euro-American understandings of West Papua are influenced by 'lurid accounts of backcountry travel found in advocacy classics like George Monbiot's [1989] *Poisoned Arrows*', the defining feature of which is a European narrator 'utterly dependent on his Papuan nationalist hosts, frustrated by their seeming failure to cooperate on his mission, yet seduced by the experience into embracing their cause'.
- 3 Rupert Stasch's (2007) Korowai informants refer to Bahasa Indonesian as the 'demon tongue'.
- 4 Thousands of West Papuans have been killed by the Indonesian military since 1963 and many thousands more have died after being forced from their villages without food or medicine. West Papuans suspected of supporting the separatist movement are treated with shocking brutality (Brundige, et al. 2004).
- 5 Steinmetz (2007: 27) defines *ethnographic discourse* as 'any representation, textual or visual, that claims to depict the character and culture of a given socio-cultural collective, regardless of whether that collective is described as a race, a culture, a society, an ethnic group, a community, or something else'.
- 6 Heider claims that Gardner must have known 'what they were thinking because he asked them in his many interviews' (Heider, 2001–2002: 67), although Loizos (1993: 151) suggests that 'it seems more probable that he [Gardner] imaginatively projected himself into their thoughts and motives, not as they were known to be for the real people in the real world, but as they were for his characters in the conceptual space of the film-story'.
- 7 Although the technology of synchronic sound recording had not yet been invented, other filmmakers were already addressing this problem with voice-overs and subtitles based on interviews recorded after the fact (Loizos, 1993; see also Ruby, 2000: 104).
- 8 The war-like representation of the Dani can be contrasted with the representation of the Tasaday as non-violent, which became a symbol of peace during the Vietnam war (Dumont, 1988). Gardner hoped that *Dead Birds* 'would contribute to the dialogue Americans were having about the Vietnam conflict, if not war in general' (Ruby, 2000: 98).
- 9 The Korowai and the neighbouring Kombai are familiar with tourism and tourists, although there is no general agreement on whether tourism is desirable (Stasch, 2005).
- 10 Freeport-McMoRan's Grasberg mine in West Papua discharges 200,000 metric tons of mine tailings and waste rock into local rivers daily (Leith, 2003: 167), more than any other mining project.
- 11 Like many mining companies, Freeport-McMoRan restricts access to its operations, excluding journalists who may be critical of their activities (see Perlez and Bonner, 2005).

- 12 The court concluded there were 'too few facts alleged upon which to base a symbiotic relationship analysis for the purposes of determining whether state action is alleged' (Duval, 1997: 32).
- 13 These funds supported an estimated 550 armed forces personnel stationed in the vicinity of the mine (Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights – Indonesia Support Group, 2004).
- 14 The Indonesian military raises a substantial portion of its operating budget by exploiting local economic opportunities. Consequently, it has a financial interest in keeping rural areas of West Papua destabilized because it derives substantial income from illegal activities in conflict zones, including logging, mining, and the smuggling of narcotics and protected natural species (Golden, 2003: 5; Tebay, 2005: 19). The military is also involved in the lucrative market for *gaharu*, a resinous aromatic wood also known as eaglewood or agarwood (Moore and Rompies, 2005).
- 15 Or counterglobalization (see Kirsch 2007).
- 16 The Indonesian state refers to the OPM and other groups that resist or challenge its power by the acronym GPK (*Gerombolan Pengacau Keamanan*), or 'Security Disruption Group'.
- 17 However, the film *Arrows against the Wind* (Groome, 1982) seeks to balance the image of West Papuans as warriors by describing them as guardians of the rain forest in contrast to the environmental problems caused by transnational corporations like Freeport-McMoRan.
- 18 S. Eben Kirksey and Andreas Harsono (2008) recently hypothesized that the desire to have the U.S. declare the OPM a terrorist organization may have motivated the Freeport shootings.
- 19 During the anti-colonial struggle against the Dutch, *merdeka* referred to Indonesian independence. The term has Sanskrit roots, entering Indonesian through the Dutch rendering of the Portuguese *mardijker*, which referred to manumitted slaves. In colonial Java, areas free from taxation and other obligations were known as *mardikar* (Fernandes, 2006:109–110).
- 20 Steinmetz (2007) sees the different class positions of colonial officers as a key source of contradiction; he also points to colonial identification with their subjects as another reason for the absence of a direct relationship between ethnographic discourse and policy.
- 21 Former U.S. diplomat Edmund McWilliams (2007: xvi) notes critically that 'the Indonesian military has justified its large and currently growing presence by contending that this tiny, fractured resistance movement [the OPM] constitutes a threat to Indonesian control and the operation of multinational corporations in West Papua'.
- 22 See Kirsch (2009) for a critical assessment of how anthropologists conduct ethical debates.
- 23 This concern had been raised before (Albert and Ramos, 1989), only to be ignored or dismissed.
- 24 R. Brian Ferguson (1995) challenges assumptions about Yanomami violence by examining the historical relationship between Yanomami warfare and the encroachment of the state.

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