Coda

Forty-three West Papuans arrive in Australia by outrigger canoe, 2006

Seven years after completing fieldwork at East Awin, the arrival of 43 West Papuans by outrigger canoe accorded a certain currency to that fieldwork. The event of the arrival and the subsequent processing of asylum claims and issuing of temporary visas focused intense media and public attention on foreign policy relations between Australia and Indonesia.

This book offers another ‘frame’ through which to view the 2006 outrigger landing, for West Papuans have crossed boundaries to seek asylum since 1962, usually eastward into PNG and occasionally southward to Australia. This coda does not set out to provide new material, but draws on the published work of other historians of West Papuan displacement, namely, Stuart Kirsch, Richard Chauvel, Klaus Neumann and David Palmer.¹

There are many more internally displaced Papuans than there are Papuans who have crossed international boundaries to seek asylum. An estimated 20,000 Papuans have been internally displaced during the period 2001–06, and much of this displacement has occurred in the Central Highlands region. The 2001 Law on Special Autonomy for Papua created new administrative units that required additional military and police commands. Classified as a ‘military operations area’, the Indonesian Province of Papua hosts Indonesian security forces including army troops, police units and mobile paramilitary police. ‘Sweeping’ operations including checkpoints, roadblocks and raids have been conducted by Indonesian security forces to expose OPM members and supporters. Such operations have been documented by researchers in the following places: Wasior (2001), Kiyawage area (2003), Tolikara regency (January–March 2005), and Puncak Jaya (2004; August–October 2005; December 2006).

Demographic change resulting in segmentation and stratification of the population causes street-level tensions between indigenous Papuans and migrants. More than 500,000 spontaneous migrants have migrated to the Province of Papua, and continue to arrive.² (This figure does not include the estimated 220,000 transmigrants who arrived until the late 1990s.) While Indonesian migrant-dominated urban areas in Papua have become integrated into the modern economy of Indonesia, the interior, particularly the highlands where the majority of indigenous Papuans live, remains an isolated subsistence economy. Chauvel’s analysis is insightful.³ He describes the spatial separation of the Indonesian settler and Papuan economies, and the meeting of these economies in the marketplace, which has become segmented, stratified and volatile. Violent clashes
have been documented in markets in Hamadi (1984), Entrop (2000) and Abeputura (2000). This book has documented the way that macro-level violence can cause repercussions that spread and become folded into local politics.⁴

Political conflict in Papua leading to internal and international displacement has been elaborated by the historians mentioned above. The UNHCR also articulates this relation in explicit terms, its 2006 Country Operations Plan advising: ‘Its [PNG’s] proximity and cultural ties to the Indonesian province of Papua means there is potential for a mass influx of West Papuan refugees. Given the continuing political instability and the security situation in Papua, regular revision of PNG’s contingency plans and training of PNG officials is considered important.’⁵

It has been easterly movement across the border into PNG rather than southward movement to Australia that has characterised the pattern of movement for West Papuans seeking asylum. The movement of West Papuans out of the former UNHCR settlement at East Awin in Western Province, Papua New Guinea, has not been southward either. Rather, West Papuans have tended to relocate to the nearest mining town in Western Province, or to the border town of Vanimo in Sandaun Province. A few families have made secondary movement from Vanimo westward to the capital Jayapura.

Any further southward movement to Australia by West Papuans would occur in spite of intense sea-patrolling activity and punitive legislation discriminating against boat arrivals seeking asylum.

One of the curious effects of the issue of temporary protection visas to the outrigger canoe arrivals by the Howard Government, was that at the time of the expiry of the visas in around 2009, the Department of Immigration would have been required to determine whether the Indonesian Province of Papua was a durably safe place to which the West Papuans might, or might not be returned. It is unlikely that either assessment would have surprised West Papuans living in PNG. If it was determined that Papua was a durably safe place to which West Papuan asylum seekers might be repatriated, then it would be understood that Indonesia–Australian foreign policy relations had been privileged, and if it had been determined that Papua was not a durably safe place then this assessment would validate West Papuans’ rationale for remaining in PNG.

In May 2008, the Rudd Government abolished the temporary protection visa regime for asylum seekers. This meant that, along with some 1000 other refugees on temporary visas who met ‘security and character requirements’, the 43 West Papuans would be entitled to permanent protection visas allowing for permanent residency in Australia.⁶
ENDNOTES


2 McGibbon 2004, p. 23, in Chauvel p. 34.

3 Chauvel, pp. 35–6.

4 Rosenau in Appadurai, pp. 152–3.

5 Chauvel, pp. 41–2.