
Jan Broekhuyse was a member of the colonial public service from 1959 to 1962 in what was then Dutch New Guinea, until the Dutch ceded administration to Indonesia. He stayed on during the interim administration run by the United Nations, from October 1962 through to March 1963. Later, he worked in a range of development projects across Africa. Shortly before his death, in late 2020, he completed the book under review in which he accounts for his work in what he calls the Biliem Valley. Here I use instead the name Grand Valley of the Biliem, or Grand Valley, on account of the size of the wide and mostly flat valley floor, and also because upstream the Biliem river flows through a lengthy, densely settled, V-shaped valley, known as the North Biliem valley. Following recent usage, I use the name Hubula for the inhabitants of the Grand Valley, rather than Dani, an exonym.

Broekhuyse's memoirs provide valuable, additional information about three topics. The first is the administrative regime set up in the Grand Valley by Rolph Gonsalves, the area's Officer In Charge (OIC), from February 1958 to January 1960 (Schoorl 1996: 617). The second concerns the 1961 Harvard-Peabody film expedition there. And the third is the ethnography of the Hubula about whom he had written his doctoral dissertation (Broekhuyse 1967). In this new book he adds important data about the position of women among the Hubula (Ploeg 2021). However, in this review I discuss only the first topic.

Broekhuyse arrived in the Grand Valley in December 1959 to take over from Gonsalves, and to serve as acting OIC until the arrival of Carel Schneider, in March 1960. Schneider became better known as F. Springer, a pen-name under which he published novels and short stories, some of them drawing extensively on his experiences in the Grand Valley.
Gonsalves’ conduct as the OIC of the Grand Valley has become the subject of at least two inquiries, the first soon after he had ended his work there, the second in 1994, when he had become a top-level public prosecutor in the Netherlands. Broekhuyse was instrumental in getting the first one started and his account reveals why he did so. Gonsalves writes in his memoirs that he was instructed to rapidly establish administrative authority in the valley (Gonsalves & Verhoog 1999: 67), although he neglects to quote these instructions or reveal their source. He claims that at the end of his tenure, almost two years later, he had been largely successful (ibidem p. 123, p. 127). However, Broekhuyse concluded that Gonsalves had used a great deal of, possibly illegal, violence to implement his instruction. He writes that soon after arrival he observed Gonsalves bodily punishing a Hubula man, beating him with a baton (p. 14). He also writes that he was told about a Hubula person who was killed while fleeing, about another ‘hacked to pieces’ (p. 26), and about Hubula carriers having been permitted to loot Hubula settlements during a patrol (p. 75). He furthermore noticed that Gonsalves failed to bring Hubula warfare to an end: ‘Each day there were reports about thefts of pigs, about raids and wars’ (p. 35). And Schneider, using his pen-name Springer in his faction inspired by his stay in the Grand Valley, mentions the violence he had to deal with during his presence there.

The very day that Gonsalves left the Grand Valley, in January 1960, Broekhuyse instructed the local head of the police, a Dutchman, that from then on bodily punishments were over and shooting was to occur only in self-defense (p. 14). Given the timing, it seems unlikely that he had conferred with his superior, F.R.J. Eibrink Jansen, the resident commissioner in what was then Hollandia, about these instructions. But presumably he had to report them and the matter soon became the subject of high-level deliberations in Hollandia, and even The Hague. Schneider was asked to submit a report about Gonsalves’ conduct. Finally, the chief prosecutor in Hollandia decided against prosecution, although in his opinion there was evidence that Gonsalves had committed penal offenses (Meyenfeldt, no date). At that time, criminal law in Dutch New Guinea allowed corporal punishment. However, during the next visit to New Guinea of Theo Bot, the under-minister charged with the administration of the colony, Broekhuyse had the opportunity to discuss with him Gonsalves’ use of this type punishment. Shortly afterwards the governor officially forbade it, as Broekhuyse writes, on the instruction of the under-minister (pp. 36–8).

Broekhuyse was told (p. 38) that the resident commissioner had to accept a transfer to South New Guinea, in June 1961, since he was held partly responsible for Gonsalves’ misconduct. However, Eibrink had been appointed resident commissioner in Hollandia in June 1959 (Schoorl 1996: 626), sixteen months
after Gonsalves had started work in the Grand Valley. And, in his comments on Gonsalves’ field reports he criticized his conduct. Moreover, his transfer took place one year after the matter was discussed in Hollandia. It also appears incongruous that Eibrink was nudged, while Gonsalves, in April 1960, shortly after he had left the Grand Valley, was awarded a royal merit, as he asserted due to his ‘pacification’ of the valley (Gonsalves & Verhoog 1999: 127).

Gonsalves’ efforts to turn the Hubula into colonial dependents appear to have been an objectionable episode in the Dutch colonial administration of west New Guinea. It should be further investigated. Broekhuyse has provided a unique record by a participant. It is fortunate that he managed to complete his memoirs shortly before his death.

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References


