

Questioning Collapse

*Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability,
and the Aftermath of Empire*

Edited by

PATRICIA A. McANANY

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

NORMAN YOFFEE

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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Excusing the Haves and Blaming the Have-Nots in the Telling of History

Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz*

We admit to being chauvinists of anthropology. We respect our discipline because of what it demands as well as what it can provide. In effect, anthropology insists that to understand people in other places and in different times – to understand what they want and seek – we must often scrutinize our own understandings, our own (often early) responses and appraisals. Anthropology urges us – and helps us – to examine our own taken-for-granted ideas about why and how people act: our ideas about human nature, about the causes and objectives of human action, about the ways people intend one thing to follow from another, about how and why people engage in collective action. We must recognize that not everyone in the world has the same objectives as (many) contemporary Americans, wanting and seeking the same sorts of things as we do. This is to say, we must be aware of historical and cultural context. We must recognize that our own desires and lives, like the desires and lives of others elsewhere, are historically and culturally constructed. To think about such things, which is to say, to think not only about how differently located others think and live, but also about how we think and live, can be a sobering, if not a daunting, experience. However, working hard – taking care – to get such matters relatively right can be very much worth doing, both intellectually liberating and politically significant.

In this chapter we would like to illustrate why examining our taken-for-granted explanations is both intellectually liberating and politically significant. To this end, we take as our topic the ways in which

a famous biologist, Jared Diamond, has sought to explain human history in his two major and widely read books, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and *Collapse*, which has been less generally praised, but praised nonetheless.¹ From our anthropological perspective, these books, while in many ways impressive and compelling, are problematic. We should make it clear at the outset that we discuss Diamond's books because they have become such popular and influential examples of a more general trend in the telling of history. This is a trend that, in basing history on what appear to be common-sense (Western) suppositions, makes complex political processes into simple, inevitable laws – laws that absolve (those Diamond calls) the “haves” from any real responsibility for oppressing (and creating) the “have nots.” It is a history that may justify expansionism as an expression of legitimate self-interest. It is a history that, for example, allows many of us to celebrate Thanksgiving without pondering much about why Native Americans have significantly less to be thankful for. It is a history that links manifest destiny at home to shock and awe policies abroad. And it is a history that may serve to render the “have-nots” into a bunch of left-behind losers who resent (if not hate) the “haves” out of envy.

ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA: DESIRE WITHIN A COLONIAL CONTEXT

In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond begins by addressing a plaintive question posed by a local political leader he encountered on a Papua New Guinea beach in the early 1970s. Yali, active as a so-called cargo-cultist in the region around Madang, asked Diamond, “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo [items of Western manufacture] and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?”² Diamond answers this question by presenting the seemingly inevitable and inexorable unfolding of global patterns. These patterns, he believes, are the result of the geographical differences that allowed certain people to have the power of guns, germs, and steel on their side, power that they would (apparently) always use to maximal effect in the domination of others. It has been the use of this power – a power that stems from the luck-of-the-environmental draw – that Diamond argues has accounted for “history’s haves and have-nots.”³

Diamond assumes that Yali was upset primarily because he wanted more "cargo" – more Western stuff. But we are not so sure.⁴ In fact, we think it important to step back from a likely first response that "of course" Yali would value Western things and to wonder what he – as a "have-not" – might have actually sought. We also think it important to ask why, living as he did during the mid-twentieth century, was Yali unable to get whatever it was that he wanted from the "haves" – mostly Australian colonists. After all, he had long lived among these colonists and had served them with great distinction during World War II.

We never met Yali. Consequently we do not know for sure what he meant in his question to Diamond. However, we have made numerous research trips to Papua New Guinea (beginning in 1968 for Fred and 1973 for Deborah) and do know something of what other Papua New Guineans (including some who did know Yali) were asking for – and about – at the time. And, as well, we do know something of the way many anthropologists working in New Guinea (and elsewhere) have explained why people desire one thing or another. Below we convey these anthropological ideas about desire before we return to a consideration of Yali's question: of what he might have wanted and why he could not get it.

Most anthropologists argue that what people want tends to be socially constructed. In particular, they have found that what people ask for is shaped by their history and in turn shapes their history. This is to say, what people want is formed in the context of narratives: stories they are told and tell about the way the world works or might work, stories about what human beings might plausibly hope for.

Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, in a famous paper titled "The Decomposition of an Event," illustrates well such a social construction of desire in discussing those who were first contacted in the 1930s by Australian explorers in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea's interior.⁵ The Australians assumed that these Papua New Guineans were impressed with their complex technology – for example, guns and steel. Yet, in Strathern's view, possession of this novel technology initially marked these explorers as spirits, and, from the perspectives of Papua New Guinea Highlanders, the appearance of spirits among the living was extraordinary but ultimately not very consequential. Spirits, after all, would likely disappear without affecting social interactions

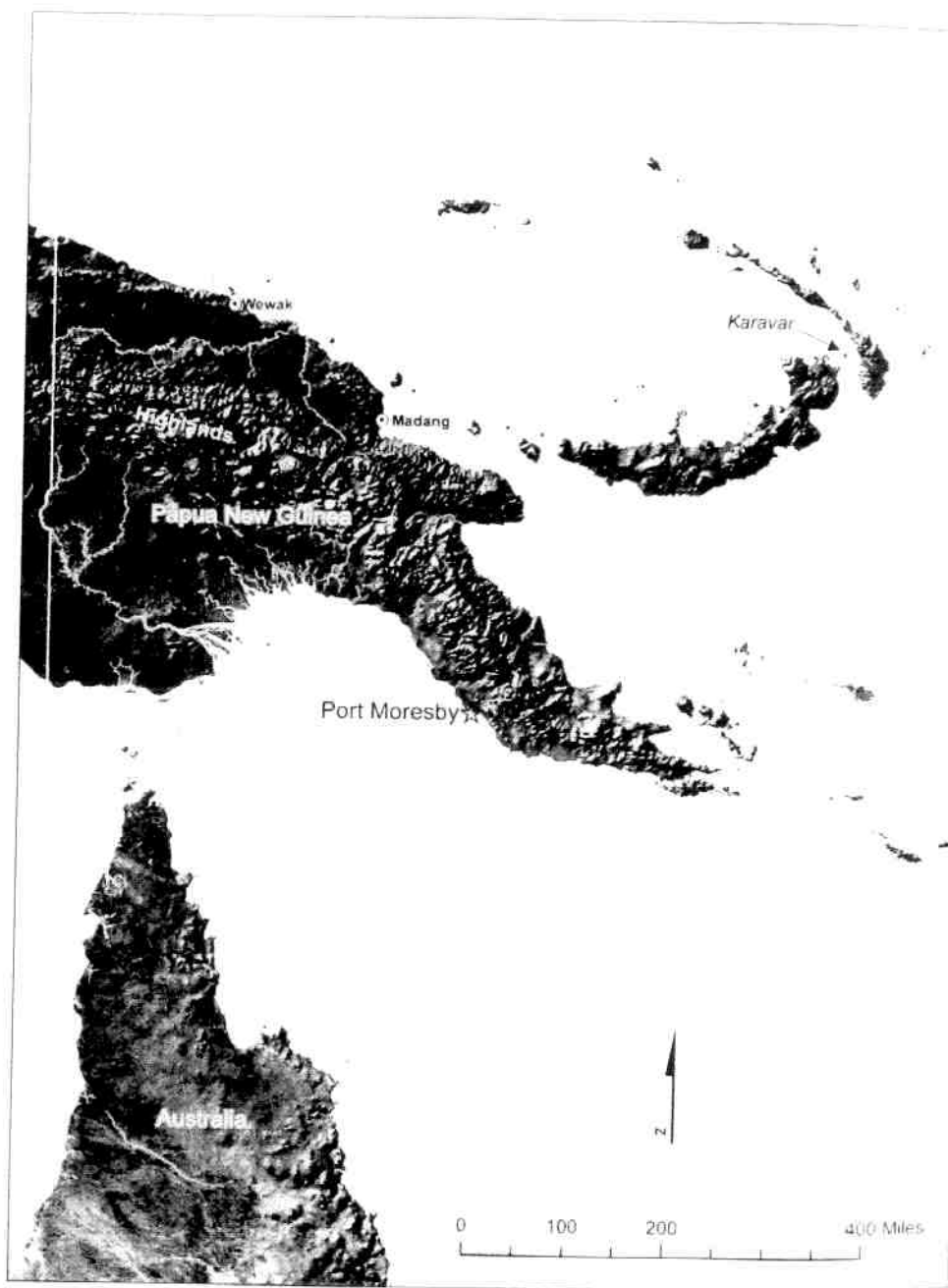


FIGURE 12.1 Papua New Guinea

very much. Only when Highlanders discovered that these Australians both had large quantities of pearl shells and wished to transact with them did the Australians become plausibly human. Pearl shells, traded up from the coast, were for a long time central in the Highland exchanges through which marriages were contracted, compensation for death or injury was paid, and alliances were effected within and between groups. In other words, only when the Australians showed that they apparently valued what the Highlanders already valued and desired did the Highlanders regard them as interesting and socially significant. Only then could the Highlanders fit these otherwise strange and fundamentally peripheral beings into their own narratives (again, stories people tell about the way the world works or might work) as full human beings: as they became persons with whom they could, and would want to, interact. Only at this point did these whites appear to enter history – Highlands style – as people who were and would continue to be social players. This is to say, that the way Highlanders understood what was happening around them and the way that they reacted to what happened depended, in significant part, on their expectations for the future – expectations shaped by local conventions, by the stories they told about the past, present, and future.

To be sure, Yali's people, who lived along the coast of Papua New Guinea, had a much longer history of European contact. (Some coastal peoples engaged extensively with Europeans since the latter part of the nineteenth century.) Yali, himself, had especially extensive contact with Europeans. He served as a policeman in New Guinea's colonial administration before World War II and as a member of the Allied Intelligence Service during the war. There is a photograph taken in 1944 in the Australian War Memorial archives commemorating his military service, in which Yali is inside the *Dace*, an American submarine, together with other members of his company of intelligence-gathering "Coastwatchers." In advance of a major Allied landing, Yali's group of twelve – seven Europeans, one Indonesian translator, and four Papua New Guineans – was sent to Hollandia, then Dutch New Guinea, on a hazardous mission to gather strategic information. In the picture Yali and the other men are posed next to their weapons in obviously cramped, machinery-packed quarters. After the war, as a distinguished veteran, Yali



FIGURE 12.2 Sergeant Yali and his comrades on the World War II submarine *Dace*. Yali is second from left in the front row. (Permission to publish negative PO1090.001 granted by the Australian War Memorial)

embarked on a controversial political career, one that kept him in extensive contact with Europeans.

Yet, like the Highlanders Strathern describes, Yali's life and aspirations followed a largely Papua New Guinean historical narrative. In outline, this historical narrative focuses less on the material attributes of things themselves than on the social uses to which things are put. Things have value because they can be used in transactions to establish relationships of recognition and respect. Things are more like gifts than commodities, establishing qualitative relationships between the people exchanging them rather than quantitative ones between the items exchanged.¹⁶ The major point of these transactions, thus, is to establish relationships of obligation, alliance, and friendship rather than to get "good deals." Therefore, when Highlanders desired pearl shells, and they did desire them with a passionate intensity, it was not for the sake of the shells alone. Indeed, many anthropologists have made a similar point about coastal Papua New Guineans – that men there acquired coveted shells (including the famous "kula" valuables) so as to be able to give them away at a later time.

Because the Highlanders were relatively inexperienced in European ways, they apparently thought that the explorers were generous in offering them the coveted pearl shells that affirmed their fundamental worth. In contrast, the coastal peoples long before learned that the colonists were stingy, offering them only meager wages that denied a common humanity – a common humanness. Moreover, exacerbating raw feelings was local recognition that whites had real and intrusive power. Certainly colonial administrators sought to bring many aspects of native life under their discipline, and they could certainly punish those who, by flouting their directives, challenged their power. Indeed, Yali was to spend nearly six years in jail during the 1950s for his recalcitrance.

Yali and many other Papua New Guineans became preoccupied with the reluctance, if not refusal, of many whites to recognize their full humanness – to make blacks and whites equal players in the same history. In their efforts to establish the transactions, the exchanges, on which the elusive equality would be based, many Papua New Guineans sought, often through magical and ritual means, the European things – the “cargo” – that whites so evidently valued. Without denying that some European possessions – matches and steel tools among them – may have had immediate appeal, it would be an error to believe that it was the things alone that interested them. Rather, with these things, they hoped to become interesting and socially significant (exchange-worthy) to the Europeans. In an important book about “cargo cults,” *Road Belong Cargo*, anthropologist Peter Lawrence, who knew Yali well, says as much in his definition of such cargo cults:

[Such a cult] is based on the natives' belief that European goods (cargo) – ships, aircraft, trade articles, and military equipment – are not man-made but have to be obtained from a non-human or divine source. It expresses the followers' dissatisfaction with their status in colonial society, which is to be improved imminently or eventually by the acquisition of new wealth. It has, therefore, a disruptive influence and is regarded by the ... Australian Administration ... as one of the [its] most serious problems.⁷

Deeply resenting their inferiority in colonial society, coastal Papua New Guineans sought for decades to improve their status by gaining access to cargo. During Fred's early Papua New Guinea research on the island of Karavar (in 1968 and 1972), local people remained

preoccupied with gaining long-denied respect from Europeans. In discussing their contemporary cargo activities (which focused on learning how to place an order such that a small payment would elicit a shipload of manufactured items), they described a history of their efforts to compel Europeans to recognize mutual humanness. In particular, they referred to the "dog movement," a series of meetings they held during the 1930s. The question addressed with perplexity and anger at these meetings was why the Europeans persisted in treating them with contempt – driving them away, telling them to get out, as if they were unwelcome dogs. Through obtaining cargo, they sought to win European respect by having that which Europeans so obviously valued.⁸

Over a considerable period of time, Papua New Guineans frequently sought to acquire and master the ritual techniques by which Europeans accessed cargo. Influenced by Yali or other cargo-cult leaders, they tried a combination of recalcitrance and ritual experimentation. They interrupted and transformed normal routines: they refused to pay taxes, repudiated the directions of colonial administrators, established alternative governments, wrested theological control from missionaries, and mobilized villages, if not whole regions, in fervent invocation and prophesy. As Lawrence makes clear in his definition of cargo cults, Papua New Guineans, in their choice of such means, often became interesting and socially significant in ways the Europeans considered undesirable – in ways that provoked greater exercise of European power and made recognition of mutual equality even less likely.

Thus, we think that Diamond misunderstands what many Papua New Guineans desired when he explains the background to Yali's question (about the differences between white and black people). In Diamond's words: "whites had arrived, imposed centralized government, and brought material goods whose value New Guineans instantly recognized, ranging from steel axes, matches, and medicines to clothing, soft drinks, and umbrellas. In New Guinea all these goods were referred to collectively as 'cargo.'⁹ Because Diamond misunderstands that Yali really was asking less about cargo per se than about colonial relationships between white and black people, he describes the introduction of centralized government as almost parenthetical to the indisputable fact that whites

and their goods had arrived. Hence, he presents local resentment as directed not at the nature and use of concerted colonial power so much as at the differential access to goods.

Perhaps consistent with Diamond's focus on cargo per se is his use of the word "goods." To call things "goods" means that they are inherently desirable – instantly recognizable as worth acquiring. Yet, as we know from advertising, many things become desirable only when they are defined repeatedly as such. Moreover, in defining cargo as goods, Diamond implies that local people will do whatever it takes to get such things. This kind of account suggests that, in their desire for these goods, local people are the agents of their own domination.²⁹ (Another example would be of the Native Americans who, ostensibly, wanted beads so badly that they were willing to trade Manhattan Island for just a few dollars worth of them. Although they may have liked beads, they never thought that they were selling their land for them since land was not, in their view, alienable as a commodity. Their probable intent was to establish an exchange relationship with the Dutch colonists.) Such a goods-centered rendition of history, we think, serves to displace attention from the nature of colonial power relationships. These relationships are not vested in the "nature of things." They are not inevitable because of the instantly recognized value of manufactured items – even granting that some items might be quite useful. Instead, colonial relationships are imposed, often to the resentment and resistance of local people.

That Papua New Guineans such as Yali wanted cargo, less because they recognized its inherent value, and more because they desired to transform the colonial relations of inequality between whites and blacks, was echoed in many Papua New Guineans' narratives. These narratives elaborated a sense of being ill appreciated and ill used. These stories often presented Papua New Guineans and Europeans as sharing a prior history of social obligations. They were, in effect, arguments designed to demonstrate European immorality in denying this history and in behaving in ways that were inappropriately, almost inhumanly, asocial. As Lawrence demonstrates in his analysis of cargo cults, Papua New Guineans often understood and represented this prior history in a range of changing forms. For Yali and others of his region, this history of social obligation was conveyed through myths, Christian beliefs, and accounts of wartime service.

