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THE BEST PEOPLE

One

Later, people who had heard about the Dayaks and the Madurese in Borneo would say, with smiles of doubt upon their faces, 'So, then - did you actually *see* it?'

'I saw the victims of it,' I would reply. 'I saw their bodies in the jungle. I talked to people who'd seen it, and I saw photographs.'

'But you didn't actually see it with your own eyes. You know . , . . . *eating.*

And I had to admit that, no, I hadn't seen it myself.

It was difficult to believe; there were moments when I had doubts about it too. An American professor once devoted an entire book to the argument that cannibalism was a myth, propagated by Western anthropologists as another means of elevating 'civilized' man above his 'savage' inferiors. After my newspaper stories from West Kalimantan, there were indignant letters from well-meaning human rights organizations, campaigners on behalf of indigenous peoples, who simply refused to believe that any of it had happened.

Two years passed, and change came quickly to Indonesia. Suharto was forced out, but with the new political freedom came violence. In half a dozen places, people were dying in unconnected local conflicts, and the killings in Borneo began to be forgotten. Then one day, unexpectedly, I went back to West Kalimantan and almost became a cannibal myself.

In the middle of March 1999, a moment of profound anxiety for Indonesia, when the nation itself seemed to be breaking up and slowly sinking, a remarkable gathering took place in the centre of Jakarta. It was held in the Hotel Indonesia, the country's oldest luxury establishment, which for forty years had served as the meeting place of the Jakarta elite. Within the hotel was a world of air-conditioned respectability; outside, around a large fountain at the centre of a traffic-stricken roundabout, dwelt a shifting population of street children, beggars, banjo players and prostitutes. And straddling the road in between, as I passed by chance one afternoon, was a crowd of astonishing people. They yodeled and whooped as they crossed the road; some of them joined hands and stamped their feet as they dodged the cars in an improvised dance. Drivers wound down their windows to have a look; the buskers and street children stared.

Half were barefoot or bare-chested, or both. There was at least one battle spear, a couple of hunting bows, a dozen *mandau* and a score of the ritual daggers known as kris. There were shirts of iridescent batik, sarongs in regionally patterned checks and stripes, and loincloths of straw and cotton. A band of Dayaks bore lozenge-shaped war shields; a group from Irian Jaya wore bird of paradise feathers in their headdresses. There was only one object that they all carried in common: flapping around each neck, in a laminated skin of transparent plastic, an identity pass bearing a name, a photograph and the words *Congress of the Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago.* The event would continue for the next week, the Hotel Indonesia was the venue, and these were the delegates arriving for the opening ceremony.

The lobby of the hotel had been filled with stalls selling island produce - baskets, blowpipes, drums, fetishes and bowls. There were more than five hundred delegates and their supporters, members of dozens of different ethnic groups from across the islands: frizzy Papuans from Irian, ebullient Bugis from Sulawesi, laconic Badui from West Java. The printed agenda listed the seminars and workshops which were to be convened over the next week. There would be discussion of land rights, customary law and political

empowerment; there would be debates and resolutions, and a ten-point list of demands. Indonesians were enjoying more freedom than they had had at any time in the last thirty years, but the congress's communiqué was still bracingly assertive and bold. 'If the state will not acknowledge us,' the document concluded, 'then we will not acknowledge the state.'

There were a few foreigners at the Congress too, members of the organizations which had been so upset by my writing on West Kalimantan. I encountered one of them in the hotel lobby, a British woman who had accused me two years earlier of inventing details of the killings.

'We need to talk,' she said, after we had been introduced. 'I've got a few bones to pick with you.'

'Bones?' I said.

We agreed to meet the following afternoon.

It was getting dark when I returned to my own hotel. I examined the souvenir which I had bought from the stalls in the lobby - a packet of the wood which Father Andreas had shown me two years before, the one which repels the blows of the *mandau.* Then I switched on my computer to look at the latest news.

It was a time of violence all over Indonesia. In the past few weeks, vigilante militias had killed independence activists in East Timor, soldiers had killed independence activists in Irian Jaya, guerrillas had killed soldiers in Aceh, and Christians and Muslims had killed one another in the Spice Islands. In Jakarta, mysterious bombs had been .exploding, and in East Java, masked 'ninjas' had murdered and cut to pieces hundreds of men and women accused of witchcraft. But the item which caught my eye this evening was about West Kalimantan.

JAKARTA (AP) Two days of bloody clashes between rival ethnic groups armed with knives and swords killed at least 43 people in a remote corner of Borneo island in Indonesia, police said.

More than 500 houses were burned and several of the victims were dismembered. One man was decapitated, his head paraded through a village by a screaming crowd, a witness said.

There was a flight to Pontianak the following day. 1 cancelled my appointment with the woman who had bones to pick, and telephoned the airport.

Two

It was Friday afternoon when 1 landed in Pontianak, and Budi came to meet me at the airport. 'Hello, Richard,' he said, as we shook hands. 'I think that 1 know why you are here.'

He had brought with him an envelope of articles from the local paper. The large-scale massacres, he explained, had begun only that week, but lesser killings had been taking place for almost a month. In February, a Madurese passenger on a bus north of Pontianak had refused to pay for his ticket. The driver, according to the paper, had 'glowered' at him, so the Madurese had drawn his dagger and stabbed the man in the abdomen. News of the incident spread quickly among the surrounding villages; in the following week, scores of Madurese houses were burned down and a dozen bodies turned up, some of them decapitated and mutilated.

'Just like two years ago,' I said. But Budi shook his head.

This time the injured bus driver and those who avenged him were not Dayaks, but the people known as Melayu or 'Malays' - native Muslims who inhabited Borneo's ports and coastal villages. But then four days ago, just before the opening of the Congress of Indigenous Peoples in Jakarta, a Dayak man had also been killed near a Madurese settlement in the interior.

The situation could not have been worse. The scene was set for a slaughter. Along the coast; road, three

hours north of Pontianak, the Melayu were mobilising, setting up roadblocks, and sweeping through Madurese settlements. In the interior, the Dayak war parties were also gathering. And trapped in the middle were tens of thousands of Madurese.

Many of them had already fled, and were living as refugees in Pontianak. But thousands more were still in their villages, and the Melayu checkpoints prevented any evacuation by road. The Madurese were gathering on beaches in the hope of escape by boat, and even there their enemies were closing in on them.

'Maybe this will be worse, much worse than 1997,' said Budi, as we drew up at the hotel. 'Two days ago forty-one were killed. Yesterday they said it was sixty-two, and maybe the real number is much higher.'

The killings were concentrated 120 miles away, near the town of Singkawang. Budi went out to find a car and a driver; in a time like this, he explained, he did not want the responsibility qf driving as well as being my guide. We met again early the next morning, and set out north from Pontianak.

'The road is so quiet,' Budi said, after we had been driving for half an hour. 'There used to be a lot of buses here, but now everyone is staying at home.' To the left, tracks led down to beaches and the ocean, and on the right was the low green of the jungle. Small outcrops of limestone, isolated from one another like the islands of the sea, loomed out of it and then disappeared behind us. We passed a candy-coloured Chinese temple, and next to it a dilapidated old house with a thatched roof and red lanterns hanging down from the eaves.

In Singkawang we dropped our bags at the hotel, and then set out again on the road north. Ten minutes outside town was a military post where the soldiers lazily waved us through. There was no sudden shock or transformation; the atmosphere of abnormality gathered imperceptibly. The road beyond the town was still quiet, but every few miles young men were to be seen, standing or strolling aimlessly along the side of the road. Several of them carried *mandau* on their belts. I was tired after rising so early, the scenery was monotonously green and even, and I began to nod off in the back of the jeep. It was in this state of blurred tension, between sleep and wakefulness, that I registered the approach of two boys on a motorbike, driving towards us in the opposite direction.

The boy at the front wore a white T-shirt and hunched forward into his handle-bars; his passenger was bare-chested and leaned perilously back. In his right hand, he carried a black sack which he swung around his head causing the bike to wobble. It contained something heavy. Both of the boys wore yellow headbands. They were yelping and hooting and traveling much too fast.

Two miles further on, we stopped at a village where a crowd was milling about in front of a mosque.

They carried knives, pitchforks and metal-tipped spears. There were many more headbands of yellow and red, and faces daubed/with red and white paint. The crowd - mostly young men and boys, with a few women and older men - was pressing up against what looked like an old oil drum in the middle of the road; as our jeep pulled up, they clustered around the drum, as if to protect it from sight. A dozen people walked towards the jeep, and there was glaring and muttering when I stepped out. A fat man in a T-shirt and a yellow headband stepped forward, shaking his head and speaking sternly.

'Put down your camera,' hissed Budi. 'Leave it in the car.
They want no photograph.'

The crowd was drifting away from the oil drum in twos and threes, and gradually surrounding us and the jeep. I said to Budi, 'Tell them who I am and why I'm here.'

He hesitated, and then began speaking to the fat man. I thought to myself, 'Why *am* I here?' but then Budi had finished, and the crowd was looking at me. It was my turn to speak again.

'Ask them what they're doing over there,' I said, gesturing towards the oil drum. 'Can we have a look?'

The fat man frowned as Budi put the question. Behind him, the crowd was murmuring to itself. People were smiling at me, and giggling naughtily. I heard certain words in Indonesian, muttered over and over

again. Later, I asked Budi what they had been saying. The phrase was: *Show him.*

The fat man led the way towards the oil drum, and the crowd parted on either side. The thing sat on top, wrapped in an elegant green cloth - I thought of the woven sarongs which I had seen at the Congress only two days before. Very delicately, he unwrapped it, and the crowd gave out a chortling sigh.

It was the head of a man in his forties or fifties. His eyes were half open, and his dark skin was turning grey. There was an open gash on his cheek, and a deeper one beneath his lip. Through his nose someone had twisted a cruel metal hook. A laugh went up as a lit cigarette was pushed between his lips. The boys tweaked his face, and patted his head; women came up to stare at him with curious expressions. Later, I saw a man with a machete carving his head like a joint of meat, and passing pieces of his scalp around as souvenirs.

The wounds were clean and bloodless. A man who introduced himself in English as the local schoolmaster explained that .he had died early that morning. His name was Ali Wafa, and he was a *kyai,* or local Muslim preacher from the nearby village of Semparu.

'There is another head of a man from the same village who was killed this morning,' Budi said. 'Remember those boys on the motorbike back there? They were carrying it in a bag. They have been taking the heads up and down the road to show them in the villages.'

'Who are these people?' I asked.

'They are Melayu mostly, the people from this village. The ones with the yellow ribbon on their heads are Melayu, and the ones with the red are Dayak.'

'Why did they kill this man?'

The schoolmaster said in English, 'Because he was a bastard. He was an evil bastard. He was the leader of the Madurese.'

The rest of the village had escaped to a small island just off the coast, where they were waiting for boats to carry them to safety. There was only one place left now where the Madurese still held out, and when the schoolmaster spoke its name the young warriors repeated it, and shook their weapons in the air.

'Sambas!' they said, laughing. 'Sambas! Sambas!'

'Sambas is further north of here,' said the schoolmaster.

'Maybe in Sambas there will also be a war tomorrow.'

I said to the schoolmaster, 'Doesn't the army try to stop them?'

'The army is too few,' he replied. 'And they are afraid.'

Three young men thrust their way to the front to take a look at us. They wore cocky smiles; with a lurch, I realized that the red on their faces was partly paint, and partly dried blood. One of them had a black plastic bag tied to his belt, which bulged unpleasantly, as if it was filled with liquid.

'What's in there?' I asked.

'Bread,' the young man replied, and the crowd snickered. The dizzy tiredness which I had been feeling in the car came over me again. I said to the schoolmaster, 'Who is the leader? Who is the *panglima?'*

'No, no,' he said, and smiled indulgently. 'That is the Dayak people. We are Melayu, and we have no *panglima.* We are Muslims.' He nodded towards the mosque.

Budi and I stood next to one another looking at the head. It was noon and the sun was directly overhead. Neither I, nor the head, nor the crowd around it cast any shadow.

There was a pause. The schoolmaster smiled enquiringly as if more words were expected of me. Then the three cocky young men walked over to the oil drum and wrapped Ali Wafa's head up in the green cloth. A motorbike was wheeled over, and the three of them squeezed on to the single seat, kick-started the engine, and wobbled off down the road.

'Do you have any more questions?' said the schoolmaster. I couldn't think of a single one.

Budi and I climbed back into the jeep. The driver looked pale. Through the rolled-down window the

schoolmaster shook our hands and said, 'For myself, I cannot agree with killing, but there has to be a solution to the Madurese people because they cannot live alongside others. If this was not done, then the' problem would just get worse. The Madurese people will become stronger, and then there will be no control. It is better for them to go back to their own island. There will be peace when they leave.'

On the way back to Singkawang we came upon a gang of boys who were playing with the other trophy from Ali Wafa's village. It was split at the back and the brain could be seen. Nearby, in a field, a group of men were slaughtering a cow with a machete, hacking through its neck with powerful swings. The cow made no sound and did not struggle. It fell heavily on to its knees and then on to its side, as the blood ran on to the earth.

Sambas was fifty miles from Singkawang, but even at that distance it was obvious that something awful was happening there. Our driver heard the rumours early the following morning; as I was eating my breakfast, he timidly approached to announce that he would not be able to drive us that day. By the time we found another jeep it was after nine, but not a shop or business in Singkawang was open. 'Sambas?' said the officer at the army checkpoint, and when we nodded he shook his head disbelievingly as he raised the bamboo. It was 21 March 1999, a Sunday.

There was no ordinary traffic on the road. The only vehicles were motorbikes, carrying two or even three riders, and buses and large trucks with slatted wooden sides. Each was packed with Melayu dressed raggedly for war. They clung to the roofs of the buses and the running boards of the trucks. They raced one another with crazy speed and the warriors leaned out and waved as they overtook us, shouting, 'Sambas! Sambas!' and pointing up the road.

People fell into two categories that day: those who could not be induced to go near Sambas, and those who could not get there fast enough.

At a town called Pemangkat, we stopped and photographed a group of warriors. It was appalling to see how young they were. The atmosphere was closer to that of a school outing than a war party, an outing which had been hijacked by a gang of horribly over-excited bullies. At the sight of the cameras they pranced and posed rapturously. Most carried small sickles, some had *mandau,* a few had longer swords or spears, and one carried a hunting rifle. With care and ingenuity they had fashioned uniforms for themselves with ribbons and bandannas, scarves and balaclavas. One young boy wore a strip of red cloth covering his face into which he had cut two eyeholes. In his T-shirt and his shorts, with his bad teeth and his childish grin, he looked like a naughty boy dressed up for Hallowe'en.

Beyond Pemangkat, we passed rows of burned and smouldering houses by the side of the road. Distant columns of smoke rose up from the jungle, each one of them representing another Madurese village. The new driver knew all their names and pointed them out as we passed: Selekau, Setimbuk and, far down towards the sea, Segaru, the island where the Madurese refugees were awaiting their Dunkirk. Had the boats come to rescue them in time? Or had the Melayu gone in, and 'finished' it, as they had promised?

Ten minutes before Sambas thick billows of smoke were visible, rising from a point close to, but outside, the town. We passed through an army checkpoint; the soldiers were doing nothing to stop the trucks of arriving warriors. Budi asked the name of the place from where the smoke was billowing, and the officer told us it was a Madurese hamlet named Suka Ramai. 'It is a strange name,' said Budi. 'Suka Ramai. The words mean "I love noise" or "I love trouble".'

Sambas was a small market town, the usual agglomeration of wooden homes and low concrete commercial buildings shaped around a square. The metal shutters on the first-floor shops were all drawn down and padlocked. Not a single person was to be seen outside. At a T-junction on the edge of town, a massed body of men had gathered: older men than the imps in Pemangkat, big, burly men with long knives and a dozen rifles

between them. To the right, a narrow road led towards Suka Ramai.

Half a dozen reporters and cameramen were already standing uncertainly at the junction. We stopped the jeep and cautiously walked towards them.

A man on a motorbike emerged from the direction of the smoke, and came to a jerky stop. In one hand he brandished a curved sword and in the other he held out an object attached to a short length of string. It was pink and delicate and abstract looking, and it took several seconds to piece together the visual information and to understand that it was a human ear.

The man dismounted, kicked out the stand on his bike and sat on it facing us. A cameraman and two photographers took up positions in front of him; he brandished the ear like a medal, and held it still so that they could focus their lenses. He wore a yellow headband daubed with paint, and there was blood on the sleeve of his jacket and on the blade of the sword. There were fine beads of sweat on his lip, and he was shouting into the cameras in a barking, staccato manner. Was this the state of possession, the battle trance about which I had heard so much? He was a handsome man, with frowning muscular brows and shapely lips. As he spoke I noticed his teeth, which were very white and evenly spaced. I stared at the small dainty ear and began to feel as if I was falling into a trance myself.

'What does he say?' I whispered to Budi.

'He says, "We don't care about your race. We don't care about your religion. Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Dayak, Melayu, Chinese or Buginese - all of them are welcome here. We just don't want Madurese. All the Madurese must leave. ",

'Ask him what is happening up there.'

Budi asked. 'He says go and see for yourselves.' *'Silahkan, silahkan,'* said the man with the ear, pointing up the road, towards the smoke. Go ahead. Be our guest.

A mile of fields lay between Suka Ramai and the spot where now we stood. The road across them ran dead straight. The cameramen and reporters exchanged hesitant glances. I had never before felt simultaneously such extremes of eagerness and reluctance. My body felt light, as if I might float away from the earth. It wasn't fear, because there was a weird absence of any personal threat. It wasn't suspense, for it was obvious what was happening up the road. But it was impossible to turn back now.

The driver refused to take the jeep any further. As we began to walk silently towards 1. Love Trouble, another truck overtook us and the warriors packed into the back cheered and waved their blades. A thin man ona bicycle passed by in the opposite direction, with a little girl perched on the handlebars; both of them waved and smiled. The surface of the road was in good condition; we passed one smooth patch which was sticky with blood.

A scattered group of warriors appeared from the direction of the village, jogging towards us out of the smoke, waving their weapons. A man carrying a spear ran up to me, grinning delightedly, and shook my hand. 'Anti-Madura!' he shouted. 'Madura, no! No Madura!'

Now there were hundreds of young men streaming down the road past us. They were all smiling, and panting with exertion and excitement. More of them stopped to talk.

'Ask them where they come from,' I told Budi. 'Pemangkat,' said one boy in a T-shirt bearing a map of the London Underground. 'But I haven't been there for seven days.' 'What have you been doing?'

'We have been hunting the Madurese people.'

'What do you do if you find them?'

'We kill them directly, then take the head and chop it.' 'Why do you chop the head? 'It is our tradition.'

Then a boy in a white vest was walking towards me, holding, a human arm, severed below the elbow. All of the fingers and much of the skin had been stripped off the hand. Bone and muscle bulged out of the other end.

When the warriors had gone, Budi said, 'It is not their tradition. It is a Dayak tradition, but they are Melayu.'

Soon I could smell the smoke of the burning houses. There were perhaps a dozen houses in Suka Ramai, and all of them were in flames. There had been a hundred Madurese holding out here, and at least a thousand Melayu in the raiding party. A few of the Madurese had stayed behind to put up a fight; after two of them were shot, the others had run off into the jungle. Some of _the raiders had stayed in the village to chop up and divide the two bodies; the rest had crossed the fields to hunt down the fugitives in the forest. But they had made a clean escape, and the tired, thirsty Melayu were returning to the burning village. We were arriving at the tail end of the hunt; the fun was over for the day. A battered pickup halted beside us, and a Chinese man began unloading boxes of bottled water and handing them out to the warriors.

There was nothing else to do, so we walked back along the road. I felt obscurely disappointed, as if the point of the afternoon had passed me by. We climbed into the jeep and drove back into Sambas to find water ourselves.

In the market square a few of the young warriors were standing around, and a single shop was open. There was a stand selling the kebabs called *sate;* nearby smouldered the embers of a fire. Among them was a charred human femur. Budi noticed it at the same time as me, and he suddenly looked stricken. His lips trembled and he was on the edge of tears.

'Let's go, Richard,' he said in a low, strangled tone.

I walked quickly to the shop to buy water and cigarettes.

As I was fumbling for the money, a tall man in a yellow headband walked over from the *sate* cart. On his belt hung a rusty handgun, as well as two of the bulging plastic bags I had seen the day before. In greasy fingers he held a piece of grey, fibrous, partly cooked meat impaled upon a stick of wood. He pulled off a piece with his teeth and chewed it. His face was a foot away from mine.

He held the kebab out to me, and smiled. *'Silahkan.'* Please eat.

The other boys in the square had gathered round and were laughing. *'Silahkan! Silahkan!'*

'No, thank you;'

Budi walked up, looking agonised. 'Please, Richard, let's go.'

The man continued to push the meat towards me, talking excitedly.

'Tell him no, I don't want it.'

But he wouldn't take no for an answer, as he waved the stick of meat in my face.

I experienced again the sensation of light trance, and of gravity failing around me. I thought about how easy it would be to take the meat, and to eat it. I thought about the animals which I had eaten over the years: horse, dog, monkey, snake, snail, slug. I remembered in particular the monkey, which had been grilled over a fire in a jungle village. Its meat had been tough and gamey, but afterwards I had seen a relic of it: a simian right arm, hand and portions of a ribcage. The skin was charred, but patches of fine grey fur were still visible and the hand had ten delicate fingernails, like the nails of a newborn baby. How far was a monkey from being a human? How close was I to being a cannibal? My dreaminess deepened as I pondered the consequences of my actions in the next two or three seconds: *I, a cannibal. . .* But the piece of meat looked cold and unappetizing. I needed to drink water before I could think about eating.

'Ha!' said the kebab man with a cackle. He pulled the meat away and stuck it into his mouth, and I felt my knees going cold with relief.

There were so many questions I could have asked. I asked the first one that came into my head.

'Delicious,' he said, when Budi had translated. 'Like chicken.'

We walked back to the jeep, and the kebab man followed us, with a group of young Melayu, all of them' laughing and jabbering and pointing behind them.

'Oh *no,'* said Budi quietly.

'What is it?'

'They've got more. . . meat. They want to show it to us. They want us to eat.'

'Let's just go.' But the hands of the Melayu kebab man were on my shirt and he was tugging me back from the open door of the jeep. 'No thank you,' I said, trying to keep a smile on my face as I unpicked his fingers. 'No thank you. Let go.'

The driver was frowning and sweating, as we struggled to close the doors. Then the engine wouldn't start. Twice, it rumbled and grated and then died. Budi was muttering something, perhaps even a prayer. Outside, the kebab man and his friends were tapping on the window, and bouncing ecstatically up and down. Then the engine started up, and we began to reverse slowly into the road. The men outside were miming the action of a pair of chopsticks over a bowl of rice. They were shouting words I understood: *'Makan! Makan!'* and *'Silahkan!'* They chased after the car as we drove away.

Makan. Silahkan.

Dinner time! Be our guest!

Three

I saw my sixth and seventh heads on Tuesday afternoon in a Dayak village an hour's drive from the town. They were visible from a few hundred yards away, standing on oil drums on either side of the road, with a crowd of about two hundred people milling around them. Most of the onlookers were men, but there were young women and children there too. 'What do you want to do?' said the man who was accompanying us, a Dayak leader in his fifties. I said that I wanted to have a look.

We walked up towards them, past the warriors with their spears and red headbands and hunting rifles. Even in big cities in Indonesia, people shout greetings when a foreigner passes by, but these people looked at me with indifference. The heads had been taken just a few hours before, and they looked. . . they looked like all the other heads I had seen.

They were a middle-aged couple, a few years younger than my own parents. Their ears and lips had been shaved off with machetes, giving them a snarling, subhuman look. The wife's nose had also been removed, and a cigarette had been pressed into the cavity. Her eyes were clenched tight shut, and above them an atrocious wound had been cut deep into her forehead. Why did I take photographs of the heads, knowing perfectly well that no newspaper could ever print them? Was it simply in order to document the event? Or were there baser, more prurient motives?

I had never worked in such conditions before, and nor had anyone I knew. The experience produced two contradictory reactions. The first was relief, together with a guilty pride, in finding myself able to confront horror without being overcome by nausea or fear. The second reaction took the form of troubling questions, which nagged me at odd moments. Why was I not more upset by this? What was wrong with me? I don't know what to call such an emotion, but it is something close to shame.

Two years earlier, when few people understood the scale of what had happened between the Dayaks and the Madurese, I had spent a fortnight in Borneo searching for cannibalism and headhunting. I had found witnesses, photographs and skeletons in the jungle, but not the thing that I secretly knew I was seeking. Afterwards, I wrote long newspaper and magazine articles - tens of thousands of words, all about failing to find a severed head. In March 1999, in the space of four days, I saw seven of them, along with a severed ear, an arm, a hand, numerous pieces of heart and liver, and a dismembered torso being cooked over a fire by the side of the road - and I find myself at a loss over what to say. The most devastating thing about black magic is not the blood and darkness, but the gaping, profound banality.

By the time the attack on I Love Trouble was done, hundreds of Madurese had been decapitated and eaten,

10,000 had fled as refugees to Pontianak, and there were almost none left alive in the settlements along the coast. But another road ran west from Singkawang and into the forests of the Dayak interior. It was here, everyone said, that the killings were now taking place.

Dayak leaders in Singkawang were adamant that this was a conflict between Melayu and Madurese; the Dayaks, they insisted, were staying out of it. But the driver of our jeep, whose name was Petrus, traveled along the jungle road one afternoon to visit his brother and Dayak sister-in-law. 'You should see what it is like,' he said when he returned. 'You've never seen anything like it.' Petrus was a chubby, smiling man, a Christian from the eastern island of Flores. He had many friends among the Dayaks, he said, and could provide some useful introductions. As we were setting out for the interior on Tuesday morning, he smiled at me again and said, 'It is unbelievable up there. Have you got the guts?'

The landscape was quite different from that of the coastal road: instead of low scrappy undergrowth, the trees on either side were thick and looming, and the limestone hills beyond them were rough and high. Within fifteen minutes of leaving Singkawang, we were driving past deep jungle. We passed a military barracks with pillars carved in the shape of Dayak shields; a few hundred yards on was a Christian cemetery cut out of the forest, with wooden crosses and whitewashed stone walls. 'Now we are in the Dayak area,' announced Petrus. In Borneo, I was always conscious of crossing boundaries, visible and invisible doors which would open silently and then close behind me with a click.

Two wooden barrels flanking the road marked the entrance to a village. There was a butcher's shop with cuts of beef hanging from meat hooks, and a food cart with a crude Union Jack painted on the side. Then the road turned a corner, and immediately ahead were three hundred Dayak warriors with rifles and headbands.

Petrus slowed the jeep to a halt, and leaned out of the window. A Dayak with a spear approached warily, then smiled as he recognized Petrus. The two clasped hands, and Petrus gestured towards me with words of explanation. The man's T-shirt also bore a Union Jack.

'It is because they like English football,' Petrus said. 'Dayaks love football - Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur.'

Two miles further on, there was a roadblock of bamboo poles balanced across two tables. On each of the tables was a scraggy head. One of them was mutilated unrecognizably and rubbery-grey in colour. The other was that of a boy, barely a teenager, his eyes open and his skin smeared with blood.

There were more smiles and handshakes for Petrus, and more polite nods to Budi and me in the back.

A few miles further still, there was another checkpoint, and another head. There were no warriors here, so Petrus simply maneuvered around the obstacles and through the narrow gap. At one point, the side of the jeep brushed with a bump against the table on which the head rested. The head was that of a young man. It wobbled uncertainly on its stump of neck; for a moment of horror, I believed that it was going to topple and roll on to the ground. Why should the thought of the severed head falling be worse than the fact of the head itself? But it quickly ceased wobbling, and we edged safely through to the other side.

In the town of Semelantan we visited the district office and heard the story of Martinus Amat, the Dayak whose death provoked the killings in the interior. The district chief was a Dayak, and next to him sat the local army chief, a Melayu major. They were friendly and open, with occasional moments of evasiveness and embarrassment. They were acutely conscious that within their community they had lost all control.

'There are two versions of what happened to Martinus Amat,' said the district chief after we had introduced ourselves. 'This is the first one.'

Martinus was an eighteen-year-old from Semelantan. He had been one of a group of Dayaks in the back of a pickup truck as it had driven to Singkawang a week before. Close to the village of Jirak, according to the other passengers, a group of men stopped the truck, and began shouting angrily at the occupants.

'They kept asking, "Where is the fat Melayu?"' the district chief said.

The Dayaks in the back of the pickup leaped out and fled, but when Martinus jumped he hurt his leg and couldn't run away. He was set upon and beaten, and the beating killed him. 'It happened on the 16th of March at 2 p.m.,' said the district chief. 'It was midnight when I heard and by that time he was dead.'

Within Semelantan and the surrounding villages, at least, nobody had any doubts about what had happened: once again, a blameless young man had been murdered without provocation by a gang of Madurese. Even the Madurese themselves made the same assumption about the identity of the killers. The district chief collected Martinus's body from the army hospital at 9.30 on the morning after he died. Along the road, Madurese families were already stacking up their possessions and boarding buses, in certain anticipation of revenge.

'I went to the house of Martinus's family,' the district chief said. 'I handed over the body, and tried to cool them down. I was away for less than an hour. But when I got back, the Madurese houses in Jirak had already been burned down by a mob.'

The second version of the *story* was virtually the same as the first - the stopping of the pickup, the search for 'the fat Melayu', the death of the boy. The difference was the identity of the men who killed him. There was one friend of Martinus's who had stayed by the truck and been there when he died; after it was too late, when the burning and killing were well underway, the district chief had talked to him at length. The boy said that the attackers had been shocked when they realised that Martinus had died from his beating. They asked the boy where Martinus lived, and when he told them that he was from Semelantan the men looked upset. They apologized for what they had done. They gave the boy cigarettes, and then they ran away.

'I'm not completely sure because I wasn't there,' said the district chief. 'But, from what I heard from that boy, it was Dayaks who killed Martinus.'

He stopped speaking for a moment as we absorbed this information.

'They were Dayaks,' said the major. 'They were looking for a Malay man - perhaps he owed them money. They thought that Martinus was the Malay, and they beat him up to scare him. But by accident he died.'

The district chief said, 'It was Dayaks killing a Dayak. But no one wants to hear this now.'

He shook his head and smiled. The major stared at the floor with folded arms. Nobody spoke for a while.

'How many of the Madurese do you think escaped to safety?' I said.

The district chief looked at the major, but he didn't return the look.

'Some,' he said eventually.

'How many are still hiding in the forest?'

'Hundreds. Hundreds and hundreds. They are hunting them down now.'

'And how many are dead?'

A pause. 'There are people killed,' he said, with strain. 'But I don't feel authorized to tell you how many.'

'It's very difficult to know the exact number,' said the major. 'Sometimes, a man will be carrying a hand, and he'll say, "I killed one." Another will be carrying a leg, and he'll say, "I killed one too." But the hand and the leg may be from the same body. So we count the number of heads.'

People in the villages reckoned that more than two hundred Madurese had been killed so far in the district of Semelantan, and that they were still being killed, at the rate of about thirty a day. Along the road, every few hundred yards, we encountered small groups of young Dayaks, stepping into or out of the jungle, armed and excited. These were the hunting parties, and the hunt was continuing. Even when we couldn't see them, we could hear the sound of their cries through the trees, the chilling, childish *Whoo-woo-woo-woo-woo!* Before we left Semelantan, 'Petrus stopped at a stall and bought forty packets of *kretek* to hand out at the checkpoints. Within an hour and a half, all the cigarettes had gone.

The further we traveled into the jungle, the poorer the Dayak vtllages became. Evidently, we were crossing another boundary here, into a harsher and more unpredictable realm. A man named Tomas, the leader of a Dayak community organization, accompanied us to .smooth things over with the hunters, although for much of the time he was the most nervous person in the jeep.

I counted up the number of heads I had seen since arriving in Borneo on Saturday. There had been five. Why was I traveling into the forest and what did 1 expect to find there? I didn't know any more.

It was in a village called Montrado that 1 saw the sixth and seventh heads, the middle-aged husband and wife, facing one another across the road on separate oil drums.

After 1 had looked at them for a bit, Tomas came up and said, 'Do you want to see some Madurese?'

I shook my head.

'But these people are alive,' said Tomas. 'They are the last living Madurese in Montrado.'

They were sheltering in the house of the Dayak chief - two families of eight people altogether, including four children. I glimpsed them as we were led inside - dark, hollow faces peeping around a door at the back. The chief, whose name was Elias Ubek, told us the story of how he had saved them the night before. 'I am the leader of these people,' he said, 'and I cannot cool them down. Last night I almost became a corpse myself.'

The killings in Montrado had been going on for three days. Elias Ubek reckoned that there had been 170 Madurese 'families here, and that seventy people - about a tenth of the population - had been murdered so far. But those were just the ones he knew about.

Elias was a skinny man with lank, murky hair and a jaundiced tinge to his skin. His small plaster house was the biggest in the village. The cramped room in which we sat contained bamboo furniture and devotional trinkets; one wall was hung with a lurid tapestry of the Sacred Heart. 'Some are shot, some are hacked,' Elias said. 'They don't care about women, children. They kill wives, husbands, they kill the children. Sometimes they pour petrol on them and burn them while they're alive. I must have seen about six or seven children myself. Two of them were babies. Three or four months old. They chopped their heads off too.'

The people whom Elias saved had been caught the day before. 'One of them is a Javanese family - the woman was widowed, and she remarried a Madurese. The other family has Chinese blood. So they are not all pure Madurese themselves. Still they tied them up, and they were about to do them in, when some of our people recognized them and told them no. But the one who wanted to kill them, the leader, he isn't a local man. He came from Darit. Those Dayaks are so violent - sometimes the local people try to stop them, but they are uncontrollable. They are unconscious, it is a supernatural spirit. They eat many of them.'

Elias poured out tea into cups with pictures of Jesus on the side. '1 went out and untied the people they were going to kill and brought them quickly in here. The mob was so angry. I told them that if you want to kill them you'll have to kill me first.'

The army command in Singkawahg had been told about the Madurese, and had promised to send a truck to pick them up. A convoy was said to be making its way even now, but it was being harried along the way by the Dayak warriors. '1 face such difficulties here, until these people are evacuated,' said Elias. '1 haven't rested for three days and two nights. 1 think that many of the Dayaks here hate me now. They despise me because 1 am against the killing. But that's the risk. I've got to resist their anger.'

Beyond Montrado, the road was lively with traffic. A few ihundred yards along the road, we watched a hunting party disappear into the jungle on the right, and a little later two boys rode past on a bicycle, with a severed hand bobbing from the handlebars at the end of a piece of string. At the next corner, I found myself parting with a 10,000-rupiah bill - a 'loan', as it was called, to a tall young man with a transparent bag of liver tied to his belt. The Dayaks who were waving us down here all had "questions, about me, about the other occupants of the jeep, and about the /reasons for our journey. Word had got around that treacherous Dayaks

were collaborating with the enemy in order to frustrate the hunters; it was necessary to reassure them that there were no fleeing Madurese in this jeep.

For the next three miles the road was deserted. Then there was a T-junction where a number of small fires were visible at the side of the road. About a dozen Dayaks were tending to them busily. Knives and *mandau* could be seen; above the flames, they were erecting frames of sticks for cooking. Behind them were a number of pink objects on a low stone wall. As we passed 1 saw two legs, a limbless trunk. Something else, perhaps an arm, was being positioned over the flames.

The Dayaks were absorbed in the preparations for the barbecue, and they ignored the jeep.

'Don't stop, Petrus,' I said.

Five minutes later, we were waved down again and as the jeep slowed a young warrior opened the door, smiled apologetically and jumped into the back. This is great, I thought. First, I give a cannibal a tip - now I'm giving them taxi rides.

Our cannibal was a teenager. He was shirtless, and wore neat jeans and worn trainers. In his hand he carried a sheathed *mandau,* with a red-painted handle carved into the shape of a horse. It looked brand new, the kind of thing you would buy from a tourist craft shop. I thought of the *Whoo-woo-woo-woo-woo!,* the wail of the Dayaks on the trail of a flagging victim, like Apaches in a Western. My new friend looked like nothing so much as the participant in a giant game of cowboys and indians.

He was chattering with excitement about the things that he had seen and done. He told us that the man whom they were cooking on the road had been caught that morning. 'We killed it and we ate it,' he says, 'because we hate the Madurese.' He had taken part in four killings himself. 'Mostly we shoot them first, and then we chop the body. It tastes just like chicken. Especially the liver - just the same as chicken.'

I asked him about the heads of the children and babies which Elias Ubek had seen in Montrado, but he shook his head and laughed. 'We don't kill babies! If we find a baby we give it to other people. In fact, we found a kid and a baby and we saved them.'

'How old does someone have to be before you will kill them?' I asked.

'Around thirteen or fifteen,' he said.

'Why do you kill them? Why don't you just send them all away?'

'Because we hate them.'

Twenty minutes down the road, he got out at his village. He was bubblingly grateful. We had saved him a tiring walk at the end of a long, exciting day. A bit later on, Petrus spoke up. 'You know, I've been all over this country - to Sumatra, to Java, all over eastern Indonesia,' he said, 'and these people - they're the nicest, the friendliest, the best. There's no one like them.'

.He was perfectly serious, and what he said was true. There couldn't be any doubt that this was evil in its most bestial form. But these were not evil people, and this was not an evil place.

Four

Most of the photographs I took in Borneo could never be published, but at one of the checkpoints, between Pemangkat and Singkawang, I made an effort to frame something printable. A group of Melayu boys were playing with a head on an oil drum. The routine was familiar: the patting and poking, the cigarette stuffed up the nose, and the keepsakes of skin and scalp. Two young brothers were in charge of the head, and they were delighted to show it off. For five minutes, I snapped them as they clowned with their atrocity. Then they grew bored and begged some cigarettes from the driver. I left them by the jeep with Budi and walked back down the road.

My idea was to take a shot from behind. There would be no doubt what was depicted - the head of a

decapitated man on an oil drum - but without the slashed mouth and lidless eyes, and the ribbons of tissue trailing from the neck. I had knelt down aad was raising the camera, when the younger of the brothers spotted what I was doing. He raised his hand, ran forward, then picked up the head and turned it round through 180 degrees to face me. I walked round to the other side, and tried again. The same thing happened. The boy was trying to be helpful. He couldn't understand why I should avoid the face of the dead man. He wanted to give me the very best view of this magical object that was bringing him and his brother so much excitement and delight.

There were moments, when the hunt was underway and immediately after a kill, when the more murderous among the warriors became abstracted and withdrawn; at those moments, it was easy to believe in spirits, or at least in bloodlust. But among most of them the overwhelming mood of those few days was jubilation. Piled into their buses, with their motley colours and their chants, they were like fans of a triumphant football team, a team which after long years of undeserved obscurity had suddenly, through courage and persistence, achieved a famous victory. In Montrado, an old woman approached me as I was looking at the heads, and repeated a single phrase: 'At last, at last, at last. . .' Rather than exultation, there was relief - that a wrong had finally been set right, and a threat that had hung over the population for years had been decisively removed. This was the strangest, and the most pitiful, thing about being among cannibals in Borneo: not how angry, but how happy they were.

I gave up trying to take my photograph and looked at the boy with the head. He was about twelve years old, his brother fifteen. In their lifetimes, the purging of the Madurese and the coming to their village of this trophy were the grandest, the noblest, the most glamorous events they had ever known. Something had changed; justice had been achieved. How poor an existence these people had, that this hairy lump on an oil drum should be an emblem of morality and hope.

Beside a burning house on the road to Sambas, a boy with a yellow headband said, These were all Melayu fields once, but the Madurese took them over. They use violence, and until now we have never used violence in return. When they use force against us our dignity rises up. And so we burn their houses. We take our heart's revenge, and we don't want them to come back.'

A Melayu man holding a Madurese head by the hair said, 'People have wanted to do this for such a long time, such a long' time. The Madurese have a different society from us. They are so different from the Chinese, the Melayu, the Bugis. Many, many times we have told the police about this, about the problems we face with these people. But nobody listens. So there is no alternative. The Madurese have to go.'

I never got to know a Madurese - for obvious reasons it was impossible in West Kalimantan at that time. The closest I got was the faces peering round Elias Ubek's door, and later the thousands in the displacement camp in Pontianak - unsmiling and uncomplaining, making do with small boxes of noodles and hags of wheat, as helpless and baffled as refugees anywhere in the world. But everyone else I spoke to in Borneo agreed that, as a community, they were impossible to live with.

They were clannish, aggressive and predatory. They resorted to violence at the slightest provocation. They were poor, of course - but everyone in Borneo was poor. 'They cannot exist peacefully alongside other people,' Budi said. 'Chinese, Melayu, Dayaks - we can get on together. But Madurese just love to fight and steal.' Hearing this often enough, you begin to believe it. But it also sounds unpleasantly like the kind of consensus that has built up at various times about Romany Gypsies, or about Jews.

And yet in the war against the Madurese, there was no trace of the beliefs which inspire other ethnic conflicts - no doctrine of superiority, no urge to expansionism or memory of historical injustice. The notion of a Melayu nationalist or a Dayak supremacist was ridiculous. There were no propagandists or ideologues; there were scarcely any leaders. Even tribalism did not explain it, for there was nothing tribal uniting the Melayu

with the Dayaks and the Buginese.

The Indonesian word which I heard over and again was *adat,* usually translated as 'traditional law'. It is *adat* which is violated when somebody steals durians from the tree that has always belonged to your ancestors, and waves a sickle at you when you remonstrate with him. 'In the eyes of Dayaks,' a Dayak teacher said, 'when people do not respect our *adat,* they become enemies, and we don't consider our enemies to be human any more. They become animals in our eyes. And the Dayaks eat animals.'

The army convoy reached Montrado that evening. One of the trucks parked directly in front of Elias Ubek's house, and lowered, its tailgate. The Dayak warriors had been waiting all day. They crowded up around the truck, three or four hundred of them, jeering and whooping. The soldiers in the truck screamed at them and pointed their rifles. But it was they, and not the Dayaks, who were afraid.

One by one, the eight Madurese ran out of Elias's house and leaped into the arms of the soldiers who dragged them up into the trucks. Every time, the crowd jeered and spat.

When all of them were inside, huddling under blankets on the floor, the convoy turned round and set off back to Singkawang. The sun had already set. There were twelve trucks, each containing about a dozen soldiers - 150 men to protect a handful of Madurese.

Near Jirak, the convoy was ambushed. Gangs of Dayaks began firing from both sides of the road, and the soldiers fired back. The warriors were .armed with hunting rifles, home-made blunderbusses, slings, and bows and arrows. The soldiers carried automatic assault rifles. <The Dayaks had no chance,' said a photographer, who was riding in one of the army trucks. <They were standing a few feet away pointing their pop-guns. The soldiers were protected by the trucks. They could take their time, they were aiming directly at them.' It was late that same evening, and the photographer and I were sitting in the hotel in Singkawang. It was my last night in Borneo.

The photographer said, ‘One of the Dayaks had a huge bird mask. It looked like the head of an eagle, with a great feather headdress. I saw it standing by the road, walking up and down during the shooting. Then it was running away back into the forest.'

By the time the Dayaks had retreated, four of them were lying dead on the road. Not a single soldier or Madurese was hurt.

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