

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

EPW-7
The Mount Hagen Show

P. O. Box 628,
Port Moresby,
Papua,
Territory of Papua
& New Guinea

September 16, 1967

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
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366 Madison Avenue,
New York 10017, New York,
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Inside the main chamber of the Mount Hagen Council House there is a bronze plaque erected in honour of Ninji Kama, one of the great traditional fight-leaders, and later a government-appointed headman, of the Mogeï clan. At his death, Ninji was the president of the Kui Council near Mount Hagen. The plaque simply reads : "Ninji Kama, - 1963, 'Papa Bilong Ol'."

The Western Highlands is still at that stage of development when most of its prominent leaders remember the taim bipo. They too have no way of telling their exact date of birth. Indeed, most of the District was not brought under government control until the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even today, some 900 square miles of the District have not been derestricted for outside entry. First contact is still being made with a few thousand people of whose existence the Administration is aware, but who themselves probably know only dimly of the vast social changes taking place quite close by. One often wonders just what these people make of the many aeroplanes that inevitably pass overhead on their way to more distant government stations.

Ninji Kama was, then, but one of many men who still bridge the transition between the ways of their forefathers and Australian rule. The writer of the plaque was perhaps unduly sentimental, and certainly over-estimated the extent of Ninji's influence, yet his respect for Ninji seems to be rooted in much the same emotions as informed Kenneth Read's regard for Makis, the luluai of the village which Read described in The High Valley :

"His face and figure possessed a quality of ancient beauty - of something perceived in relics from the civilizations of man's beginning - an age-old pride, the mark of grandeur and authority."

The present Members of the House of Assembly and most of the local government leaders from the Western Highlands were youngsters when Ninji was at his peak. They too maintain a pride in their past that complements their aggressive efforts at their people's self-improvement in the modern world. They have not been demoralized by the self-consciousness of near-nakedness, nor the reiterated imputation of

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incompetence. So far, they have benefited from contact. The central government has brought peace and greater security to their daily lives. New goods have become available to them, and some money. Modern means of communication are expanding their horizons. Their gratitude for these changes is reflected in their willingness still to build roads, often with simple digging-sticks aided only by their bare hands, and against the advice of Administration engineers and economists to whom the benefit of direct contact with the outside world is not sufficient justification for the hard work involved.

Change, though modest still by external standards, has been so far-reaching and so rapid for this area that the Highlanders' demands have scarce managed to keep pace with actuality. As the rate of change slows, and new demands are frustrated, so the picture will change, but there is here still a very real pride in the past and a faith in the potential benefits of present labour that remain unbowed by the preaching of church and Administration. Until recently, in fact, many Western Highlanders were in no way reconciled to the permanence of the Australian Administration in their area. Their doubts, however, were stimulated by a very real pride in the past, a nostalgia for the excitement of pre-contact living, rather than by hatred for their new masters. Material progress has served to lessen much of the local people's distrust of the future, but there is a restlessness here that seems rooted in the same emotions as Makis' demand for Read's attention - a longing still for the flair and swagger of the successful warrior.

The Mount Hagen Show is, in the words of its patron, intended as a biennial "memorial to all the peoples of the Western Highlands and an assurance of a sound (specifically economic?) future for the District." Its exhibits, however, take second place to a living memorial of an only outwardly receding past, for, while local clothing habits may be changing, a very real pride in the past persists, despite the local schoolteachers' injunction to their pupils that they were to go to the Show only as spectators, and certainly not in feathers.

As in most parts of the Territory, there are two worlds in which Mount Hagen's normal population of 550 Europeans lives. There is, firstly, the world of those Europeans for whom the word "expatriate" was coined - Australians away from home in everything but spirit. The young North Queenslanders who wander around town in cowboy hats and elastic-sided boots, the young ladies and gentlemen in their ballgowns and tuxedos who went to the Show Ball, have never really left home at all, though they often find themselves a little higher up the social ladder than they did at home. The only Papuan or New Guinean who impinges upon their existence is that accoutrement of colonial gentility, the hausboi or mankimasta (Pidgin for "domestic servant").

On quite a separate plane, there is the world of those who are responsive, favourably or unfavourably, to, and even concerned with, their environment. For the actively hostile, the Show has little interest, except perhaps to demonstrate the intractability of the local people in the face of change. For concerned and unconcerned alike, however, the Show has its attractions. At worst, it provides an occasion for yet another few nights "on the booze" with rarely seen acquaintances. At best,

it can be a pageant, magnificent both in its sights and sounds, which somehow summons up the grandeur of a past that never really existed.

In official eyes, the principal aim of all Territory Shows is not so much to boost a particular district, nor even to pass on information to the local people per medium of the various departments' displays, as to provide a meeting-ground for people from once hostile groups to meet and to compete together. Hence, the small contingent of Kukukukus flown in on special charter from Wonenara, and kept under police guard to protect their wouldbe friends from their erratic fierceness. Hence too, the visiting group of gourd-wearing Hewas who had been contacted for the first time less than a year ago, and to whom the idea even of a Western Highlands District is as foreign as is their new life of relative peace. Watchful as ever, uncertain of their newly found security, they were hustled around the arena in a tight group, escorted by a small contingent of police, an interpreter, and a patrol officer who was specially dressed for the occasion in a kilt. One gained just the faintest insight into the former tenor of their lives when an announcer warned the crowding cameramen to be careful of the Hewas' archery. "They are," he cautioned, "renowned for their speed rather than their accuracy of fire."

At first glance, the official programme might have been written for another place. It was that of any rural fair. Commencing with a competition for the best matched pair of ponies, it proceeded through a band recital and musical chairs for the under 15s to the final presentation of prizes and sale of produce. On the way through, however, one encountered references to a different set of competitions : archery, spear-throwing, and tribal dancing. There was, then, a Show for everybody.

The real life of the Show, the element that drew the crowds, had very little to do with the ring programme or the peak-capped, jodhpur-clad, lady horseriders. The bicycle race and woodchopping finals attracted few entrants, though the bewigged and painted competitors provided the occasion for some, by now repetitive, photographic humour. Ironically, the bicycle race proved a dismal failure for its European onlookers in that it was won by a young man in a T-shirt who, alone of the 4 competitors, was unencumbered by a feathered headdress. The ring events were good for a few laughs perhaps, and even for a hastily awarded prize of a bag of rice, a case of tinned fish or a new axe, but they were only intermissions from the real stuff of the Show.

The real excitement of the Show was to be gained simply by being in Mount Hagen. Walking around the Showground, one was assaulted by colours, sights and sounds which have no antecedents, and probably no successors. One was pressed amidst throngs of men and women covered in pig-grease to protect them from the cold of evening, their faces so thickly covered in bright paint that a smile seemed like a sudden flash of humanity beneath a mask-like face. Feathers swayed, and bare-breasted girls posed self-consciously for yet another camera. Long lines of brightly decorated headdresses of bird of paradise and parrot feathers set in wigs of knotted human hair swayed in time to the alternate chanting and loud hissing of a line of Wabagas. A confusion of languages and chants



surrounded one, while, beyond the dusty confusion of the mass-attendance, sat a grandstand of sunburnt Europeans. It was the noise, the colour, the confusion of the people who simply walked around, both inside the arena and outside, which was the Show. The indigenous patrons paid 30 cents to attend, Europeans \$1 (and \$3 more for the security of the grandstand from which to view

the grand parade), yet it was simply to see the 30-cent-attenders that most of the Europeans came. The local people came to see each other, to admire the traditional adornments of other areas, and to be admired themselves in turn. The spectators were the show; the local people its principal exhibits.

Some of the local government councils' exhibits consisted simply of a group of brightly decorated warriors in defiant poses. One council proudly displayed the decaying body of a preserved wantok, and charged 20 cents for each photograph taken of him. A "genuine" Red Indian - at least he sounded like an American - clad only in a loincloth for the occasion, sat and watched the parading Highlanders from the stand. The female horseriders, clad in the garb of a foreign tradition, seemed strangely cool and remote from the confusion of their surroundings.

The Show required months of preparation on the part of the local people. Transit houses were built at intervals along the roads that lead into Mount Hagen, sweet potato was planted





8 months before to feed the visitors, and, finally, 4 miles of traditional men's houses made of bush materials were built near the Showground - an "Instant Hilton" of mammoth proportions.

In more distant parts of the Highlands, preliminary fairs had to be organised by the local people in order to raise the money to pay the fares for a local delegation to attend the Show. A group

of Eastern Highlanders from the Kompri near Henganofi, for example, held a market day at the local primary school and sold sweet potato and other vegetables to each other so that a small group could pay their truck fares to the Show. The attendance of many people was rendered even more difficult by the widespread publicity given to an Administration circular requesting those Highlanders who could get to the Show not to charge tourists the traditional 10 cents when they posed for a photograph. Only the Hewas were exempted from this restriction. Their interpreter carried a small card bearing the District Commissioner's signature beneath a sign informing any wouldbe photographer that, as the economic potential of the Lake Kapiago area was so low, the Hewas were entitled to charge 20 cents per photograph.

The Highlanders came to the Show for much the same reasons as the Australians. They came to see and be seen, to meet strange people from distant areas, to trade (but not with their best axes, only with specially made ones of inferior quality) and to converse, to compete, and perhaps to win. Their enthusiasm this time, however, was not what it once was.



A large sign outside the Mount Hagen Subdistrict Office urged the local people to prepare for the Show. It was clearly aimed at increasing their sense of anticipation, and, therefore, indicated at weekly intervals over the last 3 months just how much time remained until the Show. Unfortunately, the sign was written in English. There was very little real incentive for many of the people to come to the Show unless they had goods to sell.

Some of the Enga speakers, who had to travel sometimes over 100 miles to the Show along roads and trails that rose at times to over 9,000 feet, refused to come unless they were driven from where their tracks met the road to the Show. Some junior patrol officers, therefore, spent 3 or 4 days both before and after the Show simply ferrying truckloads of their charges into Mount Hagen. Indeed, the principal contribution to the Show of one group of Wabagas was the continual chanting of a refrain in their own language to the effect that the next Show should be held at Wabag. Local pride was not the only feeling that motivated their chant.



A Mock Battle Begins

Hagens' houses, a prominent Wabag leader replied quite simply, "We just wanted to show them that we hadn't forgotten..."

The nervousness of the marshals for a mock battle between rival groups of Hagens this time was perhaps understandable. The delighted anticipation of trouble experienced by a group of European observers when a group from Togoba charged through the town in the early hours of the morning seemingly hellbent to spear anything or anyone in their path was lessened somewhat when one of the leaders of the charge stopped to look at his watch to check that the charge was proceeding on schedule. On this occasion, most of the enjoyment was experienced by the local people.

Once at the Show, however, the arrogance and swagger of the warrior of old reappeared. At the 1965 Show, for example, a group of Wabagas lined up on one side of the airstrip near Mount Hagen to confront a group of warriors from the Mount Hagen Subdistrict. Battle was averted only by the rapid intervention of the Papua and New Guinea Police Band, which doubles as a riot squad on such occasions. When questioned later why they had smashed down some of the

There is still a genuine pride in the way in which the Western Highlanders bedeck themselves in their feathers and paint. They did not giggle nervously when recognised beneath their traditional finery as did a contingent I knew from the Eastern Highlands. Indeed, it was not an uncommon sight to see a councillor's gleaming silver badge given pride of place in the headdress of a proud Wabaga.

The organisers of the grand parade, however, the councillors, M.H.A's and other leaders whose job it was to marshall their various contingents together, wore mainly European clothes, in order to distinguish themselves from their more backward charges. Despite their sophistication, however, all of them too were quite determined that their people should win. In fact, their zeal in this cause combined all that was worst in the behaviour of the old-style kiap in a primitive area with the traditional aggressiveness of the Highlands leader. They swung their canes mercilessly at the performing kanakas - for, despite the United Nations, this is what they called their less sophisticated charges, and how they treated them to boot - in a way that no European would dare in this anti-colonial age. Their distrust of their wantoks' very instincts was evident in the elaborate precautions they took to ensure that a mock battle that was staged in the main arena did not develop into outright conflict. Even the indigenous police who accompanied each group into the main arena could not match the liberality with which their own leaders flayed the luckless dancers. It was perhaps the same distrust in their own people that informed the frequent and unprompted harangues, delivered both in public and in the privacy of the longhouses at night, to the effect that the Highlands must not be hurried. At these times, the magnificence of the day's display, the swagger of the proud warrior, gave way to a despondency about the future that emphasised the Highlanders' material and psychological dependance upon European advice and guidance to lead the way into the modern world. These feelings were not momentary, nor delivered for the edification of yet another white man, but were as real as their fears appeared physical, as their almost constant repetition showed.

In the end, it was a group of prominent leaders from Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands who seemed to sum up best of all just what the local people really thought about the Show. I met them walking disconsolately around the Showground, dressed in long trousers, white shirt and tie, gazing sorrowfully at the various Subdistricts' exhibits. "If only we had known," they said, "we need not have lost face quite like this. We could have arranged some sort of exhibit, or dressed some of our local people up in their traditional costumes. Instead, we have lost face, and everyone will know only of the tremendous prestige of the Western Highlands. We have done nothing here, and yet our area is much better developed than theirs..."

Yours sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.