

Papuaphobia



Before anyone gave me a name, I already had one. Clan, kinship, land, ceremony, the mountain that raised me — that was my identity, whole and unquestioned. Then a stranger's word arrived to replace it: papuwah — "woolly," "frizzy" — a word for hair, stretched over centuries until it swallowed an entire people, then an entire island. I did not choose that name. It was fastened to me from a ship's deck, by men who had not yet even mapped the shore they were naming.

That is the first violence. Not the whip, not the bullet — the naming. Because once they named me, they had already decided what I was before they ever looked me in the eye.

This is Papuaphobia, and I am writing from inside the five centuries it has taken to build.

Long before any coloniser set foot in my highlands, I already existed in their imagination — wild, primitive, irrational, spiritually empty, permanently incomplete. Their explorers did not discover me. They arrived to confirm a figure their own maps, sermons, and textbooks had already drawn.

They folded me into a race that was never mine — Melanesia, the "black islands" — borrowing a vocabulary built to justify the enslavement of Africa and pouring it, unmodified, over the Pacific. One reviewer, a century and a half ago, reduced my entire existence to a single sentence: a black skin and a frizzled head of hair make the Papuan. Nothing else about me needed to be true. My humanity had already been settled by my hair.

Then they divided even my own people against each other — sorting some of us into "Papuan," others into "pygmy," inventing internal hierarchies of primitiveness so their science of inferiority could always find a new layer to expose. A man in my own village could be measured, photographed, and filed as evidence of an earlier stage of the species — a specimen of the Stone Age standing in for all of humanity's forgotten past, so that the men holding the measuring tape could feel they stood at its summit.

They came with two kinds of proof, and pointed both of them at me.

The first was scripture, twisted until an ancient curse on a man named Canaan became, centuries later, a curse on every Black body on earth — divine sanction for servitude dressed as theology. My village became a mission field awaiting rescue from cannibalism and paganism, whether or not those descriptions bore any relation to what I actually believed. My cosmology had to be renamed savagery before their conversion could be called salvation.

The second was science. They measured my skull. They ranked its volume against a European one and called the difference intelligence. They dressed an old prejudice in the language of laboratories and statistics until it wore "the objectivity of numbers" — even though the numbers had only ever been counting what they already believed. Genetics has since proven the entire architecture false. It did not matter. The classifications survived the collapse of the science that built them, because by then they had already moved from the laboratory into the language of everyday life.

Between the pulpit and the skull caliper, I was pinned twice: spiritually deficient, biologically incomplete. Two different institutions, one identical verdict.

They call it independence. They call it national integration. Look closer, and it is the same architecture wearing a new uniform.

Indonesia did not invent what is done to me. It inherited it — the maps, the missionary reports, the anthropological monographs, the racial hierarchy already built and waiting — and simply changed its vocabulary from civilisation to development, from empire to nation. My land administration still runs on Dutch colonial law drafted without a single Papuan in the room. My childhood was named "primitive" by teachers using a script written a century before I was born.

I have been called monyet. Monkey. Ape. My own governor had to stand in public, in this century, and say the words: Papuans are not a monkey race, they are members of the human race. That such a sentence needed to be spoken at all should tell you everything about how far these classifications have travelled, and how little they have changed along the way.

I have watched soldiers beat a man while calling him "dog" and "ape." I have watched children mocked for their skin and their hair in their own classrooms. I have heard officials speak, seriously, of removing my entire people from our own homeland — to the moon, to the Pacific, anywhere but here — the same doomed-race logic that once made Indigenous disappearance sound inevitable now recycled as population policy.

Here is what almost finished the job: not the insult, but the day I began to believe it.

I grew up whole. I did not know myself as a problem to be solved. I knew myself through family, land, language, and the cosmology that had never once asked me to prove I was human. It was only when I entered their towns, their schools, their offices that I learned I was "Black" and "Papuan" — and that this identity had already been assigned a lower price before I ever spoke a word in the room.

That is the mechanism's true genius. It does not need a soldier standing over me forever. It only needs me to start measuring my own worth by a standard built to prove I could never meet it. At that moment, the diagnosis and the cure arrive from the very same hand — I am named deficient, and then offered their civilisation as the only medicine for a sickness they invented in order to sell it to me.

I have been made to audition for a humanity that should never have needed proving.

I will not spend what remains of my life negotiating my worth using categories built by people who decided the verdict before the trial began. I do not need their classification system to know what I am. Their hierarchy — gods above humans, races above races, developed above primitive — is not the shape of the universe. It is graffiti they have painted over reality and mistaken for the wall itself.

I was never behind them on some ladder toward civilisation. I was standing on ground of my own, with my own law, my own memory, my own way of being answerable to land and ancestor — a world that does not require their approval to be real.

I will not let a name given to my hair decide the shape of my humanity.

I will not let their skull caliper outlive its own science inside my mind.

I will not inherit the shame they manufactured and call it self-knowledge.

Before I lose my land, they first try to take the authority to name me. So that is where I begin taking it back.

I name Papuaphobia for exactly what it is: not a passing prejudice, but an inherited architecture, rebuilt in every generation, wearing whatever costume the century demands — scripture, science, security, development — while keeping the same verdict underneath. Naming it is not an academic exercise. It is the first act of ending it.

I return to what was mine before any ship arrived: land, kinship, language, the cosmology that measured my worth through relationship and reciprocity, never through skull volume or hair texture. My decolonisation does not end with a flag or a vote alone. It ends the day I stop answering to classifications I never authored, and start speaking, once again, entirely in my own voice.

I am done being named. I am naming myself.

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