

Under the Mountain Wall

A Chronicle of two Seasons in Stone Age New Guinea

P.Matthiessen

January 4-7, 2016

It is in truth remarkable that Stone Age populations have survived into our Modern Age. They are in the nature of fossils from human prehistory, and as such eminently fascinating. In a sense they give us virgin examples of human nature unsullied by advanced civilization, and as thus promise to reveal to us what human nature is really like. There is but a problem, they are humans, and as such they cannot help interact with us, and we with them. They are no mere spectacles, in the words of the historian Collingwood, unlike the various phenomena of the natural world. Thus the inevitable tragedy of once being observed they vanish and become instead irrevocably transformed. It is like bringing up beautiful creatures from the depths of oceans, only to seem them explode as they approach the surface. Or to analyze logical sentences, which change in the process of being analyzed, leading to seemingly unresolvable paradoxes. Anthropology in its original and exciting sense is a young science, and also one doomed to a short life for want of a subject to study. In 1938 areal inspection disclosed that one assumed uninhabited region of the highlands of Central New Guinea, through which the Baliem river flows, in fact teemed with hitherto unknown people practicing a primitive agriculture as testified by terracing. This was to be the last major discovery of unknown tribes. Admittedly there are still some hundred small communities, mostly in the Amazonas (but also in parts of India and of course also New Guinea), typically only numbered in the low hundreds, which refuse contact with the outside world. As those communities have been isolated for a long time they are very vulnerable to diseases to which we have evolved immunity against, thus contact could also be deadly to them, which of course they are not aware of. But their refusal to contact us, means first that there must have been original contact, at least they are not unaware of our existence, secondly that their behavior is atypical, not to say strange, and more in the nature of a sect than a human community. Sadly one must admit that their continued existence is in great peril, and can be compared to that of animals on the brink of extinction, as more and more of their habitats are compromised by modern economic expansion, the fruits of which eventually trickle down into the last recess of our human planet, and thus diminish it. Hence the discovery of the people of the Baliem valley was indeed the last encounter with archaic human tribes, as they did not constitute scattered populations but could be counted in the tens of thousands. After the discovery war intervened thus protecting them for a while, but then of course renewed contacts were taken in the 50's as Holland was dismantling its colonial administration of Indonesia, in practice being defunct during the war due to Japanese invasions, holding on to the Western part of New Guinea, the eastern part initially under British then Australian administration. In 1961 an expedition undertaken by the Harvard Peabody Museum with the co-operation of the Dutch authorities was launched to study tribes from the southern

part of the area, the southern Kurelus, as being the least affected tribes. As part of this expedition one notes Michael Rockefeller, the son of the politician Nelson Rockefeller, who later disappeared on site, presumably drowned, and of course the author of this book, whose ambition it was to document the daily life of the tribesman, very much in the nature of a novel, the writing reminds you of D.G.Lawrence, although without a plot. Thus the reading becomes very tedious, that although a lot of things are happening, they do not add up to a story; on the other hand the cumulative effect of all those things piled on top of each other nevertheless gives you a fair idea of what life might be in a Stone Age society, as far as we are able to appreciate it. The book, apart from a brief preface, gives no indication of how the interaction was effected. Supposedly it concerns two seasons of the life in the villages, but the narrative discloses no such division. In particular there are no dates given, intentionally of course to emphasize the timeless nature of life, close to the equator, where no seasons naturally divide the year. How did they live among them? How many were there? Too many and their interaction would have a major effect. As concomitant with the expedition a filmed documentary was made, as was very common at the time, necessitating quite a crew. How did they communicate? Obviously through interpreters but did someone like Matthiessen himself pick up enough Dani vocabulary to be able to speak to people directly if primitively? Furthermore the account is supposedly not fictional, although for obvious reasons the account is edited, and as the author admits, in order not to burden the reader with too many names and characters, some of the latter are fused. In an account like this literal truth is not a major issue, we are not talking about a crime investigation, in which it is crucial to know the what and whereabouts of every person involved. Furthermore, at the time at least, knowledge about the origins of those tribes were scant not to say non-existent. Oral tradition giving no clue. Given the rate of erosion, as the people practice a slash and burn economy may indicate that their tenure may not have been very long. Now it is assumed that New Guinea was subjected to two invasions, one concomitant with that of Australia, some 60'000 years ago, and one rather later stemming from established populations in Australia. A remarkable thing is the great diversity of languages in New Guinea, a large percentage of languages actually spoken around the world are spoken within the narrow geographical confines of the island, although the largest island there is not covered with ice¹. Finally the book gives no indication of the overall mission of the expedition, a mission one surmises went beyond the mere writing of the authors account as well as the filmed documentary, but also involved so called scientific anthropological work of a more systematic nature. A visit to the Peabody museum at Harvard² may shed some light.

What is striking about the account? A Stone Age society is for one thing very structured, it is simply not true that civilization impose more regulations and that in a primitive

¹ For all that we know, Greenland may consist of many different islands, all under the same sheet of ice

² opposite which I lived in a Harvard graduate dorm for almost two years and never, much to my latter chagrin, visited, in spite of seeing all those tour-buses from all over the States parked outside. Especially the glass-flower exhibition was legendary. I never saw it, as admittedly opposed to some other exhibits I inspected briefly with my American wife prior to a trip to Mexico and Guatemala during the Christmas break of 74-5.

society you are freer to act. In an uncivilized society social life is paramount, there is no life outside the closely knit tribe. In other words there is no civil life, an individual is wholly dependent on the good will of his peers, if you have no family and no friends your situation is perilous indeed. You can escape your tribe and flee to another one. This is fraught with danger, and you may get killed in the process, in case you are not accepted by the other. The truly solitary individual, can only exist in a highly civilized and tolerant society. But even so, the socially isolated individual, is seldom a happy one, it going against human nature, whatever is meant by that. The structure consists in that the society is hierarchical, and with a clear division in the lives of women and men. In the society under investigation, clearly men have more power than women, if for no other reasons than superior physical strength. In particular they have the right to beat up their wives, if occasions should occur. More significantly a man may have many wives, although a woman may only have one husband. In practice this means that there will be many men with no wives, while women can be more or less assured to have a husband, no matter how poor and ugly they may be. The status of a man is shown by the number of wives he has as well as the number of pigs, but those are only the manifestations of status, not their source. The real value of a man has to do with his valor, namely his physical bravery in combat. A man who performs well in battle, and who has killed many people of the enemy tribes, (it does not matter whether in face to face battle or in ambush, neither if the victim is a man or a defenseless child or woman), has acquired status as a *kain* and is regarded as a leader. Those who shy away from violence, who do not participate in war, are looked down upon as worthless, and referred to as *kepu*. They seldom get any wives to marry, nor do they necessarily get a redress if suffered an injury, as having a wife taken, or pigs, unless a *kain* takes pity on them. Thus some men, by virtue of their martial daring or physical attributes, deemed to be related to the former, become very attractive to women, who after all, one surmises, seem to have a say in the matter of husbands. Thus it seems to be mainly the men who give way to innate vanities and are very conscious of their appearances as to attract the women, not unlike colorful male birds strutting in front of the muted females. Of course something similar goes on in modern society if not as plumply³. The men are concerned about removing body hair, except chin beards, to grease themselves with fat in order to gleam in the sun, and to make up their faces with natural paint to look fearsome. It seems that the wars among the tribes serve no other purpose than to give an opportunity to the men to show their valor. In particular it serves no economic purpose, and as far as one may see from the book, territorial conquest is not an issue. The wars are conducted in ritual manner, and are not as deadly as more civilized wars are. In fact they look more like sports events, but of course with the intermittent casualty. Every death should be avenged, making sure that the cycle of killing will not stop, and in that aspect the exchanges between hostile camps are not that different from classical feuds even in Western society, where one death has to be followed by a revenge. Now it seems that war and violence are simply the outcomes of boredom. This is an important issue in a primitive (and not so primitive) society, where do you find excitement? The quotidian life does not provide too much distraction. There is little hunting going on, as the forests seem depleted of large game. What is left is foraging and cultivating sweet

³ The fashion among western men was until the 19th century quite extravagant

potatoes, which seems to be the staple food, along with pigs, the tending of which make up most of the activities. Thus pig-stealing becomes a past-time, but as it may be engaged in by everyone, one has to be on ones guard, and mutual hostilities means that walking around, straying too far from the village compounds, is dangerous, hence the system of *kaios* - look-outs - erected everywhere, manned by guards to sound the alarm. One is also struck with the great differences in personalities among the individuals, something that endows social intercourse with tension and dynamics. There is no system of justice, because such would need to be implemented by sufficient transpersonal authority, which does not exist in such societies, what comes in its stead is partly an intuitive and instinctive common sense of justice, as well as certain traditions. Ultimately you need a strong man to provide the authority, and here we have of course the proto-king whose authority has to be earned and compliant with the general sense of justice.

Now killing if socially sanctioned is not a crime. This is why we look at horror and disgust at the solitary serial-killer, while we admire the general or the head of state, who may be guilty of far more killings. In Stone Age Society a killer is feared, and thus when there are individuals who have shown their valor in an exaggerated way, and one such example is given from the enemy tribe, where someone has killed hundred of victims, far more than the general course of ritual warfare would have provided the opportunity, the society does not know how to deal with it. Such feats are of course superhuman, and thus psychopathological.

So we are treated to long, rather tedious list, of sundry activities, involving quarrels, wives deserting husbands, thefts, ambushes, building of sheds, tending pigs, preparing fields for cultivations, warfare, and more importantly feast of which funerals play an important role. One tragic example is that of a little boy caught in an ambush and speared to death. Not dying immediately but lingering on, his demise inadvertently hastened by being taking down to the river, where he is allowed to bleed to death from his deep spear wounds, the flowing water making coagulation impossible. A big funeral ensues, with a lot of visitors and wailing, tears flowing in a profusion only practice may make perfect. A funeral is a social affair in which there are unwritten rules as who should attend, for how long, and which kind of gifts should be exchanged. Concomitant with grief is the tradition of cutting off the finger tips of young sisters as a manifestation of grief, a kind of modest human sacrifice, but nevertheless barbaric.

The tribal people benefit from no medical services, apart from traditional cures effected by medicine men, whose effectiveness is up for doubt. One does expect a high level of infant mortality, as is still the norm in the Third World, but otherwise the ability of the human body to heal itself should not be underestimated, still even in advanced societies, general health is less due to medical intervention than a less hazardous environment. People reaching puberty are probably as healthy, maybe even more so than in the West, they are definitely stronger, but the life style eventually takes its toll. In the mid-thirties youth is definitely over, and old age may enter in the forties, and few may survive into their mid-fifties. As noted, the teeth of most people are permanently covered with dried mucus, as a result of chronic respiratory infections, which although no doubt being of only marginal inconvenience, eventually must weaken the system.

As already noted, no plot, and thus no climax, nor anything to structure your memory

along. But anyway, as already remarked, the relentless documentation of daily events gives at least the illusion of a realistic sense of existence. In a way our own lives in civilized society, although stuffed with events, are guided by no plot, and thus in retrospect seen as just one damned thing after another.

January 8, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se