Mystery in the Eye of the Beholder: Cross-Cultural Encounters on 19th-Century Yap

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*Cross-Cultural Encounters on 19th-Century Yap**

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THE COMING TOGETHER OF STRANGERS ACROSS A GULF OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE remains a compelling topic. The story of 'first contact', in all its depth and detail, is still to be told for many islands in the Pacific, including Yap, but this will be no easy task. The record is incomplete. Until well into the 19th century, European navigational skills were often unequal to the task of finding islands and fixing them to a map. Island contacts were brief and poorly reported; islands were named, re-named, and named again by strangers in unwieldy ships unable to cope with reefs and currents and unable to find their way back a second time.

Carolinian Islanders themselves have long been vigorous voyagers with far-flung ties. Yap in earlier centuries participated in a broad trade and tribute network that stretched a thousand miles eastward almost to the island of Chuuk, and maintained ties with Palau to the west as well. Carolinians ranged at least as far as what we now call Indonesia and the Philippines to the west, Guam to the north, and the Marshall Islands to the east, and had probably been doing so long before European ships ventured into these waters. In what sense should contact with Europeans receive the title of First Contact? Where do those pink- and olive-skinned sailors, evangelists, mappers, namers, traders, kidnappers, and refugees fit in the complex scheme of cross-cultural contact on Yap and in the Carolines?

Given the lengthy presence of Europeans in Indonesia, the Philippines and Guam, the net of island contacts also make it unlikely that the Yapese and their neighbours would have waited at home in ignorance until the day European ships entered their harbours (or stood off and on outside their reefs waiting for the more agile island canoes to come to them). Iron, the most highly prized European commodity, appears to have circulated rapidly through the Western Carolines, and we can well imagine that news of the strangers who had brought it circulated as well.

Carolinian voyagers were sometimes blown off course as far away as the Philippines and Guam, where they met Spanish officials and missionaries in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Missionaries in turn visited the Carolines (including one close neighbour of Yap) in 1710 and 1731.[1] Carolinians in search

* Winner of the 1994 *Journal of Pacific History* Essay Prize.

1 Francis X. Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization: A History of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in Pre-Colonial Days, 1521–1885* (Honolulu 1983), 37–59.

of iron initiated a trade relationship with the Spanish on Guam in the 1780s;[2] for many years, the Spanish continued to depend on the islanders' superior ability to navigate in Carolinian waters.[3]

At least a few Yapese voyagers were among the Carolinians who made those early contacts with Europeans. But it is nearly impossible to pinpoint exactly when and how Yapese and Europeans first became acquainted with each other. Very few ships appear to have stopped at or near Yap in the three centuries after the first European entered the Carolines,[4] and few of those visitors had much to say about the islanders they encountered. For Europeans and for islanders alike, awareness of the other seems to have come as a slow dawning rather than an abrupt revelation; and through the middle of the 19th century, islanders may have known more about Europeans than Europeans knew about them.

Thus, to understand *first* contact seems an elusive goal for this region of the Pacific. But it is possible to take a closer look at what happened on Yap when contacts between Europeans and islanders became more frequent in the latter part of the 19th century. The 1843 visit of the brig *Naiad*, captained by Scottish *bêche-de-mer* trader Andrew Cheyne, can serve as a marker between the era of fleeting European contacts on Yap and the era when those contacts became lengthier and more frequent. Cheyne's stay was probably the longest European visit to that date, though it was shorter than he had hoped. (Searching for *bêche-de-mer* or sea cucumber, marketable as an aphrodisiac in China, he appears to have started the island's first influenza epidemic. He left when the islanders seemed about to overrun his ship.) Cheyne's visit led to others, and eventually to a number of permanent trading stations. In addition to perhaps a score of traders, two amateur anthropologists and three warships visited Yap briefly in the pre-colonial era. Two events — Cheyne's first visit in 1843 and formal Spanish colonisation in 1886 — thus frame a distinctive era, one in which the first substantial encounters between Yapese and Europeans took place, and in which Europeans usually acted on their own, without the support of their home governments.

The written record for this period is rich in adventure stories, scenic descriptions, and collections of ethnographic minutiae. But evidence for actual encounter between Yapese and Europeans remains faint and fleeting. We will first look at a Yapese view of that encounter as expressed in a short but thought-provoking piece of oral tradition recorded shortly after the turn of the century. We will then focus on Yapese encounters with the island's longer-term European residents, particularly the traders, following three themes that resonate in the broader

2 Otto von Kotzebue, *A Voyage of Discovery Into the South Sea and Beering's Straits for the Purpose of Exploring a North-East Passage, Undertaken in the Years 1815–1818* (London 1821 and New York 1967), II, 83 and 240.

3 Von Kotzebue, *A Voyage of Discovery*, III, 83–4. See also Friedrich Heinrich von Kittlitz, *Denkwürdigkeiten einer Reise nach dem Russischen Amerika, nach Mikronesien und durch Kamtschatka* (Gotha 1858), II, 163.

4 The Portuguese captain Diogo da Rocha probably landed on Yap or nearby Ulithi after being blown off course on a journey through the Moluccas around 1525.

history of the Pacific as well: depopulation, trade and labour relations, and violence. To understand these encounters, however, we must first attempt to understand something about the two cultures involved.

ANY ATTEMPT TO reconstruct a picture of life on mid-19th century Yap must necessarily be partial and tentative. The following description, drawn on written observations ranging in time from the 1840s to the 1970s,[5] is no exception. Early European visitors to Yap described a thickly populated coast, giving way to coconut groves, then taro patches, then forested slopes and grassy uplands. Jutting into the water on stone platforms were the men's club houses or *faeluw*.[6] Slightly farther inland were *tabnaew*, or extended family estates. Neat and well-drained coral paths lined with trees connected the estates to each other and to village meeting houses (*p'eebaey*) and dance arenas. Some distance from the villages were the *dapael*, groups of smaller structures set aside for women during menstruation and after childbirth. Unfortunately, very little about 19th century Yapese women survives in the written record.

Farther inland were the villages of lower caste people described variously by Europeans as 'serfs' and 'slaves'. Caste or rank was, and is, a complicated business on Yap, and only imperfectly understood by foreigners. In broad terms, status was hereditary and determined by village membership. Along with serving in war, producing several of the island's handicrafts, and helping in house and canoe building, lower caste people were responsible for burying the dead. Lower caste men could not marry into a higher rank, and were obliged to dress modestly and behave deferentially toward their social superiors.[7] Also inland were the cemeteries, many near to lower-caste villages, various spirit shrines and apparently, at least in the mid-19th century, a good deal of unpopulated forest and grassland.

Yapese villages were organised into districts, whose coexistence formed a fine balance between competition and co-operation. One of the major districts, Gagil, controlled the *sawei* exchange network or 'empire' that extended to the eastern islands, while another, Rull, oversaw contact with Palau, where Yapese stonemasons sailed in their fragile canoes to collect the huge and immensely

5 Among the main sources consulted are F.W. Christian, *The Caroline Islands: Travel in the Sea of the Little Lands* (New York 1899); E. Graeffe (ed.), 'Die Karolineninsel Yap oder Guap nach den Mittheilungen von Alfred Tetens und Johann Kubary', *Journal des Museum Godeffroy*, I (1873/74), 84–130; Franz Hernsheim, *Südsee-Erinnerungen 1875–1880* (Berlin 1883); Johann S. Kubary, *Ethnographische Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Karolinen Archipels* (Leiden 1889); Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Yap: Political Leadership and Cultural Change in an Island Society* (Honolulu 1975); Wilhelm Müller, *Yap*, part II, section B, vol. 2 of *Ergebnisse der Südsee Expedition 1908–1910* (Hamburg 1917); Arno Senfft, 'Ethnographische Beiträge über die Karolineninsel Yap', *Dr. A. Petermanns Mitteilungen aus Justus Perthes Geographischer Anstalt*, 49 (1903), 49–60 and 83–7; and R.S. Swanston, Journals, vol. 6 (Honolulu, University of Hawaii, Hamilton Library (hereinafter Hamilton Library), Mf 4030).

6 Yapese words are spelled many different ways in different documents. Spellings and definitions of Yapese words used in this article follow John Thayer Jensen et al., *Yapese-English Dictionary* (Honolulu 1977).

7 Lingenfelter, *Yap*, 136–49.

valuable disks of stone money.[8] Yapese religion, too, was the subject of complex island-wide arrangements, organised around a system of calendars which involved complementary celebrations of religious events by different districts at different times of the year.

The Yapese were a seafaring people, skilled at both shipbuilding and open-ocean voyaging, although it is possible, given the tributary relationships in which they were involved, that they received visitors more often than they travelled out. They were also reportedly known throughout the Carolines for their sorcerers' skills, although remarkably little on this topic survives in print.

Early accounts sometimes differentiate between sorcery and religion, or between healing and harming magic, but others do not, so that any picture of the supernatural on Yap will have to remain very tentative. Persons observed by Europeans to be working with other than manifestly natural powers on Yap might have served to heal or cause illness, call up storms or calm them, call spirits in and out of houses and canoes at the right time, seek aid in war, or guard the shrines of major and minor spirits. The music and dance which often evoked deep admiration in European observers were performed under the protection of sorcerers, and had ties to Yapese religion and sense of origins and history, as well as to other islands: many dances honoured on Yap originated elsewhere.

Supernatural knowledge was a very private affair, passed down strictly within family lines. And the meaning of family itself was, on Yap, complex and different from its meaning in Europe, transmitting some aspects through its paternal line and others through the maternal in a complex system of relationships that shifted with every generation. The absolute core of family life — and of Yapese life in general — was the land. Family existence revolved around the estate, and when making decisions an elder might say, 'The land is chief, not I. I only speak for the land.'[9]

Thus our tentative view of 19th century Yap reveals a highly sophisticated society — from its building and design feats, to its music and dance, to its complex and shifting social alliances and hierarchies, which both encouraged change and managed it. Into that society came a group or men — rowdy individualists, out to make a fortune in the wide world. By the very fact of their presence on Yap, they had cut themselves off from the family and land that would have given their lives meaning in a Yapese context.

MOST 19TH CENTURY European visitors to Yap were practical men, versed in seamanship and accounting and not in the intellectual and cultural issues

[8] Good descriptions of Yap's inter-island relations can be found in William Alkire, *An Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Micronesia*, 2nd edn (Menlo Park, Cal. 1977) and *Coral Islanders* (Arlington Heights, Ill. 1978), and Mark L. Berg, 'Yapese politics, Yapese money and the Sawei tribute network before World War I', *Journal of Pacific History*, 27 (1992), 150–64. Sherwood Lingenfelter provides a detailed look at the island's village and district organisation in *Yap: Political Leadership and Cultural Change in an Island Society* (Honolulu 1975).

[9] David Schneider, 'Yap', Hamilton Library, Pacific Collection, TS, 34.

preoccupying Europe's salons — though two anthropologists did include Yap in their travels in the 1870s.

Social class in Europe was probably as rigidly hierarchical during the mid to late 19th century as it was in Yap, and reflected greater economic inequality. Still adjusting to the impact of the industrial revolution, Europe looked to emigration as one way to resolve its tremendous social and economic strains, sending its unwanted children to the four corners of the compliant earth. Those adventurous and lucky enough found in the western Carolines fresh markets and a source of trade goods, such as *bêche-de-mer* and copra, often as one leg of a three-way trade with China. Sporadic visits gave way to permanent trading stations, and small-time adventurers made room for some of the larger 19th century commercial concerns: Godeffroy, Hernsheim, Capelle. Whether company owners, employees, or pirates, all were imbued with the robust spirit of personal initiative and competition that informed the era.

Intellectually, Europe was undergoing great upheaval during this era, led by the natural sciences. Darwin's publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859 and *Descent of Man* in 1871 set off a debate which would rapidly spill over into areas outside biology as the European intellectual élite worked out its beliefs about human nature and human relations. It is unclear how much that debate affected the boozy, argumentative men who made up the tiny European enclave on Yap. But Europe's fascination with race and species probably did affect two men who spent time on Yap: Johann Kubary, who worked as a roving anthropologist for the German company Godeffroy and Son, and Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklukho-Maklai, better known for his work on the northeast New Guinea coast, who visited the Caroline Islands in 1876.

GILTEMA'U, AN ELDER in Gacpar village, told a German anthropologist visiting Yap in 1910 a story about first contact with Europeans. Unencumbered by dates or by a need to divide the natural from the supernatural, it goes like this:

> In former times no European ship could find the island of Yap because there was so much *matsamats* [magic] there. The two foreign vessels, one of them under a captain named Malito, came to Palau, from where some Yap men quarrying stone money guided it to Yap. The foreigners were killed there by the people of Tav and Maerur. For many years no more ships were seen. Finally one arrived, whose English captain was named Gapsin. He remained outside of the reef and started to shoot. A man from Maerur named Kanepa was killed. The people from Vugol composed a [song] in which they ridiculed Tav and Maerur. Then Tugurad, the grandfather of Pitemag [a sorcerer who was alive when this story was told], made a *matsamats* to call the ship back, but it did not return. In the meantime a large, flat coral rock suddenly emerged from the water, and Tugurad prophesied that a ship would be sighted in nine days, which actually happened.[10]

10 Müller, *Yap*, part 1, p. 347.

The story breaks off there, a fragment of what must have been a longer account. What can it tell us about how the Yapese perceived contact?

Magic or sorcery plays a central role in the account: it is *matsamats* that kept the Europeans away from Yap for so long. The European presence was to be avoided, and failing that, to be controlled. Given what we now know of ship-borne illness and trader aggression, this is hardly surprising. Yapese *matsamats* was unable to prevent Europeans from coming to Yap; but whether it was able to delay them, who will ever know? Who were the Yapese men on Palau who guided the first European ships to Yap? Were they in league with the sorcerers or working at cross purposes? Were Malito and his crew killed to prevent further contact? For their possessions? For some other reason? The Yapese story, as recorded, would support many interpretations.

The mysterious Gapsin who came several years later, whatever his intentions, managed to kill a man from the same village that had killed Malito. Europeans say of themselves that they came to Yap to do business: to trade, to collect island produce, to solicit island labour. What are we to make of the vision of a ship that stays beyond the reef, shoots to kill, and leaves? After Kanepa died, his enemies immediately composed a song deriding his village. That suggests that internal Yapese divisions remained more important than any sense of Yapese unity against an outside aggressor. The important Other was still Yapese, this event was not catastrophic enough to change that. On another level, the episode suggests an ingrained habit of recording momentous events in song — a practice apparently widespread in Micronesia at one time. It would, of course, be a historian's dream to find a way into the world of those songs. But few if any of the Yapese songs recorded in writing describe events of the European era.[11]

The story, spare, difficult to interpret, full of questions, was complemented by some physical evidence — or at least a story of physical evidence. In the bush was a small hut which the anthropologist was not allowed to enter. It contained mementos of that first European visit: a plate and a glass ring. They had been preserved since the time their mysterious owners were brought home from Palau and killed.

When Cheyne sailed the *Naiad* into Tomil harbour in 1843 Yap had already experienced a few brief European visits, and was linked to an island network that surely would have passed on information about other visitors to the region. The Palauans told Cheyne before he sailed for Yap that the Yapese were treacherous and violent. What had the Yapese been told about Europeans? It is tempting to guess that they might have been told something like this:

> . . .caution [is] necessary; at unobserved moments the sly men, always ready for a fight, may break into violence. If they see, however, that they are being watched, friendly intercourse continues without interruption.

[11] Part 2 of Wilhelm Müller's *Yap* contains 200 pages of Yapese songs and chants recorded in 1910.

— exactly Alfred Tetens's words about the Yapese, with the word 'men' substituted for 'natives'.[12] No doubt each group approached the other with its own set of hopes and fears. This essay will focus on three facets of that encounter: depopulation, trade and labour relations, and violence.

WHILE CHEYNE WAS anchored in Tomil harbour in 1843, waiting for a tabu imposed by the Tomil chiefs to run its course, a crewman named John Gill fell sick with 'fever and ague',[13] and was taken ashore to an unnamed village to recuperate. (None of the villagers who took care of Gill are named or described in Cheyne's account.) The ship's tabu ended with a great ceremony, and Gill soon recovered; but Cheyne began to notice a cough among the islanders visiting the *Naiad*. 'The Influenza has broke out among the natives at Tomal', he wrote on 5 October, 'and they are very much alarmed, never having had any disease like it before'.[14] The next day he learned from Leok, a chief he referred to as 'prime minister', that several Yapese had died and half the population of Tomil was sick with the mysterious new illness. The chiefs, taking advice from their priests, accused Cheyne of bringing the disease (by sorcery, not contagion). They thought he was angry; he thought they were joking.

On 8 October Leok visited the ship and reported the last day's death toll: 20. The next day, a large canoe full of young men approached the *Naiad*. Leok asked if they could board the ship; Cheyne refused; Leok reported that 24 more islanders were dead. Cheyne posted an extra guard. Before long the islanders' military preparations were unmistakable and Cheyne's tenuous friendship with Leok was clearly at an end. Leaving behind several of his own crewmen in the hands of the defiant chief, Cheyne pulled out of the harbour at daybreak on the 14th.

Cheyne's stay at Yap, which lasted just under two months, almost certainly brought a virulent and fatal disease to the island. Other ships would bring other diseases. Certainly such epidemics must have played a role in the dramatic depopulation of Yap, from a maximum estimate of 50,000 at an unspecified date in the past, to about 7,500 at the turn of the century, to as low as 2,500 at the end of World War II.[15] Observers such as Kubary wrote fatalistically about the annihilation they saw in store for islanders, as they set about to rescue some traces of island cultures.[16]

[12] Alfred Tetens, *Among the Savages of the South Seas: Memoirs of Micronesia, 1862–1868*, trans. Florence Mann Spoehr (Stanford 1958), 63.

[13] Dorothy Shineberg (ed.), *The Trading Voyages of Andrew Cheyne, 1841–1844* (Honolulu 1971), 257. The following account is taken from pp. 257–78.

[14] Shineberg, *The Trading Voyages*, 270.

[15] Schneider, *Yap*, 2–7, and 'Abortion and Depopulation on a Pacific Island' (undated TS, Hamilton Library, Pacific Collection), 1–2; Senfft, 'Ethnographische Beiträge', 49.

[16] Kubary, *Ethnographische Beiträge*, 104.

The travel writer Franz Hernsheim and the trader R.S. Swanston both noted in 1883 the persistence of flu-like epidemics. But if the Yapese continued to connect foreign visits with the outbreaks of disease, neither of these writers reported it. Yapese traditionally sought a spiritual explanation for illness or infertility, and turned to practitioners elsewhere described as sorcerers for cures both magical and herbal.[17] Europeans throughout the colonial era looked for explanations and solutions in vain, until population trends turned around after World War II.

Depopulation drastically affected family and village organisation on Yap, since the pool from which leadership positions could be filled was so reduced. Specialised knowledge in the spheres of religion, magic, culture, and history was threatened — and apparently often lost — when its practitioners died without having found an appropriate successor. Thus depopulation itself made Yapese culture more vulnerable to loss and change through European influence.

AFTER CHEYNE'S VISIT, Europeans apparently left Yap alone for another two decades. Sporadic visits in the 1860s[18] then gave way to permanent trading stations beginning in 1869.[19] Traders sought *bêche-de-mer* and copra, and recruited Yapese labourers to work on their plantations and fisheries at other islands. Some Western goods were already known on Yap before Cheyne's first visit, tobacco and iron being the most popular. Accounts of Yapese responses to European trade goods are mixed, but it appears that the islanders often chose items which could make their lives easier without changing them drastically: cloth, flints, matches, mosquito netting, magenta dye, fishhooks and other iron goods.[20] But more disruptive commodities such as guns, alcohol, and tobacco also came to play a large part in the Yapese trade.[21]

Early traders found that the most effective way to persuade the Yapese to deliver the island products they wanted was not by offering European goods but by helping the islanders to acquire an island commodity already long valued on

17 Richard Marksbury, 'Land Tenure and Modernization in the Yap Islands', PhD thesis, Tulane University (Tulane 1979), 86; Sixtus Walleser, 'Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Inhabitants of Yap' (undated TS, Hamilton Library, Pacific Collection), 32–47; Don Jose Montes de Oca, 'La Isla de Yap', *Boletin de la Sociedad Geografica de Madrid*, 34 (1893), 274; Franz Hernsheim, *Südsee-Erinnerungen*, 25–6.

18 Best documented are those of Andrew Cheyne (Shineberg, *The Trading Voyages*) and Alfred Tetens (*Among the Savages*).

19 Hezel's 'A Yankee trader in Yap' (*Journal of Pacific History*, 10 (1975), 3–19) contains probably the best general description of the early trader community. Among the interesting first-hand descriptions of this era are Eduard Hernsheim, 'Lebenserinnerungen von Eduard Hernsheim' (Familienarchiv Hernsheim, no. 1, Staatsarchiv Hamburg Auftragsbuch 1895, Hamilton Library, Mf 1919, reel 1); Swanston, Journals; and Cyprian Bridge, 'Letter to the Western Pacific High Commissioner, August 16, 1883' (Great Britain, High Commissioner for Western Pacific Islands (hereinafter WPHC), Inwards Correspondence, General file no. 116.83; Hamilton Library, Mf S0052, reel 6).

20 Arno Senfft, 'Ethnographische Beiträge', 83.

21 Stewart G. Firth, 'German Firms in the Pacific Islands, 1857–1914', in John A. Moses and Paul M. Kennedy (eds), *Germany in the Pacific and Far East, 1870–1914* (St Lucia 1977), 6; A.E. Bollard, 'The financial adventures of J.C. Godeffroy and Son in the Pacific', *Journal of Pacific History*, 16 (1981), 5; Senfft, 'Ethnographische Beiträge', 54–5.

Yap: the heavy aragonite disks, used as a form of ceremonial currency, which could only be mined on Palau. Yapese canoes, while as seaworthy as any of the great Micronesian ocean-going vessels, were lightweight enough to make transport of the heavy stone disks hazardous. Islanders often lost their lives in the enterprise, and it is not surprising that they took advantage of the offer of safe and comfortable passage between the islands. One trader dominated this traffic: David Dean O'Keefe, a castaway who arrived in Yap around 1870 and soon built up the island's most thriving business, to the envy of his fellow traders.

The traders themselves formed a small group, for the most part clustered on islands in Tomil harbour. Their population fluctuated and included some transients, but at the most their number can hardly have reached more than a dozen or two even in the years immediately before annexation. At the time, the Yapese themselves numbered at least 8,000 and perhaps more. The image of the intrepid lone white man alternates with that of a small armed group terrorising helpless islanders; neither can be entirely correct.

Whether the traders knew it or not, their actions on Yap both shaped and were shaped by island networks of power that had been in place long before they arrived. Yapese families and villages were organised into complex alliances and had long experience in the fine art of balancing and managing their internal tensions. At the same time, Yap had complicated alliances with Palau and with the eastern islands. Traders, often unaware of boundaries they were crossing and balances they were upsetting, helped to change the political face of Yap.

Traders recorded little of their own interactions with the islanders (the private journals of R.S. Swanston and Eduard Hernsheim being two major exceptions). But much of the early European ethnography of Yap seems to have relied on trader information; and it is impossible to imagine this information being gathered without some sort of relationships being established. O'Keefe was washed up on the island almost dead from exhaustion and exposure; someone must have given him help and shelter. One trader was said to have had a Yapese 'girl' looking after him;[22] and Tetens, whose account often seems somewhat fanciful, claimed to have had a relationship with a chief's daughter.[23] Otherwise there are few if any accounts of relationships between European men and Yapese women.[24] Traders alternately admired Yapese men for their industry and cursed them for their laziness. Relations must remain something of a puzzle, but we can look at a few of the traders most likely to have had an impact on Yapese society.

[22] Swanston, Journals, VI.

[23] Tetens, *Among the Savages*, 11–26.

[24] In 1908 a German anthropologist remarked, 'I believe that Yap has the proud distinction of being the only island whose girls and women are almost impossible for white men to obtain'. Augustin Kraemer, 'Studienreise nach den Zentral- und Westkarolinen', in *Aus den Schutzgebieten der Südsee*, 21 (1908), 177.

Andrew Cheyne, who arbitrarily assigned titles such as 'king' and 'prime minister' to the Yapese he met, understood the ritual need for a temporary tabu on his ship well enough to record the islanders' explanation in his journal. But he found it difficult to respect, and continually chided his Yapese contacts for what he persisted in seeing as laziness and lack of co-operation. He opened simultaneous negotiations with competing villages, ignoring local divisions and tensions. And his fire-power seems to have made an unpleasant impression on the islanders. When he first arrived, and felt that the canoes full of curious islanders were approaching too close to his ship, he stationed armed men on deck. The canoes immediately withdrew to a respectful distance; perhaps they were already familiar with such weapons. Later, a dance exhibition to which Cheyne had been invited was interrupted by the sound of gunfire. Jumping up to investigate, he found a crewman shooting off his weapon in a drunken lark. The Yapese were apparently shaken by the episode, but there was little Cheyne could do to his employee. (Eduard Hernsheim was later to say that hiring European assistants for island enterprises meant choosing between fools and scoundrels;[25] but to the islanders, Europeans felt they had to present a united front.)

The night before Cheyne left Yap, when he was already deeply worried about the possibility of an attack, he ordered guns to be fired toward the shore. A crew member later sued him, claiming among other things that he had fired on a village; but Cheyne, who claimed the guns' range had been too short to do any damage, was exonerated. Cheyne did not return to Yap until 1864, a good two decades later. That visit was even briefer and marked by the same problems as the first: disease broke out, co-operation diminished and then ceased, an armed threat seemed to be building up, and Cheyne left for good, dismissing Yap as a 'nest of treacherous pirates'.[26] Just under two years later, he was killed on Palau, victim of factional fighting and of his own insensitivity and ambition. A year after that, the Palauans who had first sent him to Yap under their protection, and later probably pressured the Yapese to kill him, were forced by the British to kill one of their own chiefs to expiate Cheyne's death.

David Dean O'Keefe is perhaps the most famous of the Yap traders, certainly the only one to inspire a novel.[27] After his shipwreck, he is said to have been restored to health by a powerful Yapese sorcerer.[28] His place in the written record is predominant, partly because he inspired so much hatred among his fellow traders. He was obviously influential on Yap, operating the largest foreign business on the island, and persuading many Yapese to work for him on his

25 Hernsheim, 'Lebenserinnerungen', 101.

26 Andrew Cheyne, journal of the *Acis*, entry for 22 Mar. 1864; quoted in Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*.

27 *His Majesty O'Keefe*, by Lawrence Klingman and Gerald Green (Charles Scribner's Sons 1950), draws on several reputable sources. It presents a sentimental picture which should be pleasing to those who like their white men righteous and intrepid and their islanders and women vulnerable and easily confused.

28 Lingenfelter, *Yap: Political Leadership*, 184.

plantation on Mapia and in the mother-of-pearl and *bêche-de-mer* fisheries of Melanesia. More important, he was able to dominate and expand the lucrative transport of stone money — a business which in itself may have drastically changed power relationships on Yap. Before the era of the traders, there was probably a balance of power between the district of Rull, which derived strength from its possession of stone money and its relationship with Palau, and that of Gagil, whose relationship was with the eastern islands and whose wealth derived from various forms of shell money. The new ship traffic between Palau and Yap probably upset that balance sharply.[29]

O'Keefe was not the only Yap trader to persuade Yapese to work for him elsewhere in the Pacific. Plantations on Yap, on the other hand, seem to have succeeded rarely, and only when run with labourers from still other islands.[30] Yapese went off-island to work for cash and trade goods, or to pay off the transportation of the stone money disks. The two arrangements, both useful to the traders, might have had very different ramifications on Yap. Stone money usually belonged to high ranking Yapese or to entire villages or clubhouses. It seems difficult to imagine chiefs or priests in this rank-oriented society going off to labour in plantations or fisheries far from home. In fact, as we have seen, lower caste islanders on Yap had certain labour obligations to their social superiors. And we know that they were sometimes directed to serve foreigners: on Cheyne's first visit, his Yapese hosts sent to the 'slave villages' several times for plaited mats to serve as thatching for the curing shed he was building.[31] Tetens wrote in his memoirs that the 'King of Krurr' once ordered 50 men to accompany him on a fishing expedition; Eduard Hernsheim made a similar arrangement at least once. This might have been common.

It would be interesting to know who took part, on the other hand, in the deals that were paid off in cash and trade goods, whether they were spontaneous or required the permission of a chief, and what effect this inflow of new wealth had on traditional relationships.

Yapese fished for *bêche-de-mer* and mother-of-pearl in the Admiralty Islands for Alfred Tetens and for David O'Keefe. Tetens took some of his workers all the way to Hong Kong. A chief sent 60 Yapese workers to accompany Eduard Hernsheim on a *bêche-de-mer* expedition to the Hermit group in the Admiralty Islands in 1874, in payment for a shipment of stone money. And a crew of Yapese and Palauans, which included two Yapese named Yaloth and Remokot, accompanied the American trader Philo Holcomb on his fatal trading voyage to

29 This idea is extensively developed in Berg, 'Yapese politics, Yapese money'.

30 Letter from Bridge and statement from McGinnis in WPHC, Inwards Correspondence; N. Miklukho-Maklai, *Travels to New Guinea*, D. Tumarkin trans. and ed. (Moscow 1982), 461.

31 Shineberg, *The Trading Voyages*, 251–6.

the Admiralties.[32] Yaloth, at least, was among those who survived the attack there that left Holcomb dead; he helped to sail the ship back to Yap.

O'KEEFE WAS THE focus of many bitter accusations, both by the Yap traders and by the anthropologist Miklukho-Maklai. What the latter wrote from his own observation was very vague. He wrote of 'dishonorable exploitation' and 'crimes of injustice to which I had to be the unwilling witness'.[33] In a note included in the records of an 1883 British military investigation on Yap, he passed on a story which he said he had heard from several Yapese, both on Yap and Palau, regarding O'Keefe's 1875 trip to the Hermit Islands. Of the 36 Yapese who shipped out with the trader, it was alleged, only seven survived, the rest dying of illness brought on by overwork and poor conditions, two tossed overboard before they were even dead. O'Keefe was also accused of failing to pay wages, failing to return workers to their home islands, beating some workers and inhumanly overworking others, and allowing his associates to create a reign of terror on Mapia.[34] None of the charges stuck.

The investigation held by HMS *Espiègle* in 1883, which exonerated O'Keefe, found several other traders guilty of staging a punitive raid on a Yapese village. A German trader had accused several Yapese of attacking him and trying to drown him, apparently in order to get hold of two rifles he had in his boat. Unable to 'obtain redress', the traders set off on a raid the next day, burned down three meeting houses, accidentally shot one of their own number in the leg, traded a few shots with the retreating villagers, and returned home. Several traders were fined for their part in the adventure.[35]

Holcomb, ringleader and accidental casualty, was also accused of having earlier killed two islanders, including a high priest of Rull. He insisted that the British investigators had no right to try him, since he was an American citizen. Shortly after the *Espiègle* left Yap, Holcomb sent a letter to the Spanish colonial government in Manila, petitioning for Spanish annexation of the island.[36] That letter helped to reawaken Spain's interest in her Carolinian 'possessions'; but by the time she came to claim them, Holcomb had died in another act of violence on another island.

32 Letter to Luis Gutierrez from the Catholic Mission at Yap, 22 Jan. 1970, from the collection of the Micronesian Seminar, Pohnpei; Augustin Kraemer, *Palau*, Part II, Section B, vol. 4 of *Ergebnisse der Südsee Expedition 1908–1910* (Hamburg 1929), 200.

33 Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklukho-Maklai, *Dnevniki puteschestvii, 1873–1887*, vol. 2 of *Sobranie Sochinenii* (Moscow 1950–54), 249.

34 McGinnis and Amery in Great Britain, Admiralty, Captains' Letters Concerning the Pacific, PRO 1824–1901 (Hamilton Library, Mf 1498, reel 2).

35 Swanston, Journals, vol. 6, 224–5; Joaquin Costa y Martinez, 'El Conflicto Hispano-Aleman, sobre la Micronesia', *Biblioteca de la Sociedad Espanola de Africanistas y Colonistas*, 3 (1886), 53; Bridge, Letter to the Western Pacific High Commissioner, WPHC, and Great Britain, Admiralty, Captains' Letters Concerning the Pacific, PRO 1824–1901.

36 Costa y Martinez, 'El Conflicto Hispano-Aleman', 53.

Violence is clearly a thread that runs through early Yapese/European relations; but how much violence, and who perpetrated it, is as open to interpretation as any other aspect of this era. The traders had guns, but so did some islanders. Yapese outnumbered traders at least 400 to one, and visits by European warships such as the *Espiègle* were few and far between. On the other hand, those visits did give the Yapese first-hand experience of European military power. In 1876 the German warship *Herthe* intervened in a dispute on Yap, forcing islanders to return some property to a trader. The Yapese must also have known about the visits of British warships to nearby Palau, where, as we have seen, Cheyne's death in 1866 was paid for a year later by the death of a high Palauan ruler.[37]

Ironically, at about the same time that the *Espiègle*'s officers were levying fines on the Yap traders for setting fire to Yapese meeting houses, another arm of that same British justice was destroying houses in Palau. The reason: their owners had not kept up payments on an indemnity, levied in judgement of a complaint brought by O'Keefe. Did the difference between 'atrocity' and 'justice' come down to a simple question of which European gave the order?

IF THE BRITISH represented the most visible European presence on Yap in 1883, that was soon to change. Spain, stirring out of its late-imperial somnolence, cast an eye once again on all those islands south of Guam and east of Manila which it had carelessly claimed for so long but scarcely bothered to map. Spain claimed its Micronesian possessions once and for all, and ruled the western half of them from Yap. To that end, the warships *San Quentin* and *Manila* left the Philippines capital in August 1885. But possessing Micronesia did not turn out to be that simple. A warship steamed out from German shores as well. That new nation, intent on acquiring all the perquisites of glory, sent its own colonial emissary towards Yap. Bismarck would have his colonies.

The *San Quentin* and *Manila* anchored in Tomil harbour on 21 August, and in proper Castilian fashion began preparations for the serious business of annexation. After four days of preparing the site, off-loading supplies, and issuing invitations, they were ready to raise the flag; the ceremony was planned for the morning of 26 August. That evening the Germans' *Iltis* steamed into harbour, dropped anchor, headed for shore — and within half an hour had raised the flag and claimed Yap for Germany. The Spanish skulked off to Manila. Germany had won. But for Bismarck winning Yap was not worth a war, and after brief negotiations the two European nations parceled out the rights to Yap. Spain would take political hegemony; Germany would retain trading rights. Thus in the

[37] Hezel, 'A Yankee trader in Yap', 10; Shineberg, *The Trading Voyages*, 24; Karen Nero, 'Cross-cultural performances: a Palauan hoax?', *Isla: A Journal of Micronesian Studies*, 1 (1992), 37–72. Nero writes that Yapese men participated in the trader's death and would have been well informed of subsequent events.

summer of 1885 the era drew to an end in which relations between Yapese and Europeans had proceeded informally and haphazardly (at least from the Europeans' side).

European visits of any length had begun a mere four decades earlier. Those visitors often arrived tense with an odd mixture of fear and resentment, seeming to know in advance that they would find dangerous and unco-operative men living there, entering a system of island alliances they did not understand. It was the Palauans who taught the first of them, Andrew Cheyne, to fear the Yapese, and he found what he expected to find.

Somehow, despite the contempt and exasperation they felt, a small band of white men congregated on Yap — most of them, more accurately, on the tiny islands in Tomil harbour — and built relationships, however troubled, with the islanders. Briefer visits by anthropologists were also not without impact. Kubary, a devoted student of Micronesian cultures, served at the same time as an assertive representative of European business and government interests in the region. Miklukho-Maklai, steeped in the humanitarian and revolutionary ideals brewing in his native Russia, considered himself a champion of islanders. But his complaints about O'Keefe's mistreatment of island workers alternated with accusations that the trader spoiled those workers and encouraged the 'impudence of their demands'.[38] His diary entries for Yap itself are very brief, but we know that his researches on Yap and elsewhere included rather intrusive activities such as measuring tooth and nose size and vaginal colour,[39] and once a grim and furtive scene is described in which he cut out a dead servant's tongue and larynx.[40] These men, gathering information about islanders for home audiences, also showed islanders another aspect of what it meant to be European.

An island story tells us that in the beginning the Yapese saw the European presence as baneful, and used magic to try to protect themselves from it. Europeans, however, had a few things to offer that the Yapese could not get elsewhere. Iron and tobacco soon became coveted commodities. The traders also offered safer and more comfortable transportation for those who mined stone money disks on Palau. Yapese chiefs found it convenient to direct islanders to sign on as labourers for projects on other islands, and many Yapese probably volunteered for the new jobs as well.

No one is sure exactly what caused Yap's dramatic plunge in population, but it seems almost certain that introduced European diseases played a very large role. The drop was drastic enough to seriously disrupt Yapese social relations and even the passing on of traditional knowledge. It may have been particularly

38 E.M. Webster, *The Moon Man: A Biography of Nikolai Mikluho-Maclay* (Melbourne 1984), 187.

39 Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklukho-Maklai, 'Anthropologische Notizen, gesammelt auf einer Reise in West-Mikronesien und Nord-Melanesien im Jahre 1876', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 10 (1878), 100–3.

40 Miklukho-Maklai, *Travels to New Guinea*, 129.

intense during the mid to late 19th century when the first traders were establishing themselves on Yap.

The European presence was plagued with rumours of violence, many of which, however, failed to stand up to official inquiry. Whether the Yapese found the Europeans worth tolerating for the economic benefits they brought, were intimidated by European violence, or found the newcomers glamorous or useful or insignificant we may never know. Beginning in 1886 they would face a different kind of European power.

With the Spanish soldiers and administrators came the missionaries; after 1885, relations between Yapese and Europeans were to be guided by church and state institutions.[41] Changes in those relations, and in the Yapese internal order, continued throughout the formal colonial era and continue today. No doubt they will always contain a bittersweet mixture of dependence and strength, constancy and change. But it seems that the Yapese have brought to the process their own special touch, an ability to absorb what they choose of the wider world and still to remain uniquely themselves.

ABSTRACT

After more than three centuries of fleeting encounters between Islanders and Europeans in the Western Carolines, contacts began to grow in frequency and duration in the mid-19th century. This article focuses on the island of Yap during that period of increased, but still unofficial, contact, ending with formal colonisation by Spain in 1886.

The traders who formed the bulk of the foreign population on Yap during this era brought with them contagious diseases, which contributed to Yap's drastic population decline, a trend which continued well into the 20th century. Yapese responded to new trade goods judiciously, maintaining a good deal of control over the trade process. Violence and aggression were not uncommon; but given the tiny trader enclave's vulnerability and need to conduct business, co-operation and understanding also formed part of the story. The exact nature of the relationship between the two groups remains a mystery.

[41] The information in this section has been taken from Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*, 308–13.