

## *From Drifters to Asylum Seekers*

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On 16 January 2015, a Manus-born Papua New Guinean posted on Facebook: “To all the security guards that were involved in the recent altercation at the AS Camp, mi laik tok faakin good one stret . . . paitim ol” (I would like to say, fucking good one . . . bash them). This was in response to a confrontation in the Manus Regional Processing Centre in Lombrum, Manus, Papua New Guinea (PNG). This confrontation allegedly occurred between security personnel and asylum seekers who had barricaded themselves in one of their compounds. The asylum seekers were feeling the despair of having lived for more than two years under hideous conditions and were now facing a transfer to another facility (a nearby transit center) and the prospect of resettlement in PNG rather than elsewhere (see also Wallis and Dalsgaard 2016). The security guards, on the other hand, were . . . well, what *were* they doing? What motivated their attacks on the asylum seekers, and why were they applauded for doing so?

The Facebook comment was far from alone—others referred to letting the asylum seekers “go die,” and an incident in which two asylum seekers were beaten by police in the Manus urban center of Lorengau was even condoned on Facebook by one of the Manus MPs (Rooney 2017). It is, as pointed out by Michelle Rooney, a researcher who is herself of Manus descent, as if the whole situation seemed to engender an atmosphere in which violence was acceptable. It was almost as if the bodies of the asylum seekers were regarded in public as *homo sacer*, “bare life” outside of law or at least without human rights (Agamben 1998; see also Salyer, this issue; West, this issue).

Of course, there were and are voices of moderation and sympathy (see Chandler 2014), but as anthropologists having worked in Manus for several decades, it was shocking for us to witness people we knew from our

long-term fieldwork—people who had welcomed us into their homes—display such negative sentiments toward the asylum seekers, even if they were not in the majority. Manus people themselves often stress how hospitable Manus is. Some have even regarded the felt obligation of hospitality as problematic and as a potential cause for conflict when it is misinterpreted by visitors (Pokawin and Rooney 1996).

In order to qualify the discussion of what the processing center has meant for people in Manus and how it can be interpreted in light of Manus people's relations to "outsiders," we unpack three key themes that in our view have been central to the encounter that Manus people have had with alterity both historically and—as is our contention—in the present: (1) the role of violence in the past and present; (2) the theme of kin, exchange, and relationships; and (3) the value of hospitality. Taken together, this unpacking provides a corrective to some of the more simplistic reports about Manus and a historical backdrop to the actual interaction that has taken place between Manus people and asylum seekers since 2013.

At the time of German colonization at the end of the nineteenth century, the Manus region was characterized by frequent warfare. Both Manus oral history narratives (Otto 2006) and contemporary observations testify to this. Trader, planter, and collector Richard Parkinson wrote, for example: "The condition of war is probably nowhere as permanent as among the Manus" (Parkinson 1911, 400), and German colonial officer Heinrich Schnee remarked how dangerous and cunning the Manus warriors were compared to men from New Ireland and Buka, who served as his soldiers (1904, 195). While there is little doubt about the prevalence of fighting—a narrative that rests alongside the stories of precolonial cannibalism that have been exploited by Australian authorities to deter future asylum seekers (see Salyer, this issue; Kaiku, this issue)—there is less consensus about the causes of this warlike state. We would like to emphasize two aspects that we find important for our discussion: first, we see warfare as an element of a regional system of exchange, specialization, and competition (see Schwartz 1963), and, second, colonization itself was very likely a factor contributing to the intensification of aggressive interaction.

Before colonization, the Manus archipelago was inhabited by people living in small settlements that were in frequent interaction with each other to obtain food, materials for building houses, and specialized products such as obsidian, clay pots, and wooden bowls (see also Bino, this issue). While some groups specialized in gardening, there were also fishermen who had no direct access to land and who obtained their starch

through exchange with the inland people. Some villages specialized in the production of clay pots, shell money, or wood carvings. Trade happened through regular collective barter of fish for sago or taro, or during large feasts between villages. There were also individual trade networks based on kinship links. In this regional system of exchange, warfare played an important role in the protection of production monopolies, in access to resources (clay, sago swamps, obsidian, trade partners), and in the maintenance and establishment of group alliances. Groups were small and were easily divided through internal competition, which was fueled by a strong drive for status. Shows of prowess and success in warfare were key ingredients of leadership and were crucial for the defense of a group's properties, including its monopolies of production.

War between groups was fought with spears on battlegrounds or in canoes at sea, but ruse and ambush were also frequently used. This led to an omnipresent fear of attack and the use of preventive measures, such as building palisades, to protect villages. Perhaps the "paranoid ethos" that Theodore Schwartz observed in Manus is an inheritance from this era (1973). Colonization brought new resources to compete for and, importantly, new weapons, which were coveted targets of raids on Western trading stations. This led to a situation of general upheaval in the whole region, with some groups gaining a major advantage over others due to their possession of guns. However, these groups were often uprooted as they (rightfully) feared retaliation from the colonizers in the form of a punitive raid to destroy their villages, property, and human life. The situation got so intense, and the relative power of the colonizer so great, that from around 1911 onward nearly all Manus groups decided to give up their weapons and deliver them to the dominating power. This was the beginning of a long-lasting period of colonial peace, in which conflicts were solved through other means, with or without the help of the colonial administration.

In the present time, Manus is still a relatively safe place, experiencing limited acts of violence, which are mostly local and small-scale conflicts. When occasionally a conflict spreads to groups of villages, each with its own language and ethnic identity, clan leaders are quick to initiate traditional exchanges and mediation practices in order to resolve the tension, which otherwise could escalate into a violent conflict. An exception appears to be conflicts with and animosity toward Asian traders who own businesses in the province. Here, traditional mediation methods do not normally apply, as the traders have not become integrated in local soci-

ety. A tragic example is the burning of a department store in Lorengau in 2017, which led to the loss of life of the Chinese owners and their children. However, when officials came from China to investigate and repatriate the bodies, employees and their relatives organized what Manus people referred to as a “sorry ceremony” (a ceremony of mourning) for them.

The tension with Asian traders seems to have more to do with their economic prominence and success, combined with their isolation from the local population, rather than with their being ethnically and linguistically distinct. In fact, Manus has a long history of welcoming foreigners. A major element of the precolonial system of specialization, exchange, and warfare was the establishment of connections, called “roads,” between kin groups and villages (Mead 1956; Schwartz 1963). This could be done in different ways, predominantly by marriage between leading clans in distant villages, but also through adoption and even capture in warfare, in which the captive was integrated into a local family. As an example, the leading clans of Lipan village on Baluan Island all trace their descent from a boy called Lolokai, who came drifting from the Manus mainland and who was adopted by a local clan leader. The boy became a feared warrior and gave the village its present name, Lipan, which means “tooth,” indicating that the village now could bite off attacks from other parts of the island. Apart from adding their own skills and power to the local kin group, Lolokai’s descendants also reconnected to the group he originated from, which led to still-honored trade relationships with Lasei on the south coast of the Manus mainland. Several other stories about the adoption of drifters, war captives, or distant kinspeople obtaining important social positions have been recorded on Baluan Island (Otto 1991, 59–68). And when we conducted fieldwork on the island, several men from other parts of PNG (Sepik, Highlands), had permanently settled and been integrated.

While violence and exchange have been recurrent themes in how Manus people have related to outsiders, the stories of drifters also point to a practice of hospitality. There was an obligation of hospitality, mainly toward kinspeople and trade partners, but this was occasionally extended to complete strangers (as reported by Nikolai Mikloucho-Maclay in 1876). During the colonial period, this gradually began to include people of the same religion or with a common background (such as language, work, or school) and changed to involve hospitality as a “strategic image.” The people of Ponam Island would, for example, present “an image of themselves . . . as peaceable towards Europeans, wishing and able to establish friendly and

profitable relations. . . . Ponams stressed their friendly, helpful and even generous attitude toward their colonisers, and the friendly and helpful attitude the colonisers took toward them” (Carrier 1987, 115). Today, the display of hospitality is stressed as a general obligation toward outsiders. Guests must be offered something in the form of refreshment (eg, betel nuts, tea and biscuits) and, preferably, a place to sleep if they come from afar. It is said to look bad and be bad for one’s reputation if one cannot or will not offer such hospitality. This obligation also extends to non-PNG nationals, but when it comes to asylum seekers, this is the exception rather than the rule.

Whereas many previous outsiders to Manus have arrived with a purpose and an identity that was easily understood by Manus people, the recent group of asylum seekers has in some ways represented a new category. It is not the first time that Manus has hosted refugees (West Papuans arrived in the 1960s, and the Manus Regional Processing Centre was open to a smaller group of refugees with Middle Eastern origins in 2001–2002). However, the recent influx is different in that it has received greater news and social media attention, has involved a much larger number of asylum seekers than ever seen before, and has included unprecedented Australian resources to facilitate the asylum seekers’ arrival and to provide security. The atmosphere of extreme securitization—keeping the asylum seekers locked away—has in itself been interpreted by at least some Manus people as an indicator that the asylum seekers were dangerous and possibly criminals (see Salyer, this issue), and it has isolated the asylum seekers, keeping them from the face-to-face interactions that could have facilitated the forging of social bonds and potential adoption into local networks.

Some relationships have been built since the processing center opened up in the wake of a 26 April 2016 PNG Supreme Court decision declaring the detainment of asylum seekers unconstitutional (Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea 2016). The increased freedom allowed for more interaction between Manus people and asylum seekers. Some benefited from this, but other asylum seekers, when given the option, preferred to stay in the Lombrum-based processing center rather than move to one of the three transit centers in Manus’s provincial capital. Different reasons for this were given, including fear of aggression from locals (RNZ 2018b) and especially the assumption that, once resettled in Manus, the asylum seekers’ chances of ever moving on to Australia or elsewhere would be severely diminished. After the last detainees were forcibly removed from

the processing center in November 2017, many of them began to mingle freely with the local population on the streets of Lorengau, although not without some challenges (RNZ 2018b).

By that time, some asylum seekers had already established lasting relationships with Manus women and had had children with them—estimated to have numbered almost forty in late 2018 (Togiba and Cheng 2018). Some ex-detainees were running businesses that provided them a livelihood, including, for example, a grocery store and an electrical services enterprise. These were resourceful men who appeared to have been well integrated in Manus families that appreciated their knowledge and skills. Otto spoke at length with one of these men, a Rohingya from Myanmar who had married into a family Otto knew well. The couple had two children at the time. The greatest frustration for this man was his lack of citizenship, which prevented him from having a bank account and traveling freely.

The absorption of several hundred exclusively male asylum seekers into the small Manus population was never a realistic or sustainable solution. However, old mechanisms for integrating foreigners are still working, and many of those who remain, after the majority have been resettled elsewhere (Potikin 2019), have been able to attain positions of respect and economic independence within Manus society. This is in spite of a much-heard critique that Manus could not and should not integrate foreign males because of the patrilineal system of landownership. The real issue has been the sheer number of refugees, most of whom did not want to stay and many of whom have been traumatized by their inexcusably long period of detention. For many Manusians, the experience has been mixed. Quite a few have appreciated the (relatively modest) work opportunities and resources provided by the camps, as well as improvements to schools, the hospital, and infrastructure made possible by Australian aid. A serious negative impact on Manus people, however, is how the refugee crisis has affected Manusians' self-perception. As mentioned by other contributions in this dialogue section, Manus people have witnessed the home they were once proud of being labeled a "shithole" by outsiders (Australian personnel as well as asylum seekers). They have also seen increases in violence and prostitution (RNZ 2018a). Manus is a slow-moving and relatively "undeveloped" place, but it is mostly a tranquil and peaceful one, and there has been little obvious poverty in the eyes of locals. While there are positive stories to tell about the local integration of some of the

refugees, the larger crisis can only be solved by positive action by the PNG and Australian governments.

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THE AUTHORS WOULD LIKE TO THANK *Alex Mawyer and the other editors of the journal for their encouragement with this article. Most importantly though, we are grateful to those Manusians and asylum seekers who have shared their stories with us and to our Manus friends who shared their houses and extended exemplary hospitality during our visits to the province.*

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