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The Last First Contact: An Eco-Cultural Interpretation

by Gregory T. Cushman

In 1336, a group of indigenous farmers and herders watched as an Iberian expedition disembarked on their native land, the Canary Islands. We know almost nothing about how this first contact played out, but its outcome is all too familiar. The Guanches eventually killed the leader of this early European foray into the Atlantic after he established a settler colony on the island that now bears his name. European guns, germs, horses, and steel proved incapable of eliminating anti-colonial resistance on the Canaries for another 160 years, however, until a wet winter, subsistence crisis, and horrific epidemic joined forces with the Spaniards' war of attrition. For the Guanches, losing meant systematic enslavement on the Atlantic World's first sugar plantations and eventual cultural extinction.¹

The last first contact turned out differently. In the early 1930s, a group of Australian gold prospectors in search of El Dorado took great care to record their first meetings with New Guinea highlanders, the last major human population to make the "dangerous. . . passage from isolation to membership in the worldwide community."² In the early 1980s, two Australian filmmakers, Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, tracked down dozens of surviving participants, obtained access to the massive archive of photographs, films, diaries, and letters kept by expedition leader "Mick" Leahy, and used them to produce *First Contact* (1983, 55 min.). At first, this riveting, classroom-friendly documentary seems to confirm many of our expectations regarding how a collision between the Stone Age and the Aviation Age should play out. However, careful attention to cultural and environmental signifiers in this film—particularly those provided by native informants—reveals how much we have forgotten or ignored about the

biological and cultural meaning of first contact events. This testimony provides a stark alternative to the stories Europeans and their descendants like to tell about how they came to dominate the world.

The first Europeans to explore the New Guinea highlands were driven by God, glory, greed for gold, and an acute sense of superiority based on eleven centuries of European overseas imperialism. This film only hints at the exploitation that mining has wrecked on the landscapes and peoples of New Guinea—and the devastation that would have ensued if geological history had located large deposits of precious metals in the Wahgi Valley. Mick Leahy gloried in his power to “elici[t] undisguised awe and terror. . . followed by stunned silence and tears” when demonstrating the ability of his rifle to blow out the brains of a pig or when flying brave native children to the coast in a duraluminum airplane. To some he encountered, even the tin can lids he discarded seemed to be impregnated with power. He and his brothers consciously manipulated these perceptions to advance their “friendly invasion” of this “primeval” realm.³ Many highlanders viewed these outsiders not as gods, it turns out, but as dangerous personifications of wildness. “Did [they] come from the ground? from the sky? from the water?” Others concluded that “they must be our ancestors from the place of the dead” searching riverine sediments for their discarded bones.

But it did not take long for highlanders to realize that these wealthy, powerful beings were human at their core. They achieved this realization in a variety of ways, befitting the spectacular cultural diversity of this region. “When we saw the laplaps [loincloths] and trousers on their bodies, we thought they must not have bodily wastes in them because they were wrapped up so neatly,” Kirupano Eza’e recalled. He “carefully hid to watch the white man excrete” in order to get a look at their unchangeable inner substance. “Their skin is different,” he

concluded with a laugh, "but their shit smells just like ours." Michael Leahy had to post a bodyguard "when nature called . . . to restrain natives eager to rush forward and package our bodily waste."⁴ Like so many colonizers of this era, he was obsessed with hygiene; eastern highlanders, on the other hand, were disgusted by the sweet "spirit smell" given off by his soap-washed body.⁵ Inevitably, his careful attempts to keep foreign disease out of the highlands failed. Liklik, a highland woman who married one of his native assistants, died from malaria after she journeyed to the coast to meet her husband's relatives. Her own people astutely diagnosed the proximate cause of her illness—she traveled too far from home.⁶ In other parts of the highlands, epidemics (*sikman*) sometimes preceded the appearance of outsiders by many years and, in the case of the Tsembenga, decimated their native dogs.⁷ But in the main, foreign disease is conspicuous by its relative absence from this film and the colonial history of highland New Guinea.⁸ Virgin soil epidemics and depopulation were not inexorable consequences of first contact.

Michael Leahy initially assumed that these "primitive people" were driven by greed for "the white man's plainly superior possessions. . . ; murder is of incidental importance compared with the acquisition of those goods."⁹ He was therefore astonished by the preference Mt. Hagen tribes showed for large mother-of-pearl shells (*kina*) over steel. When Ndika Nikints first glimpsed these shells, he immediately sent someone to locate his tribe's big-man, Ndika Powa: "Tell him the people-eating spirits wanted to eat the pig and gave this shell in return. . . . This strange man that came, he's not a spirit, he's the shellman! Hurry quickly, there's a lot more shells!"—more than he could imagine, thanks to the waste leftover from pearling activity in the rich marine waters off northeastern Australia.¹⁰ In return for shell traded on native terms, the Leahy expedition obtained willing labor, more meat than they could eat, and sex. As one aged

woman in the film recalls, "My people gave me to the strangers to get their wealth. We were terrified! We thought they'd eat us. In fact, they were kind to us. We had sex together. Then we knew they were men. . . not spirits—just men." In return, Ndika Powa suggested a bride price that would have made his tribe a major power in ritual exchange for generations: he hoped to obtain a few cuttings of the trees that bear *kina* shells.

This naïve request actually suggests that New Guinea highlanders were not as isolated nor as technologically ignorant as the Australians believed. Europeans expected they would encounter one vast, virgin wilderness in the New Guinea interior. Indeed, the Leahys crossed large unpopulated tracts rich with wildlife, but interspersed with densely settled, grassy valleys that "looked like a huge parkland." Paleoecological evidence shows that the upper Wahgi valley has never been primeval forest; from 7000 years ago until after first contact, its utterly humanized landscape was dominated by gardens and fire-adapted *kumai* grass (*Imperata cylindrica*). Highland farmers were the first, worldwide, to domesticate taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), bananas (*Musa* spp.), and the Guanches' bane, sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*), and by at least 2500 years ago, they were engaged in intensive, raised field agriculture. Ever since, enterprising highlanders like Ndika Powa have been quite open to new cultivars and agricultural practices that would improve the productivity and sustainability of their agroecosystems. Circa 1200 BP, Wahgi farmers began planting *Casuarina* trees en masse to provide timber, firewood, and to replenish the soil. (Meanwhile, the ubiquitous military strategy of ring-barking an enemy tribe's trees helped ensure that the Wahgi retained its open landscape.) Sometime after the great Long Island eruption (ca. 1645), Wahgi farmers rapidly embraced an American domesticate, the sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), as their dominant staple and pig fodder and learned to intercrop them with nitrogen-fixing legumes. More recently—but well

before first contact—they supplemented these with maize (*Zea mays*), manioc (*Manihot dulcis*), squash (*Cucurbita* spp.), tobacco (*Nicotiana* sp.), and a host of other foreign economic plants, all the while living in intensely localized, stateless societies.¹¹

As a document of eco-cultural change, *First Contact* is even more valuable thanks to two sequels, *Joe Leahy's Garden* (1988) and *Black Harvest* (1992). These films show a wooded, postcolonial highland landscape transformed by the suppression of fire and warfare and the growth of plantation agriculture—lands in which sweet potato now grows as an unwanted weed. Mick Leahy's mixed-race son, Joe, was one of the lucky few who became fantastically wealthy by postcolonial standards after the great Brazilian frost of July 1975 caused world coffee prices to skyrocket.¹² The first film centers on the struggle of Tumul, a clan leader of the Ganiga tribe, to obtain suitable recompense for helping Joe make it big. The film ends with Joe Leahy, the proud owner of a Mercedes, making peace by exchanging Tumul's pig for a smoke-spewing Daikatsu pick-up on the verge of breakdown. (Ironically, Tumul sports a fishing hat emblazoned with the slogan "Get Rich, Stay Rich" during this ritual exchange.) The second film picks up the story five years later when a new cooperative venture is on the verge of its first harvest. Green coffee beans glisten with anticipation in a dew of orange, hand-mixed pesticide. Then, tragically, the world price of coffee collapses and the Ganiga (subsistence farmers still) refuse to pick coffee for the token wage offered by Joe. Popina Mai, the clan leader who risked his reputation and tribal lands on the success of this partnership, receives a cruel lesson in globalization from Joe: "When world prices drop, we're affected too. Nobody cares about our little enterprise. You think we're important. In world terms we're fleas." Symbolically, their partnership disintegrates when Joe refuses to let Popina use his modern toilet, while an old-style tribal war ravages their plantation and the local bank initiates foreclosure.

In *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), Jared Diamond begins with a question posed by Yali, a leader of the Papuan movement for independence. "Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?" In the spirit of Mick Leahy, Diamond did not stop to think about what Yali meant by his question, nor wait to hear Yali's answer.¹³ These films do not refute the interpretations of Alfred Crosby, Tim Flannery, and Jared Diamond regarding the environmental roots of global inequalities, but they at least give the citizens of Yali's republic—on both sides of first contact—a hard-earned chance to respond.

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Notes

¹ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

² *Ibid.*, 99. Circa 1930, the upper and middle Wahgi River valley, the main focus of these explorations, had an estimated population of 125,000 and the highlands of Papua New Guinea, as a whole, a population as high as one million.

³ Michael J. Leahy, *Exploration into Highland New Guinea, 1930-1935*, ed. Douglas E. Jones (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 45, 80, 145. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotes come from the film.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵ See Warwick Anderson, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 640-669. In Mesoamerica, the Spanish conquistadors' relative lack of personal hygiene convinced the Aztecs they were dealing with a barbarian race.

⁶ Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, *First Contact* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 46, 167.

⁷ Roy A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 8-9.

⁸ See Warwick Anderson, "The Possession of Kuru: Medical Science and Biocolonial Exchange," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000): 713-744; John Dedemo Waiko, *A Short History of Papua New Guinea* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹ Leahy, *Exploration*, 45.

¹⁰ Quoted in Marilyn Strathern, "The Decomposition of an Event," *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992): 248.

¹¹ T. P. Denham, et al., "Origins of Agriculture in Kuk Swamp in the Highlands of New Guinea," *Science* 11 July 2003: 189-193; Jack Golson, "The Ipomoean Revolution Revisited: Society and the Sweet Potato in the Upper Wahgi Valley," in *Inequality in New Guinean Highland Societies*, ed. Andrew Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 109-136; Abraham L. Gitlow, *Economics of the Mount Hagen Tribes, New Guinea*, Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, 12 (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1947), 18-21, 61-65; Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, 3, 44-46.

¹² See Maxine Margolis, "Green Gold and Ice: The Impact of Frosts on the Coffee Growing Region of Northern Paraná, Brazil," *Mass Emergencies* 4 (1979): 135-144; these frosts also contributed markedly to the displacement of small coffee farmers from Paraná to the Amazonian frontier.

¹³ See Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz, *Yali's Question: Sugar, Culture and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).