

## MISUNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE IN THE HIGHLANDS

MERVYN MEGGITT, *BLOOD IS THEIR ARGUMENT*, MAYFIELD  
PUBLISHING CO., CALIFORNIA, 1977.

C.R. HALLPIKE, *BLOODSHED AND VENGEANCE IN THE PAPUAN  
MOUNTAINS* CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 1977.

Perhaps the media event of 1977 was "Fighting in the Highlands", which received wide coverage and public debate by the elite in the pages of the *Post-Courier*. The year culminated with Parliament passing the "Group Punishment" Act,<sup>1</sup> which was an effort to curb these "violent excesses". Clearly then, influential circles define Highlands fighting or warfare as a serious problem.

The publication of these two books by two senior and respected members of the anthropological profession on Warfare is thus to be welcomed. One, *Blood is their Argument*, is on warfare among the Mae-Enga by Mervyn Meggitt. Meggitt has done continuous research on the Enga since the early Fifties and stretching through to 1973. The fruits of this labour are to be seen in Meggitt's impressive list of publications and it is small wonder then that he is styled as "the world authority on the Enga" by Max Orken.

The second book by C.R. Hallpike is on *Bloodshed and Vengeance among the Tauade* or "Goilala" of the Papuan Highlands who, as we know, have been stereotyped by bureaucrats and others as a "violent people". Hallpike spent twenty-two months in the early seventies doing research amongst the Tauade, having established his credentials as an Africanist with a well-received monograph on the Konso of Ethiopia. So what then do these experienced academic warriors have to contribute to our understanding of Highlands violence and what policy implications (or working solutions) can one draw from their work?

I turn firstly to Meggitt's work for a number of reasons. First, his theoretical position was worked out prior to that of Hallpike. Second, I have spent a brief period in the Enga Province studying the role of *Kiaps*<sup>2</sup> and violence. Third, when the sorely needed sociology of anthropologists in Papua New Guinea is written, he will undoubtedly occupy a well deserved prominent place. Fourth I have discussed his work with a number of Enga students with interesting results (regrettably we have as yet no student from the Goilala).

Meggitt's book is clear of obfuscating jargon, well illustrated with numerous photographs, and contains plenty of statistics to provide scientific

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1. *Inter-Group Fighting Act* 1977 (No. 43 of 1977).

2. Government patrol officers.

credibility. It is certainly eminently readable despite the pseudo-"objective" style and trite observations such as "my observations suggest that when the population density of a growing clan exceeds about 250 persons per square mile, the members of that group become increasingly land-hungry". No doubt Engans living around Kandep who feel obligated to pay compensation for deaths which might have occurred four generations back, will be pleased to hear that their commitment is not as strong as that amongst some of their brothers since 'this emphasis on meeting commitments correlates with the high density of the central Enga population". The statistics might impress the more gullible but the more skeptical reader would like to know how they were collected and from what universe.

He presents a detailed and valuable ethnography of traditional Enga military practices in which violence is portrayed as being endemic and land the major cause. This situation Meggitt argues changed drastically with the introduction of the hegemony of the Administration. Since he attributes to the Enga a crude "might is right" philosophy, the Administration brought peace because the "pragmatic" Enga soon calculated the pros and cons of Administrative retribution for making traditional war and decided to continue it by other means, namely through the courts. However, because land is becoming increasingly scarce and the Kiaps are being overworked, "traditional" warfare is now returning to the Enga Province. His prognosis for the future is pessimistic: The *raison d'etre* for fighting is land, which must, inevitably, become more scarce with population growth, and therefore violence *must* increase.

This is a summary statement of Meggitt's argument which I hope does justice to the book. It is not a new position for Meggitt since he has argued along similar lines in some of his previous publications, most notably in his *Lineage System of the Mae-Enga*. Unfortunately, despite telling and I think conclusive criticisms of his previous position by Koch, Hallpike, Sillitoe and others, he blandly ignores these and restates his position once again. Whether in fact Kiaps are overworked nowadays is debatable, especially in view of the "bureaucratic explosion". Perhaps the issue is why did the Enga humbly obey the Kiap when told to stop fighting in the past, while now they ignore the exasperated Kiap. It is regrettable that Meggitt does not analyse this problem.

I am uneasy about his thesis: it is too simple, too logical, and too calculating to have validity. (It is important to note in this respect that Meggitt attributes these self-same features to the Enga. A point to which I shall return). I do not think that Meggitt's explanation of Enga warfare is satisfactory because along with Weber I feel that a satisfactory explanation must be adequate on both the levels of cause and meaning. Meggitt singlemindedly pursues a coldly casual simplistic, and allegedly amoral mechanistic, explanation in which warfare is seen as a mechanism for redistributing population. He could possibly have saved his argument (although I doubt it) by invoking the classic Durkheimian distinction between Necessary and Sufficient conditions for warfare. But he does not. Instead, he continues with an attitude of "my mind is made up, don't confuse me with facts or alternative explanations".

Given Meggitt's firm conviction about the importance of land scarcity as a cause of warfare, we must consider how crucial it is. Here an immediate hoary problem is how do we define land scarcity? For

example, there are areas in Enga which agricultural experts labelled as "unsuitable for intensive agriculture" a few years ago which are now being intensively farmed by Engans on their own initiative. And how does Meggitt explain that much of the recent warfare is occurring in areas of relatively lower population density, and is absent in high-density areas like the Ambum valley?

Given Meggitt's portrayal of the Engans as cold pragmatists we come to a contradiction: does he think that Engans fail to realize that if Clan A makes war on Clan B and chases Clan B off a piece of land, then Clan B will appeal to the Authorities and get a restitution order for the land? Given this "reality" if the Engans are such pragmatists as Meggitt makes them out to be, why do they fight about land? In short, it is illogical to say that because Engans fight about land, there must be a measurable land scarcity. Sir John Guise pointed to the complexities of the situation when he noted that: "Land is part of life; take it away and you take away life itself".

Apart from being bad theory the problem lies in ignoring the realm of meaning. The psychological and emotional aspects of the situation are ignored. The tensions, fears and camaraderie which go hand in hand with fighting are only occasionally mentioned, let alone brought into constructive analysis. One feels that Meggitt treats the Engans as bland robots with no feelings, which is a tragedy not only for the Engans but also for Meggitt, since good ethnography also serves to "liberate" the ethnographer. If Meggitt had seen Engans as people he might have been able to provide a more feasible understanding of the nature of Enga warfare. For example, if he had treated Engans as humans with emotions, with a love for life and vitality, his crude assertions that the courts were simply used as a means to continue warring "by other means" would necessitate considering that perhaps some Engans were sick of warfare and found the imposition of the Colonial Administration a useful excuse to stop fighting. It would also have made him aware of the diversity of Enga opinion on the matter of warfare and possibly worked as a prophylactic against his dangerous habit of selectively sifting the facts to fit his pre-conceived theoretical framework. For example, one of the points which he makes to substantiate his claim that the warfare of the Seventies is a resurgence of "traditional" warfare is the "fact" that while a number of Engans own shotguns they do not use them. As any Engan knows, people do not use shotguns because if one does, the Police and Kiaps will easily be able to identify them and not only will they lose a treasured status symbol but the official retribution will be extremely harsh. All the Engans I spoke to clearly realized that the rules of war had changed. It is a new ball game, what with Police and Kiaps as "referees" and cash crops to protect or destroy, etc. But naturally the ideological justifications might be traditional and rooted in the past. My impression is that the basic "cause" of warfare is death. It is true that pigs, women or land are often used as justifications or excuses for warfare, but if one studies the history of the inter-relationship between the "owners of the fight", invariably one finds an 'unpaid' or "overpaid" death lurking in the background.

Ah ha, Meggitt might rejoin, in this monograph I have "deliberately eschewed theory since my aim is to present as complete an ethnography as I can". Unfortunately ethnographic "facts" are not manufactured by angels and dropped readymade from heaven. Ethnographic facts are social constructions informed by the ethnographer's ideological and theoretical predilections and Meggitt's are clearly those of a conservative (despite disclaimers to the contrary).

And if it purports to be as complete an ethnography as possible, what about the school dropouts? What about relative and absolute deprivation? Why no full assessment of the potentially crucial relationship between the exchange system and contemporary warfare? Why no mention of the fact that many Kiap positions have been nationalised? That the rural police constabulary has been replaced by riot squads (who occasionally are said to have engaged in acts of brutality)? What about the growing economic inequalities in Enga? And perhaps most importantly the problem of insecurity and uncertainty. Are these not factors which should be included and analysed in an ethnography of Enga warfare?

Meggitt's ethnographic study leads him to make simplistic policy recommendations. He suggests large-scale resettlement schemes without discussing what impact such schemes will have in Enga. Elementary discussion and observation would have shown him that these schemes are not successful in alleviating the land shortage problem for two reasons: first, most settlers maintain their traditional land rights and residences. Second, Government regulations stipulate that the potential resettlers have "adequate" financial means to develop the new block. In practice this means that it is the rich "peasantry" who take up blocks and not the poor peasantry who are suffering from land scarcity. Thus, the rich get richer and the poor suffer more and the problem remains unresolved - this, I suggest, might be an important contributing factor in the "resurgence of violence".

But my intentions are honourable, Meggitt will no doubt protest, since I seek to record the customs for the "generation of young people ... growing up in a culture of literacy, and some of them want historical testimony that they may interpret as a basis for decisions about their society's future course." I doubt it. The absurdity is demonstrated by the hostility of Enga students who have tried to decipher Meggitt's works. Inherent in any ethnography is an image of Man and many Engans feel that Meggitt's image of them in his many publications is downright insulting. It is a crude caricature resplendent with "perambulating penises" and "vascillating vaginas". What self-respecting educated Engan would take Meggitt seriously? No wonder many educated Engans are asking "should we allow field workers into the Enga?" In short, a disappointing book, Meggitt has produced better work.

For those who are concerned about the reactionary nature of the anthropological enterprise in Papua New Guinea and look to the day when anthropology will be reinvented, Hallpike's book could conceivably act as a catalyst. Professor Hallpike, who like Professor Meggitt is empire trained, has in the interests of science transferred operations and expertise from Ethiopia to Papua. His book could serve as a catalyst for either of two reasons: it is either the most candidly racist book of recent vintage I have come across, or it is the most brilliant satire on anthropologists I have ever seen. This latter point derives from my own intellectual "game" and I doubt its validity because Oxford University Press does not publish satires, especially not as K26.00 a copy. The tragedy of it all is that in between all the inanities this book does contain some brilliant insights.

Hallpike bases his approach on the hardly novel strategy of starting from the opposite point of view. Thus, while most anthropologists in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere have argued that gift-exchange and cross-cutting ties serve to integrate society, he argues that these phenomena are disintegrating factors and are intimately associated with the high level of

violence. But at the same time as Hallpike says, "pacification" led to an increase in feasting and exchanges and a decrease in violence - yet he does not explain this in any satisfactory manner. Secondly, he says that the Konso of Ethiopia treat groups and categories as fundamental and see both actual and normative behaviour as deriving from these groups and categories. In contrast to this Aristotelian "cognitive orientation" (left undefined) the Tauade have a hereclitean cognitive orientation. To them relationships between individuals are basic and groups and categories are simply the precipitate of such relationships. Again this is hardly a strikingly novel contribution (if indeed it is a contribution: I suspect some better informed anthropologists would have serious reservations). Roy Wagner has already addressed the issue of whether in fact social groups exist in the Highlands, but Hallpike does not appear to be aware of this.

His discussion of violence is certainly more sophisticated, complex and insightful than that of Meggitt. Like the Enga, for the Tauade peace is "ultimately maintained by a precarious balance of forces". Violence, according to Hallpike, is chronic among the Tauade. A number of factors serve to "generate" this state of affairs and he summarises these on pages 229-231: First, there is the propensity to take vengeance on any member of the offending group. Second, there is a lack of effective sanctions against a man who kills a man from another tribe. Third, the multiplicity of cross-cutting ties means that men in tribes other than the victim's have an interest in avenging him. Fourth, the high mobility in Tauade society means that people can physically flee their obligations and nullify the threat of payback to them. Fifth, compensation contributes to violence since the killer is supposedly able to "buy off" the deceased's relatives. Sixth, the ethos of payback makes vengeance an appropriate mode. Seventh, the men's houses result in good warriors being taken as role models. Last, the ecology and pig-raising basis of society mean that men have a lot of "leisure" and "it is clear that prolonged idleness would tend to nourish the thought of violence". It seems then that anything the Tauade do or do not do will lead to violence.

How valid is this argument by Hallpike, since it is obviously not testable in an immediate sense? Its validity must lie in the long run in its utility or praxis in the hands of the people themselves or concerned outsiders as an instrument leading to social change. In this sense of validity, Hallpike's theory is invalid: it has so many feedbacks that it stifles change on its own accord. It is not difficult to see why this argument is invalid because it is a prime example of what C. Wright Mills called illiberal practicality. That is, it belongs to the *genus* "Multiple causation theory" according to which all social phenomena are the product of countless small and diverse causes. Thus if one is an adherent of this approach, it follows that one must confine oneself to the proposal of small modifications of minimal consequence: the band-aid approach to major surgery. Hallpike's theory cannot lead to meaningful social action.

But there are other equally distressing problems with the validity of Hallpike's presentation. First, it is empirically inadequate. For example, he claims that one of the most striking characteristics of the Tauade is the absence of social stereotypes (page 81) yet in his description he provides numerous examples of how important stereotypes are (e.g. pages 29 and 36). Also some of the cases which purportedly illustrate his conclusions are not convincing. The case on page 239 which allegedly demonstrates Tauade sadism, simply does not. Such examples can be multiplied. As has been mentioned Hallpike does not explain the major contradiction,

namely that with "pacification" feasting has increased, yet violence has decreased, except by stating that this is because the Tauade have migrated to Port Moresby and thus transferred their violent proclivities there. Dubious outdated police statistics are cited to give this explanation credibility. Indeed, it is a pity Hallpike did not study the urban "Goilala squatter camps" because of the numerous "squatter settlements" they have impressed observers as being the most cohesive group, having the most creative artistic impulse of all the diverse groups which make up Port Moresby's population. In addition they have a reputation for being friendly and open. This is in contrast, so sharp as to be almost unrecognizable, to Hallpike's description of the Tauade as people. The problem is exacerbated by Hallpike having an "ethnographic present" which ranges from pre-colonial days to 1972.

All theories reflect the value orientations of the theorist, and Hallpike's values are so transparent in his book that one cannot but disagree with him. Explicit in his model is the image of the Tauade having a crude 'might is right' philosophy, like Meggitt's Mae-Enga and Turnbull's Ik. As he says: "I cannot explain why the Tauade are obsessed with power and aggression, beyond making the rather common-place observation that this is an obsession shared by many societies in Papua New Guinea". If this is in fact so, then surely this should have been the question to be examined and not used as the assumption upon which his whole book is based.

The portrait he paints of the Tauade is one totally lacking in human compassion. He describes the area as being a "drab wasteland of meanness and indifference. Hamlets are clusters of dreary hovels, and despite their ample leisure the Tauade prefer to satisfy the bare necessities of life with a minimum of effort and thought for the future." Despite being only eighty air-miles away from Port Moresby, "the area remains one of the most economically backward in the Territory." This is because, according to Hallpike, the Tauade can be characterised as being economic morons. Their attitudes and beliefs are all wrong: "The people have not the slightest conception of economic realities and think that all the proceeds from a sale are profits." It goes without saying that "they have been slow to appreciate the advantages of the roads" which the administration has magnanimously provided. And not surprisingly they "are incapable of calculating the relationship between weekly and daily wages .... Moreover, even when they have money, they fritter most of it away on trivial purchases". They fail at business despite the fact that they have the role models of successful white business-entrepreneurs. (Yet if they are so economically naive, why do large numbers migrate to Port Moresby?)

As with economics, so to for religion and philosophy:

But while a few persons may be able to transcend the limitations of their culture, it is an obvious fact that Roman Catholicism today is the product of 2,000 years of European history. For the Tauade to be able to grasp in the space of a few years the basic implications of so profound and complex a religion would be as extraordinary as their displaying an understanding of the principles of British justice and representative government.

How many European sophisticates could reach the level Hallpike assigns to them?

It goes without saying that such people "killed and still do kill for the pleasure of killing" and the two Kiaps who were dismissed for brutality were held in the greatest respect (not fear?) by the Tauade:

In my experience a display of strength and domination not only gets the best results from the Tauade but makes them more amicable in the bargain. Three of *my pleasantest* days were spent supervising the cutting of a motor-bike track .... Far from resenting my stream of shouts and orders, the men and women working under my direction seemed to be put in the best of spirits by them.

Naturally the "Tauade are fluent and ready liars" and the Tauade would only visit Hallpike to obtain or beg things. "I cannot pretend that I liked the Tauade. The Tauade were secretive, sly and dishonest, greedy and their limitless rapacity" drove Hallpike to distraction. Thus it comes as no surprise that in his acknowledgments, Hallpike acknowledges no help or assistance from any Tauade person. After all what can one expect from people who have no noses but "snouts"? This is significant because it makes the point that the book is not about the Tauade *per se* but about Hallpike the ethnographer and his warped fantasy world. This book is the product of a reactionary colonialist and racist mentality. The Tauade are in a colonial situation and Hallpike associates himself with the "Mastas" and tries to justify their treatment of the Tauade. If he had taken the colonial situation and its underdevelopment as a point of departure and taken "the natives' point of view" seriously, he might have salvaged a reasonably creditable analysis. As it is this book must be rejected on both theoretical and ethical grounds.

But perhaps the very vulgarity of Hallpike's book can lead one to suspect that he is deliberately baiting his readers. Perhaps Hallpike is trying to do to the anthropological establishment what the classic satire, *Report From Iron Mountain* did to the American War establishment during the Vietnam War. And there are striking similarities: Both display a fixation with "system". Both are amoral. Both argue that war, far from being an irrational evil, in fact provides the principal organisational basis of society. Apart from these similarities, Hallpike says that social anthropology might be defined as the "study of the lies natives tell anthropologists especially anthropologists (like Hallpike) who work with people like the Tauade". Since the difference between anthropologist and informant is one of degree and not kind it follows that anthropological monographs might be defined as the lies anthropologists write about their informants. Thus, *Q.E.D.*, one should not take this monograph seriously as even approximating reality. But somehow I doubt that Hallpike intended his book to be a satire. And if it is a satire why not clearly label it fiction? Why intellectually defecate on the Tauade who have no way of defending themselves against the absurdities of a Hallpike.

When I was an undergraduate I was taught that if a book is bad, one should ignore it. To discuss it only provides the bad book with publicity and shows that one takes the book seriously. Clearly then an argument can be made that maybe both Meggitt's and Hallpike's books should be ignored. But since both have had their books published under the imprimatur of highly respected publishing houses, we have to take them seriously because clearly other people are taking them seriously.

Both books serve to perpetuate and rationalise arch-colonialist stereotypes. They raise but ignore the vexing ethical question of when is one justified in presenting such obnoxious images of people in the name of "science". Scientific knowledge, especially of the social variety, is relative and always changing. It is not absolute. No doubt in time their data and impressions will be superseded by more conducive myths. But at the moment they fulfil a most unacceptable ideological function of justifying authoritarian rule. Geertz once wrote that "all ethnography is philosophy

and a great deal of the rest is (self) confession . These two books tell us more about the respective authors than about the people they allegedly write about. Cooley's notion of the "looking-glass self" that what we see is a reflection of ourselves certainly seems pertinent. Certainly neither book comes down four square on the side of humanity Rather they do humanity a disservice.

Unfortunately this colonialist mentality is not restricted to a few expatriate anthropologists but seems to be distressingly widespread among top level public servants and even Bigman Highlands politicians, although for different reasons no doubt. The recent Inter-Group Fighting Act bears testimony to this. Personally, I feel that this Act will fail precisely because it is based on this erroneous mentality. Undoubtedly it will stop the fighting: but it will be a coercive peace since it does not strike at the root causes of the fighting except in a superficial *post-facto* way. It will not provide the framework for generating a mutually beneficial peace - already warring groups are changing their styles of violence under threat of the Act - because like Meggitt and Hallpike it ignores the colonial or crypto-colonial context and the underdevelopment of the chronic fight areas. Instead they opt for the time-worn strategy of blaming the victim. Space does not permit a full discussion of this point, suffice it to mention one aspect. Kiaps have always played an important role in "pacification" and it could reasonably be suggested that the number of Kiaps in a given area provides a reasonable indication of the Central Government's interest and development of that area. The distribution of Kiaps shows that most Kiaps are in the coastal and island areas: Manus for example has one Kiap for every 1,400 people, while in Enga the ratio is one Kiap for over 6,500 people. Need more be said?

----- Dr. Robert Gordon  
Department of Sociology,  
University of Papua New Guinea.