

Papuans, It's Not You, It's Them

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There is a certain part of me that does not want to write this. I fear letting other Papuans hear this would damage them the way knowing it did me.

Parts of it I am sure Papuans know, as I remember from being in a city surrounded by non-Papuans. It appears in the disdain in using drunkards as excuse of Papuans 'backwardness', without talks about the systemic sources of Papuan hopelessness. No talks about how this state, this foreign thing thrust upon us, can only succeed through dispossessing Papuans; land grabbing, mama-mama displacement, the influx of more and more pendatang. At its worst they dispossess Papuans by stripping Papuans of their humanity.

What I was trying to say is that there is a certain way of seeing Papuans that I was afraid to mention. It is this way of seeing Papuans that specifically focuses on what Papua lacks; couth, clothes, 'beauty,' internet signal, the right use of Indonesian language, 'civilisations'. If this sounds familiar, that is because this practice was common during Dutch colonialism. Indonesia has reproduced this, believing Papua is lacking because it justifies their presence. This is why 'tertinggal' is a favourite term, a problem for which the solution is obviously *pembangunan*.

The aforementioned way of seeing Papuans is familiar because some postcolonial scholars (Frantz Fanon foremost among them) have called it the colonial gaze.

I am old enough to grow up without social media. So I did not have to think about being a Papuan in front of other people, people beyond Sentani. The gaze did not slap me in the face until I arrived in Java. I was not aware of how 'behind' we were. How the continuous use of koteka is obvious evidence that we need clothes, or in worse cases needed to be taught how to wear clothes.

Being outside of Papua also subjected me to the blatant stereotypes people have about Papuans. Most of the stereotypes are not flattering. Most of them are not new, I have heard them expressed in more polite terms in Papua. That we are stupid, until we prove otherwise. Alcoholics and trouble makers until we prove otherwise.

Added to that is the realisation that outside of Papua, I am not myself, I am a representative of my people. I was also somehow responsible for the faults of other Papuans. And people felt comfortable communicating to me their opinions of the problems of Papuans. I have heard of these problems before, but because this time I am the pendatang, people do not need to be polite when pointing out these problems to me.

What is weird is that as a mixed person, I have a better life than most Papuans in Indonesia. My light skin means I only get crumbs of what dark-skinned Papuans have to deal with. I was never called a monkey. How can they? My skin is brighter than some of them. An assembly of light-skinned Papuans like me is not seen as a threat to security.

When alone in Jakarta, people will not accuse me of being a trouble-making separatist. If anything, I am perhaps the face of an 'acceptable Papuan' in this colonial gaze; not too dark (read: visibly

Papuan) or loud or blunt or confident.

My skin tone protected me from the worst things that Indonesian racism could offer (and the case this weekend shows that they can offer a lot). I do not think a person with my skin tone will be handled as violently as they do to Orang Asli Papua.

But it did not protect me from other aspects of racism. For example, taking Java as the centre of Indonesian colonialism, my extended presence there has turned a part of me into what Fanon feared. I am a Papuan who carries within me this colonial gaze. The repeated assertions that Papuans are not ready to govern themselves (the reasons for which are the stereotypes above) haunts me.

Surely we know that Indonesians think Papuans are stupid, Papua is 'terbelakang'. A 'backward' place does not produce intelligent people. Surely we know Indonesians do not care about the well-being of Papuans. We have eyes, we have seen how violent the police and aparat are in dispersing Papuan demonstrations. And we have also seen how many Indonesians are okay with violence toward Papuans in Java. Perhaps we just did not expect them to be so crass in their racism.

In the coming days, I suspect we will hear stories about how development is a solution to this racism. Development will elevate Papuans to a level where we will not be equated with monkeys. That development will somehow take us to this mythical stage where each Papuan individual will be respected.

Let me preempt all that by assuring you that it is not true, that *pembangunan* will not end racism towards Papuans. The one who has a problem with racism is not Papuans, it is Indonesians.

This is the colonial gaze after all. If it ever thinks Papuans are enough, it will lecture Papuans to be grateful.

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Footnotes

[\[1\]](#) Bahasa Indonesian version of this article available here:

<https://tirto.id/rasisme-adalah-masalah-indonesia-bukan-orang-papua-egA9>