
Four Days in Papua

Notes from the Field

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The trip described here occurred in December 2007 and January 2008.

"Your name?"

The detective spoke with a broken ease. His accent cut his words sharply, suddenly, but his voice carried no energy and his shoulders hung passively on his frame. His hands sleep-walked over the typewriter, searching for the right place to begin.

"Spell please?"

He didn't look up. A smoke trail rose from the cigarette burning between his lips. As I answered, I surveyed the room.

The public section of Jayapura's police intelligence unit was small—just three offices, none bigger than a dorm room. We sat in the third, separated from sunlight and company by a low plaster wall. Everything looked aged. Wide, dark stains bloomed on the walls. The metal filing cabinet in the far corner bowed, its corners chipped. I shifted my weight; the chair squeaked.

I found it fitting. The station felt like the rest of the city: hot, slow, and vaguely supervised—every bit a remote provincial capital. I refocused my attention as the typing stopped. The detective looked at me.

"And you are here for why?"

I had set off for Jayapura the day before out of simple curiosity. I wanted to escape from the Jakarta-Yogyakarta-Bali beaten path of tourism in Indonesia, wanted to see what else such a large and diverse country might hold. Like all travelers, I sought authentic experience.

Here, history encouraged me. Papua—the province governed from the city of Jayapura—looked to be anything but a beaten path.

Originally colonized by the Netherlands along with the rest of Indonesia, Papua has long been regarded as different. Its people are ethnic Melanesian, not ethnic Javanese as in Java, the country's most populous island. Over time, many Papuans embraced Christianity, not Islam. And while the main islands developed the economic and bureaucratic infrastructure of a modern state, Papua has remained relatively isolated.

When the Dutch left Indonesia in 1949, they stayed in Papua. To them, such differences merited a separate country. But Indonesia's staunchly nationalist early presidents protested. What was Dutch, they argued, should be Indonesian—all of it. And, after long years of UN-brokered negotiations and a very controversial vote, Papua joined Indonesia in 1969.

But as the province joined Indonesia, many of its people rejected the idea. Even before the official handover, dissidents formed the Free Papua Movement. Some in its armed wing, the National Liberation Army, have been waging a low-level insurgency ever since. Over time, several issues inflamed resistance: large-scale migration from Java and Sulawesi, resource extraction by international corporations, local government corruption, a heavy security presence, a Jakarta-centered dictatorship, and human rights abuses.

Even after Indonesia's remarkable democratic transition earlier this decade, the province remains a flashpoint. In Indonesia, protests continue periodically; in 2006, a demonstration near Jayapura turned into a riot, killing four Indonesian officials. Abroad, a network of non-governmental organizations draw attention to the province; several advocate for Papuan independence outright.

But by the time I stepped into police headquarters, the province had calmed. The new democratic government in Jakarta promised cultural respect, regional autonomy, local representation, and development. The police were no longer controlled by the military. And the insurgency hovered near extinction.

Still, Papua remained closed to international journalists, and even tourists needed to check-in with police for special passes.

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The detective's keystrokes echoed around the otherwise silent office one at a time. Clack. Clack. Clack. While he typed my *surat jalan*—the required travel permit—I tried to make conversation.

"Why do I need a permit again?" I asked in a fake casual sing-song.

"Oh." The typing stuttered and then resumed. The detective smiled weakly. "It is the paperwork. For everybody. Just in case. For your safety."

"Safety?" I asked, with a forced note of concern. And after a pause: "Why? Is it dangerous?"

"No, no," he answered quickly, pausing for another smile. "It is not dangerous. Just for everybody. You are safe. Everybody has a permit." So I am safe, I thought,

but the permit is for my safety. I did not bother to point out the contradiction.

Still, he was likely right. Despite the province's small insurgency and recent riot, I faced little danger. The government maintained a heavy security presence around Jayapura. District and provincial police stations watched over the city's main avenues—a detached outpost, its night market. On the roads outside the city, a handful of military bases stood guard, their armored cars parked in a row, watching traffic.

If anything, I worried more about the military than the would-be rebels. Papuan dissidents often embrace outside observers. To them, foreigners—commonly NGO workers—are a source of international support. The government is less welcoming. The military in particular sees international observers as interlopers, meddlers.

I recalled with unease the night before, when a walk had turned into a lesson on local military culture.

That night, I had stepped outside of my hotel to find two young Javanese men selling fireworks. At first, the conversation flowed as it always had in Indonesia: name, age, nationality, their fireworks, my limited Indonesian. One of a hundred conversations of curiosity. Open and easy. Smiling.

But, when I parted, they caught up to me. And the questions got more intrusive. What are you doing here? Where are you going? When the pair started warning me away from certain areas, I stopped. We stood still, awkwardly lit by the headlights of passing traffic.

"Why are you so curious?" I asked over the buzz, turning their questions around. "Why are you following me?"

"To help," one answered, looking at the other. "To be friends."

The second pulled out a camera. "Let's take a picture! Friends!"

I motioned the camera down and made a sour face, more upset at myself than them. Open and easy and smiling, sure. I should have noticed earlier, I thought. Their haircuts and bearing. My light skin. I looked like an NGO researcher, and they were more than naturally curious. My hands shifted nervously. Faking a smile, I asked for confirmation: "Where do you work?"

“For the army,” the cameraman answered. “We are soldiers. We work for the army.”

Calming a dizzying rush of uncertainty, I made my goodbyes and walked on, away, around a dark corner, toward the places they had asked me not to go. The damp night fed my nervous sweat. A small event, but no small displacement. I fumbled for a reaction, not knowing what to think, rudely pushed into reality—a researcher suddenly lost as his ink became experience.

My heart danced, I recalled, but I moved slowly, deliberately, like a drunk trying to pass as sober.

Stumbling upon a *wartel*, I tapped a quick email to the American Embassy in Jakarta, less for them than for me. “Nothing illegal,” I wrote in closing, sure the pair had not acted under orders. “But certainly nothing reassuring.”

The bang and rattle of the typewriter slide brought me back to the present, to the police office and the slow ceiling fan. I pushed myself upright and the chair again complained. The detective continued to type. Clack. Clack. Clack.

The next day, I gathered my permit and bag to set out from Jayapura for Sentani, a smaller town several miles away. As soon as it began, the journey took an unexpected turn.

While bargaining with a *supir ojek* over the cost of a motorcycle ride, I heard a call for my attention. Nonchalantly, two Papuan men walked over, interrupting my awkward negotiations. The driver and I both paused.

The two were almost comically mismatched. One stood tall and spare, with a bare and serious face. The other was short and accessorized, wearing a bright aluminum watch, a dark safari cap, and a thick mustache that ruled proudly over the lower half of his face.

Ignoring the *ojek* driver, they pointed me toward the public taxi, a dented but sturdy white van. We boarded together. And, after a short ride, they motioned me off. Out past the city, out off the highway. They set to walking and I followed.

At a bend in the dirt road, the tall man turned around. “This,” he said, motioning to the right, “is my house.”

A neighborhood of cinder-block structures fanned out before us, draped in thick coats of bright paint. His house, from its narrow front porch to its tall rear wall, radiated lime green.

“Please, sit,” said the short man, nodding to a couch on the porch.

The tall man disappeared inside and a woman emerged with lemonade and cookies. Across the street, boys played in worn shorts, with shoes discarded and shirts optional. I slung off my pack and sat down, disoriented, but with enough presence of mind to thank the woman generously. His wife, I thought.

“Next time, take the taxi,” advised the shorter man. “It is cheap. Look for the white vans and then ask the driver where you are going.”

I agreed, and discussion continued. At the speed of lemonade-sips, the conversation moved predictably — another conversation of curiosity. Smiling. I answered more questions than I asked. Eventually, I told them about my earlier trips across Java and Bali.

The tall man wanted to know more. “Why are you here, in Papua?”

“Vacation,” I said. “I am a student in Washington, D.C., in America. I came here for vacation, to learn about Indonesia.”

“Student,” he repeated, “not working for research, not NGO?”

“No.”

“Oh,” he said, looking past me into the street. He sounded disappointed.

At times, activists and academics seem to be the only foreigners watching Papua. Usually, the activist voice is louder, more certain. But sometimes the line between the two groups blurs. Before setting off for Indonesia, I had read reports by both. Briefly, I had even conducted interviews.

Several months earlier and half a world away, I sat down with two human rights activists as they lobbied the United States Congress. To them, the situation is

binary. In Papua, there is good; it is native, just, and innocent, if imperfect. And there is bad; it is imposed, illegitimate, and destructive. Pushing the province into Star Wars, one called it “the dark side.” At the time, I just shrugged.

But Papua complicated things. Moving from chat to chat, I caught glimpses of a second Jayapura, a mirror city birthed by this tension. The government kept calm the surface. But invited visitors swam deeper. Hints came and then disappeared sporadically: an activist telling me how an old woman guided him quietly to a scene of government abuse; those two Papuan men, too eager to shepherd and speak with a researcher; an *ojek* driver, offering me a cot in his house so that I could avoid the government register at a hotel.

“It is fine,” he had assured me. “A young man, too, came one week ago. For an NGO.”

But even as I breathed the dust and road-smog of Papua, even as I walked, I could never shake my skepticism. I understood the international open hearts that pressed for education, free speech, or healthcare. It was those pushing for independence that confused me. From my small perch near Jayapura, the province looked vast, underdeveloped, diverse, destitute, and inaccessible—poor soil in which to plant the seeds of a new state.

Still, I felt unsure. With each step, my walk brought me no nearer to certainty. Like the city, my mind felt divided. If cold policy stretched over the surface, hot doubt flowed beneath it. Conclusions froze and boiled, crashed and melted away. If not independence, then the province deserved reform, I decided—the government’s promises of respect, representation, and development. Promises. But implemented by whom?

My feet continued to move in a quiet cadence. I thought of the detective. I thought of the soldiers. I thought of the researcher that came before me, imagined him white with youth.

I thought finally of the Papuan boys playing, of the man with the lime-green home. And what does this mean to them? No answers came to me.

A day later, I sat outside my guesthouse, watching an indifferent orange sky close out the year, unsure of

what to do with the last hours of 2007. New Year’s Eve in Papua. I decided to take a walk.

In Sentani as it was in Jayapura, the ethnic differences were almost geographic. The Javanese claimed sites of uniform and commerce: the military bases and police posts, the driver’s seats, the storefronts. Papuans took the highways, the board-and-tin villages, the betel stands. Migrants from Sulawesi moved between the two.

And all held claim to God. But, as the mosques watched over scattered corners, the churches claimed the main. They lined the highway: great, reaching structures, many without walls, open to God and the wind, open to salvation from the heat of bodies clustered close together. Along the roads, they outnumbered police outposts.

But the one I stumbled upon was different, no more than a house on a side-street. In the dark, I saw people gathering outside its double doors, and studied the shadows they cast across the light streaming out from inside.

On impulse, I walked over. The group quieted as I approached, a ghost from the darkness.

“*Selamat tahun baru!*” I almost shouted, smiling, nervous. “Happy New Year! Is this a church?”

“Happy New Year!” they responded. And, almost without hesitation: “Please, please come in.”

“Are you a Christian?”

“We are having a service tonight. Come in, come in.”

Pushed along, I followed their hands, riding on a wave of greetings. To the pastor, to an old woman, to and past a family, to the corner. I searched for an out-of-the-way spot and sat down. The room filled quickly, crowded with maybe fifty people.

The service moved, but moved blurry. The convocation, the sermon came too quickly for me to understand, wrapped in accents too thick to decipher. Language fell into the background, mingled with the sweating heat in a haze. They called to God and I stepped back.

I felt like a phony, like a leech. Unable to find my own meaning in the new year, I had sneaked in to steal theirs. Eager for authentic experience, I found something deeper than I could understand, more

sincere than I knew how to process. Overwhelmed, I just watched.

The congregation moved together, sang together, and called again to God. Their off-beat claps punctuated discordant hymns. Together, they reached and felt and grabbed to recover a meaning unique to them. Around me, the church body felt at once both disjointed and united.

I did not understand it. But I knew why I felt so out of place. I had discovered a refuge, a pure expression of community and in-group experience, a space with no burdensome supervision or ethnic expectation. I had found a place that the spirit of my presence inherently violated, an in-group I contaminated with the simple act of watching.

I stood with them, but hunched. And I fell deep into my chair upon sitting, ashamed and waiting for it to end.

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“What is your name?”

This again. The army officer stood stiffly, but looked at me with boredom from under the brim of his hat. I handed him my *surat jalan* and leaned over to sign the register. The Papuan *ojek* driver guiding me grinned and chatted with the other guards.

“And your passport?”

We stood at the entrance to *Ijar Gunung*, a squat mountain overlooking Sentani. During the Second World War, the United States had turned it into a military base. General MacArthur retreated here after losing the Philippines. Now, the Indonesian military used it.

But, before he left, MacArthur erected a monument at the peak. I told the guard that I was an American, that I wanted to visit the monument. The officer took my passport and waved my driver and me through.

The short ride to the top was surreal. Crawling up the side of the mountain, the military base looked like a displaced image of an older America. Factory-line brick houses, old officer’s quarters, clustered in small villages. Barrel-shaped barracks still survived—some abandoned, others restored—set aside in clearings.

At the top, the view was no less arresting. Wind poured over the peak, swaying trees and tearing branches away. It seemed to wash us clean, to make us ready. We stared out to the horizon. From the foot of the mountain out across the valley, Sentani lay exposed. I could see the dot-like houses bunched by the edge of the lake, the single strand of highway running through town, and the American-made airstrip off to the right.

I sat to look and the driver joined me. After a few days together, he had become more of a friend than an occasional hire. But his mind was on the guards, not the view.

“Soldiers and police,” he said, “they are no good. I do not like them. When you are nice, they just act like nothing, like you are nothing.”

“Legally,” I agreed, speaking louder than I felt to fight the wind, “I don’t think he should have taken my passport, only my *surat jalan*.”

He did not seem to pay attention.

“I want to show you something,” he said. Reaching into his pocket, he took out his cell phone and showed it to me. The display background was the morning star flag, the symbol of the Free Papua Movement. I nodded, letting him know I understood. But I stayed silent.

After a time, he spoke again.

“*Saya orang Indonesia*,” he said over the charging wind, “*tapi saya tidak suka orang Indonesia*.”

I am Indonesian, but I do not like Indonesians.