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A Paper read before the Pan-Pacific Science Congress in 1929, by Sir Hubert Murray, K.C.M.G., Lieutenant-Governor of Papua

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KON. BAT. GENOOTSCHAP VAN K. EN W.

The Response of the Natives of Papua to Western Civilization.

The Primitive must Respond or Perish.

THREE races of mankind, the white, the red, and the black, met in America. The white man gave the others the choice of slavery or death; and the red man chose death and the black man slavery.* In other words the black man responded to the stress of altered circumstances, and the red man did not. This gruesome precedent teaches that the Papuan too must respond to the stimulus of Western civilization, or he too will die, engulfed in the maelstrom of economic and cultural progress which has suddenly swept upon him. I should be sorry to think that the only alternative was slavery; but death is the certain penalty if he refuses to adapt himself to the change.

Difficulty of Understanding Primitive People.

It can very seldom happen that a man of European race and culture can know a primitive people well enough to be able to describe their response to our civilization; the best that most of us can hope to do is to seize upon a few isolated instances, and to endeavour, in a tentative way, to draw conclusions from them. It has been said that there is a close resemblance between the Indonesia of the present day and the Europe of the Middle Ages, and, if we wish to realize the difficulties which surround a study of Indonesian culture, we have only to remember how desperately hard it is to grasp the spirit of the Middle Ages,

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*Bruce. "Broad Stone of Empire." Vol. I., p. 387.

in spite of the libraries of books that have been written about them. Still more difficult is it to understand the Papuan, who corresponds more or less closely to the man of the early neolithic culture.

"Thinking Black."

And it seems to me that in the attempted application of anthropology to the art of government there is always this difficulty, that we are inclined to treat questions both of anthropology and of administration as if they were merely matters of academic interest; with the result that we cannot really put ourselves in the place of the native whose welfare is at stake, though we may like to persuade ourselves that we can. I have friends in Papua whom I have seen "reacting" to the stimulus of an alien civilization practically everyday for the last twenty years, and, apparently, "reacting" very favourably, but I cannot claim to have any clear idea of the nature or extent of their "reaction." But I know that they, and the Papuans generally, have a difficult task before them; for, in order that they may give a full and favourable response, they must begin by knowing something about us, a people as different from themselves, both outwardly and inwardly, as it is possible for human beings to be. The appreciation of an alien culture is a task which is hardly accomplished even with the aid of books, newspapers and other records; I cannot even guess how hard it may be to a race that cannot read.

We know that the gift of "thinking black" is a rare gift, bestowed on very few;* but is it more difficult than the art of "thinking white," which the native must master if he is to give a fitting "reaction" to our alien stimulus?

Reaction is Mutual.

Of course, as the native "reacts" to us, we must, in however small a degree, "react" to him also. But it is we

*See e.g., Hartland, "Ritual and Belief," p. 24.

who call the tune; the native must dance to it, for we, as the stronger race, demand far more adaptation from him than we ever dream of giving ourselves. It has been said that the first effect of the meeting of the primitive and the white man is the demoralization of both parties, and this seems to be true enough; the primitive meets a superior being against whom his best protection is deceit, and the white man, who perhaps never had a dog to order about before he left home, suddenly finds himself with servants ready to do his bidding.* The result is likely to be deplorable in the case of both; the one tends to become a sneak and the other a bully.

Still the white man and the primitive have to live together, and they must accommodate themselves to the situation. But the position is far more difficult for the latter than for the former, for it is on the primitive that the chief burden of adaptation lies, and it is he who, from his ignorance, is the less capable of bearing it.

The story of the mutual adaptation is sometimes a brutal, a bloodstained, and a very sordid one; but in the particular case of Papua it has been less so than in some other parts of the world. This is due partly to the fact that our early settlers were on the whole a law-abiding lot of men, and partly to the fact that during the last century a great change came over our attitude towards native races, and the European settlement in Papua, or (as it was then) British New Guinea, did not begin until the change had been for some time in operation. Consequently in Papua we have been spared that bitter hostility, followed by sullen resignation, that has been found in some other places.

Differences between Primitive Culture and Our Own.

Now what is the nature of this stimulus which I have mentioned—the stimulus applied to an inferior race by the sudden impact of our civilization? What are the outstanding differences between the two cultures, our own and

*See Willoughby, "Problems of the New Africa," p. 228.

the Papuan? Well of course ours is a grander and finer culture altogether; our civilization is more stately, more spacious and more massive than anything the Papuan could possibly conceive; our national and political ideas cannot be comprehended by him, his art is rudimentary in the extreme, science for him is magic, and for him literature does not exist. Thus one may say that, on the higher cultural plane, the Papuan and the European do not meet, except so far as the Papuan is induced to adopt the European religion, and that, with that exception, the Papuan makes no response at all on this higher plane. It is in the ordinary practical everyday life that the two cultures do meet, and there alone. And, if we had to compare the typical Australian or European with the Papuan, as they appear in this everyday life, we should say, I suppose, that the chief difference was that the former was characterized by superior energy, enterprise and industry; that the Papuan was inferior in these respects, that he was mediocre and undistinguished, and that he suffered from what has been called *la débilité de la personnalité*.

Also we might say that the white man had ideas of justice and government that the Papuan had never dreamt of. On the other hand we might be reminded that *der Handlende ist immer gewissenslos*, and it might be suggested that the white man is ruthless in the pursuit of economic advantage, and oppressive to those whom he has in his power; but these very unpleasant qualities would weigh but lightly in the balance against the murderous raids of the Papuan, his eternal vendetta, his cannibalism and his head hunting.

I have many good friends among the Papuans, in whose country I have lived for nearly 25 years, but I must admit that they had much to learn from the white man. The question is have they learnt it, and how? Certainly the lesson has been a hard one, and the invasion of Papua by our civilization has been accompanied by many disturbances of native life. These I may distinguish as (i) moral or psychical; and (ii) material. The material disturbance is seen clearly enough, in connection, chiefly, with the

introduction of metals and the establishment of peace; the moral or psychical can be traced in the breaking up of the old village life, the abandonment of the old customs and traditions, and the weakening of the *moral* of those who have to struggle through life without the protection which those customs and traditions afford.

Conscious and Unconscious Adjustment.

These disturbances in the life of the Papuan are caused by the reaction of his culture to ours, and by his attempt to adjust the one to the other; and the attempt at adjustment is either (i) conscious and intentional, or (ii) unconscious.

The conscious adjustment is largely, though not altogether, concerned with external matters, and is more obvious and more easily controlled than the unconscious adjustment. As instances I may mention such matters as the use of steel knives and axes instead of stones and shells, of sails made of canvas instead of bark and leaves, and the substitution generally of our implements for their own. And then on the spiritual plane we have the adoption of Christianity, and the eagerness to learn to read and write, and to master the English language; not, be it understood, the hideous jargon known as "pidgin English," but the ordinary conversational English, more or less undefiled, that is presented to the Papuan by the settler from Australia or elsewhere.

So far the influence is all to the good, but with the good comes the bad, for it must be admitted that the white man's example is not always edifying. And here I tread upon dangerous ground. I have lived for many years, and hope to live for many more, among the white men of Papua, and who am I that I should call attention to the less admirable of their qualities? Let me say then, in general, that white men are not always courteous in their manner, that their standards of art are not always of the highest, that there are other weak joints in the armour of their culture, and that the native is likely to imitate these weaknesses. Drunkenness, the worst, perhaps, of the

lessons that the inferior race has learned from the superior, has, fortunately, had little attraction for the Papuan. The white men of Papua are, as a rule, abstemious, but it would be idle to maintain that we are all teetotallers; consequently the native has had the opportunity to acquire habits of intemperance, but luckily he has had the sense to abstain. And it is possible that his powers of abstinence have been reinforced by the fact that he is severely punished even for having liquor in his possession. So, in the same way, the use of European clothes, which some observers consider the most harmful of all our gifts,* has never been so common as to constitute a danger; and here again the native conservatism of the Papuan is fortified by the prospect of fine or imprisonment if he is caught wearing European clothes without a permit.

The instances that I have given of conscious imitation are not intended to be exhaustive; they are merely illustrations. Most of them make for an increase of industrial efficiency and are calculated to lead to a higher civilization, but some of them have after effects which raise very serious, questions.

For instance the substitution of steel for stone enables the Papuan to do his work in much less time than it used to take, and in consequence his life, which in his native state was fairly well filled, has now become comparatively empty. The natives of the Northern Division are neither more nor less industrious than the average, and it has been calculated that a full day's work for a native of this Division may be taken as covering about 4 hours, including dances and festivals and preparations for them; and for a woman about the same. But when he had only stone implements, which he must make himself, and when he lived in a state of constant though intermittent warfare, the hours would be much longer.

* See e.g., the Reverend W. J. Durrad, "Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia," p. 7; Willoughby "Race Problems in the New Africa," p. 189.

Disintegration of Native Life.

And it is here that the great danger arises—the danger that the native, while responding fairly well to our civilization in all that makes life easier, may fail to respond to it at all, in so far as it supplies means for the profitable employment of the time saved from the long hours of labour, that were formerly necessary for the maintenance of village life.

It is as true now as it was in the days of Dr. Watts that "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do," and this increase of leisure is to be deplored, unless the administration or the missions forestall the Evil One, and find some useful occupation to fill those empty hours. And it is at this critical point that we see the combined effects of all the attempts, both conscious and unconscious, that the native makes to adjust himself to his new environment. He has adopted our tools and abandoned village warfare, and so works quicker while at the same time he has less to do, and now he is led, often unconsciously, to the disintegration of village life by the abandonment of his old customs and traditions. Many of these customs are anti-social and have nothing to recommend them except that they are of interest to anthropologists; but others have a social value, and native life is the poorer for their loss. It is a commonplace among administrators nowadays that native customs, so far as they are not actually harmful, should be preserved; and this has always been our policy in Papua, though it was by no means a commonplace when the Australian Commonwealth assumed control in 1906. But, however hard you may try, it is impossible to preserve native custom in its entirety or in anything like its entirety. Its disappearance is part of the Papuans' "reaction" or response. Any administrator will agree that in a country like Papua every white man and woman has a solvent effect upon native life. Even the amateur anthropologist, who is loudest in his clamour for the preservation of native custom is, by the mere fact of his residence in the country, contributing his share towards that custom's dissolution.

Many, though by no means all, native customs must go, but the tragedy is that those which go first are often the best. It is a bad thing when a native loses interest in his canoe making or his gardening, and it may seem a paradox to say that it is still worse when he loses faith in the magic which controls those activities. But the Papuan other world is not wholly evil, and it is surely a calamity when the primitive loses all faith and all belief in a world of spirits, and finds nothing to put in its place. And just as the administration must find something either to stimulate or to take the place of his waning interest in his garden, so the missionary offers in Christianity something to fill the gap which has been left by the loss of the old superstitions, to rekindle the spiritual lights which our materialism has extinguished.

It is principally on account of this essential service that missions are held in such high esteem by all administrators of experience. Certainly, in the case of the Papuan, his "reaction" to our ideas is purely negative on the spiritual side; and it will remain negative, hiatus valde deflendus, unless active steps be taken to provide a new content.

Alleged Indolence of the Papuan.

It is natural that the primitive should adapt himself more readily to the use of new implements than to cultural changes, and the Papuan is certainly much quicker to make use of our steel axes and knives than to imitate those habits of industry by which the European has worked out his salvation. But the indolence of the Papuan can be easily exaggerated, and it is interesting to notice that he thinks that we are far lazier than he. "Do you think that you are a white man," one native has been heard say to another, "do you think that you are a white man that you sit there and do nothing?" The difference is that, while we reproach them with their indolence as a vice, they envy us ours as the result of a triumph over the obstinacy of the material world. Doubtless life in the tropics is not

conducive to superabundant energy, but nevertheless I think that the example of plantation life has taught the Papuan a lesson in industry, and the effect of sustained labour. The lesson is, I am aware, hardly learned and retained with difficulty, but I think that one sees evidence that it has not been wasted altogether.

Administration.

The administrative lesson has been still more difficult to learn. The Papuan had nothing to start from, for our natives, with but few exceptions, had little or no idea of a powerful chieftainship, or of tribal or even village administration, as we understand it. Native life was, in fact, ordered in a reasonably efficient manner, but how this was done is a matter of conjecture. Various explanations have been given, but they are all far removed from our own ideas of government.

We cannot say how far the Papuan, unaided, would have "reacted" to our methods of administration, or whether he would have "reacted" at all; for in this case we took the initiative, and forced our system upon him (of course in a very simple form) by the appointment of Village Constables to occupy the position which is, apparently, held by Chiefs elsewhere. The establishment of Village Constables, which was the work of Sir William MacGregor, may be taken as an assured success; but this cannot be accepted as evidence of a response to our ideas, for these Constables are really Government Officials, imposed from without, and backed by all the power and prestige of the government.

More important as evidence of such a response will be the success of the Village Councillors. These Councillors are selected by the Villagers themselves and are intended to give expression to village sentiment, which the Constable, as a Government Official, might be tempted to ignore. Gerontocracy was hardly known, even among our Melanesians, and if these Councillors are a success, as

I have no doubt they will be, they will afford an interesting example of the readiness and ability of the Papuan to respond to a form of government which was quite strange to him.

Courts of Law.

Courts of law are another alien institution. There have been a few sporadic instances of concerted punishment by a whole village, but there were no Courts. Usually there was no communal action at all; punishment was left to private vengeance, and a man with powerful friends could do pretty much as he liked. It has been said that the fear of the gallows is a much feebler deterrent than the fear of ghosts, but I do not think that this applies to the Papuan, who, in his native state, had little sense of personal guilt, and still less of personal responsibility. Indeed the strangest feature to him in our legal system was probably our theory of individual responsibility, and its striking contrast to his own system of "paying back," according to which a murder is sufficiently avenged by the death of one of the same village, or even of the same tribe, as the murderer. It speaks well for the receptivity of the Papuan that he should have accepted individual responsibility so readily as he has.

One may cavil and poke fun at what has been called *les chinoiseries de la justice occidentale*, but, imperfect as it is, it is surely better than the wild injustice of the "pay back," or the chance guess-work of the Papuan ordeal. And indeed our system of administering justice seems to have made a favourable impression on the Papuan, and one finds "Courts" being held in an informal way among the Papuans themselves. These "Courts" have of course no power of enforcing their decisions, beyond what sanction they may draw from public opinion, but they seem to have an attraction of their own. It would be possible to mistake them for a survival from the days before European settlement; they are, however, not a survival, but an imitation.

KON. BAT. GENOOTSCHAP VAN

Social Response.

Socially I think that the Papuan has hardly responded at all with the exception of those living in mission compounds, or under white supervision elsewhere. European influence might be expected to affect marriage more than any other department of native life, for instance by regulating or prohibiting divorce, by substituting monogamy for polygamy, and so forth. But in Papua polygamy was rarely practised on a large scale. There was no looting of women from hostile villages, for all were killed impartially, women as well as men and children, there were few powerful chiefs or rich men, and the women did not exceed the men in numbers. There were in fact barely enough women to go round. Mr. Stone, who visited Port Moresby in 1875, says that it was the exception for the *Motu* to have more than one wife. There was a strict rule of monogamy in the Eastern part of the Gulf of Papua, and, I believe, in a few other places, but generally speaking there seems to have been no fixed practice one way or the other. Christian Papuans have of course only one wife, but those who are not Christians have not been affected by their example. The government of course is neutral and does not interfere at all.

Personally I am glad that the social response has not been more ready, for it is on the social side that European influence is likely to be harmful. It is obvious that the Papuan might learn many useful lessons from our social life, but unfortunately the primitive races always seem to find our bad qualities much more fascinating than the good. For instance our ideas of personal chastity, of the sanctity of family life, and so forth have but a moderate attraction for the ordinary native; it is rather on our looser and less reputable side that the primitive finds our example so difficult to resist. So far as Papuans are concerned I am inclined to think that neither our good nor our bad example has had much effect upon them socially. They are in this respect very conservative; the social life of the Port Moresby villages has varied little, if at all, during the years that I have lived here, and I doubt if it

has varied much since the Protectorate was established in in the year 1884. It has to some extent been purified by religion and regulated by law, but in its general features it has remained the same.

Occasionally however one does get a glimpse of a change, and of a change for the better. A few days ago, for instance, a native of Port Moresby was talking to me on the absorbing subject of pigs, and he expressed genuine and utter abhorrence at the conduct of some of his fellow villagers who kept their pigs under their houses—"living just like animals" he said. Formerly this practice would not have excited comment.

General Response of the Papuan.

The response of the Papuan is shallow, incomplete and superficial compared with that of more advanced races elsewhere; but it is nevertheless better than we could reasonably have expected, seeing that our Government is hardly more than a generation old, and that less than 50 years ago the Papuan was everywhere, as he still is in many places, simply a stone age savage.

Four Dominant Principles Distinguishing the West from the East.

Professor van Eerde,* following Professor Ramsay Muir, enumerates four dominant principles which he says, characterize the Western world as distinguished from the Eastern. These are, to paraphrase his more precise phraseology, (i) the rights of the individual; (ii) the universal application of law; (iii) the voluntary submission of the individual to the rule of order; and (iv) Parliamentary self-determination. The rights of the individual and the universality of law will appeal to the Papuan—indeed they appeal to him already—but the other two principles will, I think, always leave him cold. I doubt if he will ever respond at all to these, and I do not think that it matters much if he does not; we must take the risk and try to get him along without them. Faith and courage are essential to a successful native administration. *Du musst glauben, du musst wagen*, or your administration will be a failure; and we in Papua have faith that the Papuans, even if they refuse to respond to the latest political theories, will eventually, under guidance, develop into a people who will appreciate and adjust themselves to the best that we have to offer to them.

*"Ethnologie coloniale," p. 8.

Response of the Papuan Generally Beneficial.

It is true that there are ways in which the Papuan's response may, in the future, be for evil rather than for good, with results that may make for his spiritual undoing. And it is the duty of an administrator to recognize these possibilities without being afraid of them. The Papuan is in a transition stage. He is crossing the gulf which divides the Stone Age from the twentieth Century, and it would be foolish to ignore the dangers that surround his path. Many of the old traditions that regulated native life will leave him at last, however long their departure may be delayed by the efforts which we make for their preservation, and they may be gone before their place can be adequately filled by the influences which we hope will succeed them. Then it is to be supposed that the excitement of tribal warfare finds but a milk-and-water substitute in the mimic battle of the football field, our policy of creating village industries is rarely recognized as a genuine attempt to relieve the monotony and the poverty of village life, there is, in some districts, a disheartening and apparently inexplicable decrease of population, and one finds traces in a few, but fortunately only in a very few, parts of the Territory of a feeling of depression, almost akin to despair, arising apparently from a presentiment that there will be no room for the Papuan in the new world of steel and machinery that is pressing upon him.

I have purposely dwelt upon the dark side of the picture, and have even painted it blacker than it really is; but the Papuan's response has generally speaking not been

such as to justify any gloomy forebodings, and has, on the whole, been favourable and not unintelligent. There is no reason to suppose that the total native population has ever declined, in spite of occasional severe epidemics, and there is evidence that it is slightly increasing. The native response to the material side of our culture has been satisfactory. Gardens are better and bigger, thanks to our steel implements, native coastal communication and trade is faster and better, thanks to our boat building and navigation, native plantations are more skilfully laid out and planted, thanks to lessons learned from the white man, village sanitation is better, thanks to our teaching, and native life is safer, thanks to the spread of the *pax Britannica*, and its general acceptance by the natives. And there is at least one thing that we can say for the Papuan, and that is that he shows no tendency to develop into that truly awful creature, that terrible parody of our civilization, the black man who pretends to be white.

Fear of Sorcerers and Evil Spirits.

There are a certain number of eccentrics who can see no good in the white man's culture, and no evil in the native's; these people have rarely had any experience of natives, but, if they had, they would realize at least one beneficent and far-reaching effect which European civilization has had upon these races. And that is the deliverance of the native from that agony of fear which pervaded his life, and which in Papua, through the influence of the government, the missions, and the white residents generally, is dying out in the more settled districts. I do not mean mere ordinary physical fear, I refer to that unreasoning and devastating terror which comes from the belief in evil spirits and sorcerers. I never realized what fear really meant until I saw it in the eyes of a native who dreaded the vengeance of the sorcerer; and I do not think that the superior persons who scoff at missions have any idea of the good work that the missions in particular are doing in banishing this awful curse. To say that they are merely substituting one form of sorcery for another is quite

beside the point. Whether Christianity is true or false has nothing to do with the question; there remains the actual fact that the introduction of Christianity makes all the difference to the Papuan, for it delivers him from the horror of this great fear. Papuan like African life is "demon haunted, crowded with known and unknown terrors"; and disbelief in these, in Papua as in Africa, is "the mark of a Christian."*

The feeling of depression which I have mentioned is quite a different matter. This depression will pass, because it is a part of the general strain and stress of the reaction to our civilization; it will not be felt by future generations, who will be born into the new environment and will respond to it more easily. This has been the general experience of the Pacific, and it will be the experience of Papua also.

Racial Pride.

If a race of beings, as superior to ourselves as we are to the Papuan, should suddenly appear, claim our allegiance, and impose upon us a civilization in which we could only play the humblest parts, I conceive that the best of us would prefer death to submission. But, fortunately for us, the Papuan is not so minded. Probably the best of the Papuans have at first been tempted to resist our advance, but, when resistance proved hopeless, as it does very soon in this contest of rifles against sticks and stones, we do not find that the men who opposed us are harder to reconcile than the rest. The absence of racial pride is however a disadvantage to the Papuan on the whole, just as its excess is a danger to us. Village pride exists and has occasionally served the cause of civilization, as for instance in checking cannibalism,† and if we could exalt it into a national or territorial pride it might be capable of great things. But this is for the future. For the present we must be satisfied to work with such qualities as we find the Papuan to possess, and we must not ask too much, or expect too ready a response from these savages of yesterday.

*See Leys "Kenya," p. 240.
†See my "Papua or New Guinea," p. 173.