



# West Papua Free!!

Frans Welman

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Land of 700 peoples colonized by Dutch and abandoned by the international community. Now colonized by Indonesia.

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## PROLOGUE

Wondered about that land years ago on that dreary, rainy and misty day in the middle of summer I thought of West Papua and. Of course I knew about it, the Dutch had tried to hold on to it after the Indonesians achieved Merdeka (Freedom) from the Netherlands in 1949; a freedom had bitterly fought against the stubborn Dutch Police, actions against the natives of the land. The Dutch had to concede and in 1963 they finally they did, but not Irian Jaya as the Indonesians called the western half of the big island north of Australia. West Papua is the name the Peoples themselves name their homeland and because the Dutch promised the Papuans their own Freedom and stood by them after Indonesian Merdeka, something was brewing. This was because of Soekarno, the first president of Free Indonesia, who to achieve a sense of unity in diversity among the Peoples of the archipelago of more than 10.000 islands, wanted to confront the enemies of the young nation so the feeling of being part of one Nation would be borne. This in itself was not an easy task for he had Aceh on North Sumatra, the Moluccas, Peoples of Borneo, Timor and others to deal with, Peoples who wanted to be free of domination by the Javanese. Holding on to what Soekarno believed belonged to Indonesia led to a war over West Papua in the early sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between the Netherlands and Indonesia. But there was more then. Threatening Malaysia was another idea to create a common enemy and so to get the Peoples back home together, under one umbrella, to stimulate nation building. But confronting the Dutch was clearly the most important for the then Indonesian leaders. After all the Netherlands had been profiting from Indonesia for a very long time and the self conscious leaders headed by Soekarno wanted to show that all former colonial islands and Peoples belonged to Free Indonesia. Because aside from the Dutch other outsiders were after Indonesia's natural resources and labor, its assets, the Indonesian leaders had to be vigilant and set the example: **Konfrontasi**

(Confrontation).

The Papuans did not want to have anything to do with the Indonesia and because Soekarno knew that it was practically impossible to drive the Dutch out; they had the Papuans behind them, he put pressure by threatening with war. While during colonial times already plans had been formed to shift people from the densely populated areas of Java to other places and the **transmigrasi**, transmigration, the Dutch architects had Borneo and West Papua in mind to transfer people to.

Before the Dutch arrived on the scene the Peoples of West Papua were completely self reliant, self sustaining and lived in splendid isolation. The tribes of the highlands were the last to be 'discovered' and the Dutch observed how well they lived in their own environment. The lowland Peoples had adapted to their forests for thousands of years but were detected much earlier. Among themselves, there was hardly any communication because they very rarely met, but when they did it more often than not there was confrontation as a result. Consequently almost all tribes developed their own culture and language. In fact, a tribe hardly ever ventured outside its own valley and certainly not as far as the low or highlands. The Dutch however explored the land; they sent 'administrators to control but also missionaries to Christianize the Peoples West Papua.. Exploration proved that the lands of the Papuans harbored quite a few sought after minerals. Later, under Indonesian rule, copper and gold exploitation began. But the Dutch already knew there was much more than these two valuable metals.

Though the Indonesian army could not make much headway against the Dutch and were close to defeat, the Dutch abandoned the Papuans they had promised self rule. They signed the treaty or agreement of New York which the United Nations, UN, under the strong suggestion of the United States of America, had composed. The Papuans felt abandoned indeed; more so when what they feared indeed happened. The Dutch signed the agreement under the condition that the UN would hold free elections to be organized by

Indonesia, a referendum through which the Papuans could express if they wanted to be independent or wanted to be part of Indonesia. That referendum was held seven years after the agreement was signed and could not fairly because the Indonesians prompted the 'transmigrasi' project into active action by send thousands of Javanese to West Papua, then called Irian Jaya. The Indonesians hoped the Papuans were going to be outnumbered and to stimulate aspiration it worked on a political infrastructure so it could rule the Papuans. A governor was installed in Hollandia, renamed Sukarnopura, and later Jayapura and from there into practically every village. This was quite alien to the native ways of self government. Adding to that were the thousands of migrants who were allocated land to grow their crops. Geologists came to explore the assets of the earth. This was the picture Indonesia painted as it groomed the far away province so it would become the cow to be milked plus it would solve the population problem to an extent in the process entire.

Due to the tribal isolation the Papuans were not united then and because of terrain and lack of communication it would be difficult to become united. Though furious about what happened to them, tribes were not capable of resisting; they were used to deal with problems locally. Small but democratic states they were devoid of autocrats dictating a tribe on what to do. Villages were like mini states which had jurisdiction as far as their land reached. Because many of the villages or within tribes were not on friendly footing with each other, disputes ended easily in ritual wars. A national feeling did not exist because most tribes did not know the extent of the island. Only when aliens, strangers, powerful soldiers followed in the footsteps of adventurers missionaries, the colonizers brought a sense of belonging with them. First the colonizers opened up the land up and so the Peoples, tribes, slowly began to relate to each other. When roads were being built and planes began to fly a tremendous change in perception took place, one that had all the makings of confusion too. To illustrate this I tell about what

I experienced myself once on the other side of Papualand, Papua New Guinea or PNG and since 1975 independent from Australia. I was just outside Goroka, a small town in the highlands of PNG where I met an old man. His village was on a hill near the airport and as we talked while watching planes touching down or lifting off, I asked him how he felt about what life in the highlands when he grew up. He looked at me as he thought of how to answer me and shook his head thoroughly. Then he told me this story with such flabbergasting ease, yet with so much dept of misunderstanding and misrelating that I found it hard to believe he really meant what he had said. Enjoying the panoRomic view from the village stood one had a panoRomic view of the field and sitting before his self styled home he said:

## CARGO CULT

“It must have been fifty years ago since I saw the first white man climbed up. He endured hardships I do not understand because he had been passing several tribes we did not know existed. It took weeks or maybe months to come to my village. According to him that is when we were discovered. He stayed with us for a while and we accommodated him. He was a fine man, like a God for in our historical tales there was a godlike creature that would save us when in trouble. But we were not in trouble, but still we thought we would be saved. After he left soon more men appeared and brought goods with them we could not believe; we never saw them before. Some of them told us, of course after they learned our language, about a religion and they sent other people back to where they came from who had papers. When they returned they brought all kinds of things they had written on the papers. We believe that they could get anything they pleased and just had to send a paper to get it. They did not work; they did not grow their food. And so we believed then that this was a Godlike thing and so we became Christians. In return the missionaries, as they called themselves, wanted us to do things for them. They asked us to cover ourselves. We had never done that before, but were happy to do what they asked of us, especially when the clothes they gave us warmed us. Before that we warmed ourselves from the cold mornings and evenings pig’s fat on our bodies. But now, though we thought we looked ridiculous, the clothes drove away the cold. This was more than 50 years ago young man!” he smiled seriously. Peering at me then for a while as in trying to fathom if his story hit me, he suddenly continued:

“During the years more and more of us became Christians and were wearing clothes like the ones I have on me now. We made peace with the tribes around us and through the missionaries we developed an idea of brotherhood amongst our highland peoples. The missionaries encouraged us to grow things we could sell,

so we could have things we do not make ourselves. In turn they arranged those things; we paid for that from what we sold, to be sent to us. But where did those things come from we wondered. The missionaries did not encourage us to find out, but we Papuans are curious people so in the end they could not stop us when some of us sneaked out and left the village to follow the people taking the route down. They ended up in Port Moresby or Hollandia. There they saw with their own eyes that large cargoes came from big ships. The ships were so large we could not believe they were there, but we saw them with our own eyes. Also we saw the goods coming out of the bowels of these enormous ships. What we saw we brought as a story stories and so it became a cult, the cargo cult because many had never seen, only heard, so they thought the powerful missionaries could order ships to come with what they; goods for us too now. The only thing we had to do was to change something of what we grow for something the missionaries wanted, coffee for instance. This is how it became. Years later and something else happened, something I could not understand. And still cannot.

“Listen,” he said before continuing as he looked at me straight, “I told you the missionaries wanted us to cover ourselves. We did, I told you that too and we understood it was just to keep us warm, but it was also to hide what we look like. The clothes were meant to be ashamed of ourselves. They called it civilized and no nudity was allowed, not while among other people. The white men told us that naked bodies are dirty and sinful to go without clothes. Wearing a G-string or a penis shaft was bad. These men were powerful you know, very powerful. Just using a pen they could get people to bring goods from far away,” he smiled as he peered into my eyes again like he wanted to feel how his words had come across. His questioned me with his eyes, then with words: “Do you believe? Do you know how it felt when these people came to us in friendship but used strange messages?” he asked looked deadly serious as he frowned in silence. I looked back and calmly waited for him to continue. When convinced his words were taken

seriously he continued:

“They once brought me too the coast. There I saw those big ships with my own eyes. There were many different of people there but it was not a village I tell you that. I met other Papuans there too. They looked the same as us but were very different; they were high- and lowlanders. Some had gone with the white men on their ships and they told me stories I could not believe. Now it is many years later and I am an old man so I must tell you what I do not understand. Of course what I saw then was shocking enough and to my people too. All what the white men brought was enormous and so it was no wonder that many of us, from other tribes too, were thinking that the white men could do anything. We believed that they could order their cargos and they would come.” He said as he paused a moment, his eyes going inward like he searching for something, not just words, but to unlock an emotion befitting his unbelief in relation to the inconsistencies in thinking he encountered.

“You see,” he continued, “you may have heard about the Mount Hagen and Goroka singsings. Goroka and Mount Hagen are the most important towns in the highlands. You know that, but the singsings are organized yearly and, not like before, spontaneous feasts. You know that a singsing is a celebration, a feast, a festival, a highlight within a village, or on a larger scale, a tribe, right?. There is nothing against tribes coming together to show their culture, not a thing. But you tell me now how to relate that to the missionaries who told us to wear clothes but nowadays, since the last decade, tourists are telling us to be singsings wearing our traditional attires. I could not understand anything of this, but think of this: as a young man I was told to put on clothes I was not familiar with; not only me of course. Now that I am an old man I am told to undress again and return to the cultural ways I was brought up with. The people telling me this look the same, so you tell me now what to believe in?”

He looked at me but with a face telling me he did not expect me to answer. I empathized with him for I realized that in the course

of just one lifetime, this man had gone through several cultural and religious changes. He was forced to go through them if only by changing circumstances or he abided voluntarily. It was odd indeed:

“Man,” I said, “this is quite surprising, “you could not know the world of these new people came from has adventurers, missionaries and traders/merchants and so you are right and some of these white men had the urge to convert people to their religion and their culture. They imposed conditions on you like wearing clothes. But nowadays people of the countries of the white men can travel. They go on holiday because they want to see and experience people of other cultures. They want to see what you gave up; they want to see your people in your traditional ways. But, instead of waiting for a natural singing they will ask you and pay you to perform for them. They have no time to wait, but want to experience a cultural highlight, they want to be entertained.”

“Yeah they do that, they give money for the dances.”

“And they want to see the authentic Papuans, the real Papuans, not the Christianized Papuan that wears shorts and boots like the Australians do. They want to see Papuans who paint their bodies or wear mud masks and headdresses,” I said as I saw him nodding.

“Now it feels ridiculous when I put on tribal adornments band but I feel Papuan. It is so strange,” he said, “perhaps I feel so strange because I have been told so many times been to be ashamed in my tribal attire?”

“I am quite sure that may be it,” I empathized “you do not feel shame when amongst yourselves. Then you feel you are part of the village or tribe and you feel free.”

“Yes,” he answered, “but even more so because it does not feel real. When I have to put on my tribal things to show myself to outsiders, it feels like I am putting it on for them, not for me or us. The tribal feeling comes we are amongst ourselves and when we celebrate. Then we do not put on a show, but we are together. We throw out modern clothes and if we dance and sing at night, we us pig fat again,” he said, now in smiles because that feeling