

BORDERS ACROSS RIVERS: Problems with the Creation of Anglo- German Border across Gira, Eia, Wuwu, and Waria Rivers, 1884-1909

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An international boundary across navigable rivers can naturally create a great potential for international conflict. In New Guinea, the officials of Anglo-German colonial authorities seemed to have overlooked this problem when they first decided to lay down their common boundary in 1885 across Gira, Eia, Wuwu and Waria Rivers at eight parallel on the south latitude. This paper attempts to discuss how the colonial officials of the two very powerful countries at the time (1885-1909) tried to make decisions in such a way to prevent or avoid an international conflict with the navigation of rivers across their common boundaries. It involved the parliamentarians of newly federated Commonwealth of Australia.

Wherever the colonial officials laid claims to protect land and people, they also created a lasting problem relating to definition of boundaries that crossed navigable rivers. A good example is the “Anglo-German boundary” which crosses the Gira, Eia, Wuwu, and Waria rivers. When the British colonial officials were pressured by their colonies in Australia, they never considered likely problems in the future if international boundary crossed navigable rivers.

Background of the imperial expansion

After the end of Franco-Prussian war in 1870s, Germany joined other major powers in the “scramble for colonies”.¹ Australian colonies became anxious over possible German

¹ Hudson, W.J. (1974) *Problems in Australian History: New Guinea Empire*, Melbourne: Cassell Australia Ltd.

expansion in the South-west Pacific. Such anxiety forced Australian colonies to annex Torres Strait Islands in 1879 and made an abortive attempt to annex New Guinea in 1883.² At least one historian comments that this was an Australasian reaction to German intrusion into what was considered a natural British area of interest, of which the colonies (especially Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria) were self-appointed custodians.³ Australian colonies never reacted in 1828, when the Dutch annexed the Western half of the island from 141st meridian East Longitude.⁴ They were willing to claim those islands and archipelagos, including half of New Guinea unclaimed by the Dutch. At the end of October 1884 both the German and British warships sped up to New Guinea with an intention to lay claims (*British New Guinea Annual Reports 1886-1906*). On the 3rd of November, Captain Scherling raised the German flag at Mioko on the Duke of York Islands and other places in the Bismarck Archipelago.⁵ Three days later Commodore James Erskine of the British Navy told more than 200 Motuan chiefs at Elevala that they were now children of the Queen of England and that she was going to protect their land from other “bad white men”.⁶

After the annexation of New Guinea by Netherlands, Germany and Britain, followed by signing of agreements, the tripartition of the whole island was completed. The three parts of the island were: Dutch New Guinea, German New Guinea, and British New Guinea.⁷ British New Guinea became Australian Territory of Papua in 1906 with the passing of “Papua Bill” by the newly federated Commonwealth Parliament of Australia.⁸

² Mullins, S. (1995) *Torres Strait: A History of colonial Occupation and Culture Contact: 1864-1897*. Queensland: Jacaranda Press. See also Ganter, R. (1994) *Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait*. Melbourne University Press.

³ For example, Overlack, P. (1999) “Bless the queen and curse the colonial office: Australasian reaction to German consolidation in the Pacific, 1879-1899,” *Journal of Pacific History*, 3(2): 1.

⁴ Van der Veuer, P.W. (1966) *Search for New Guinea boundaries*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

⁵ *German New Guinea: The Annual Report: 1886/1887-1913*.

⁶ *British New Guinea Administration: 1895*. There is additional information which can be obtained from the said document located at the Fryer’s Library at the University of Queensland: DU740.G62 M24.1895.

⁷ See E. Ford’s map IV, produced in Whittaker, J.L. et. al. (eds.) *Documents and Readings in New Guinea History: Prehistory to 1889*, Queensland: Jacaranda Press, p. 459.

⁸ *British New Guinea Government Gazette: 1903-1906*.

Queensland Colony

One of the Australia's colonies that put a lot of pressure on Britain to annex New Guinea was the colony of Queensland.⁹ Queensland feared that the Germans might claim New Guinea. In the event that the war broke out in Europe and Britain became the enemy of the Imperial Germany, then Queensland colony would be in great danger of being invaded by the British enemies next door. Queensland colony, being caught up in this situation, decided to take the first and desperate move towards annexing New Guinea in 1883, but it became an abortive attempt because Britain never recognised it.

Some British missionaries in New Guinea saw the failure of the annexation attempt as a "saving grace" to the indigenous people. Two missionaries, Dr William George Lawes and Rev. James Chalmers of the London Mission Society (LMS), were already working among the Papuans since 1870s. They claimed to be defenders and friends of the Papuans and vigorously campaigned against the exploitation of Papuan labour and land. The two missionaries had some degree of concern for Papuan life, land, and labour as there was no indigenous government capable of controlling them. They, therefore, reluctantly acknowledged the need for a "foreign jurisdiction". They rather have British jurisdiction than the Queensland colony. The two missionaries never trusted the Queenslanders. William Lawes wrote to the LMS foreign secretary in very strong terms against Queensland's annexation attempt because he feared that the Queenslanders might cruelly treat the Papuans in the same way they treated the Aborigines.¹⁰

Lord Derby and Queensland parliamentarians

Lord Derby was the British Colonial Secretary in 1884. Before New Guinea was annexed Lord Derby sent a letter to the Governor of Queensland. The letter dated 9th of May 1884, contained an offer by British colonial authority to annex New Guinea on certain conditions. On the 21st of August, in response to Lord Derby's letter the Queensland parliamentarians

⁹ *Papua Annexation and Administration: 1884-1914*. This document contains most of the original memoirs or dispatches which are located at UQ Fryer's Library: DU740.62 J69.

¹⁰ Langmore, D. (1989) "Missionary Lives in Papua" *Pacific Islands Monograph Series No.6*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

passed the Act known as “*New Guinea Act and Pacific Jurisdiction Contribution Act, 1884*”. Before Lord Derby could nod for approval he was reluctant all the time when Australian colonies periodically requested British Imperial Government to annex New Guinea.¹¹ There were two reasons for his reluctance: First, Lord Derby never wanted to get into quarrel with the Germans over New Guinea. Second, he thought it was unnecessary to acquire more colonies when Britain already had enough colonies elsewhere.¹² Lord Derby, however, finally changed his mind to intervene in New Guinea should Australian colonies were willing to meet the administration cost. The Australian colonies then agreed to contribute about 15,000 pounds to meet New Guinea’s administration cost.

At that time they never considered defining a precise boundary to avoid crossing navigable rivers in order to avoid any likely international conflicts in the future.¹³ They never made any commitment to the geographical extent of British jurisdiction in their desired colony. The clauses in the Act were vague. For instance, clause 1 of the original *Bill* is vague, according to Van der Veur.¹⁴ He says that clause 1 (c) clearly reflected the vagueness relating to defining of the precise boundary of the Protectorate, but the Queensland government went ahead to pass the Act. Even the Anglo-German agreement relating to the inland boundaries of the Protectorates reached in April 1884 was done on paper in Europe.¹⁵ Neither the Anglo-German officials nor Queensland legislators physically inspected the New Guinea boundary before reaching the compromise. Their decisions and actions then created problems for the indigenous people on the boundary as well as for the officials of the two imperial powers who later tried to administer the border. Part of this problem was dealt with by Van der Veur’s detailed studies on New Guinea boundaries.¹⁶ Through investigation of some oral accounts from the indigenous people, we understand

¹¹ Sharman, R.C. (1969) *The Annexation of New Guinea by McIlwraith Government: 1883 and its aftermath*. A Post-Graduate Diploma Thesis: University of Queensland.

¹² Brown, H.C. (1968) *Queensland Annexation Ambition in New Guinea: 1859-1884*. See also O’Rourke (1969) *A Problem of Queensland’s Defense: 1878-1901*. Bachelor of Arts with Honours Sub-Thesis: University of Queensland.

¹³ *Documents and Correspondence on New Guinea Boundaries* (1944) Can be located at UQ Fryer’s Library: DU740.62 F79 1944.

¹⁴ Van der Veur (1966:44).

¹⁵ Gash, N. & Whittaker, J. (1975) *A Pictorial History of New Guinea*, Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press.

¹⁶ Ibid.

that there were problems encountered by competing imperial powers and the indigenous people on the common border.¹⁷ Following is the first problem often created by the colonial officials.

Divide and Rule

“Divide and rule” was the first problem. The Dutch on the west, the Germans and the British on the east, had divided a nation with one cultural entity into three parts. They had imperial motives, which were unknown to the indigenous people. The division of their land was permanent; the social and cultural ties and the trade network were cut by the boundary. The long-term impact was disregarded as the colonial officials took advantage of people’s ignorance. The indigenous people were never conscious of what was meant by “divided we fall, united we stand”. It has now taken more than hundred years before the indigenous people began to see and feel the pain of being divided and ruled. This is true today, when we take into account the PNG-Indonesian boundary that cuts across various ethnic groups from the north to the south. The struggle of the West Papuan “freedom fighters (OPM)”, shows that people disliked being divided and ruled. They would never give in to the threat from their oppressors. They would fight to death. Jacob Prai and Colonel Martin Tabu represent those who have extra-ordinary courage and determination to fight for freedom till death.¹⁸ Freedom is free for the humanity today, but it is not free for people whose land, rivers, and seas are cut across by international borders. Even the liberated people can never save their relatives on the other side of the boundary.¹⁹

Defining Unsurveyed Boundary

Defining an unsurveyed boundary was the second problem. From 1884-1909, no physical boundary existed between German New Guinea and British New Guinea. The imaginary

¹⁷ Kanasa, B. (1995) *Reconstructing the Zia past to 1920 with special reference to the first contact with Europeans*. Master of Arts Thesis: Port Moresby, UPNG. (See chapters 5 and 7).

¹⁸ Press Release No.569 (10th of July 1978). *Papua New Guinea Office of Information*, Konedobu.

¹⁹ Just after PNG got independence there was a border incursion by Indonesian forces. Mr. Ebia Olewale who was the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade very cautiously but fearlessly dealt with the issue. See Press Release No.288 (12 May, 1978) *Papua New Guinea Office of Information*, Konedobu.

line was only drawn on paper in Europe in 1885 after Queensland Parliamentarians passed “*New Guinea Act and Pacific Jurisdiction Contribution Act 1884*”. No survey was done on the common boundary before the Act was passed in response to the British colonial secretary’s letter, which expressed his willingness to annex New Guinea. Lord Derby in his letter states clearly “an imperial intention to intervene in New Guinea should one or more of Australasian colonies were willing to meet the administration cost”.²⁰ He never, however, in any way considered in advance the issue under discussion until at a later date.

Although, in September 1884, Britain officially informed the Germans that she planned to establish a protectorate over eastern portion of New Guinea, not claimed by Dutch, and all the adjacent islands, she never proposed a definition of precise common boundary that would avoid crossing navigable rivers (Bill, 1884). Britain never even considered her commitment to the geographical extent of her jurisdiction in New Guinea. On the other hand, the Queensland parliamentarians went ahead and passed the Act to give them legal powers to act immediately in response to the imperial intentions revealed in Lord Derby’s letter of 9th May 1884.

Actual Problem

The actual problem was with the four rivers crossing the 8th parallel into the German territory. According to Van der Veur, at least one of the rivers crossed the boundary more than once. Gira River, in 1884, for instance, originated well inside the German territory, made a small loop across the border some seven kilometres before reaching the Solomon Sea, and then crossed the boundary about 1.5 kilometres from the mouth, which was situated approximately two-third of the 8th parallel.²¹ William Macgregor, the first administrator of British New Guinea already realised the likely difficulty in the future.²² He, therefore, recommended that the navigation of the river should be left free to both

²⁰ Lord Derby’s Circular Dispatch of 9th May, 1884. See also Minutes of Convention in Sydney by the Representatives of Australasian Colonies (1884), William Street, Brisbane: Government Printer, pp. 34-35.

²¹ Van der Veur (1966:44).

²² *British New Guinea Annual Report, 1896-1897*, pp. 39-40.

countries. However, with the discovery of gold on the Gira River, the miners made their way north towards Waria River.²³ The officials had to consider an alternative option.

Australian Territory of Papua

All Australian colonies became federated in 1901 and in 1905 the Australian Commonwealth passed a Bill to take over the administration of British New Guinea. In 1906 the British New Guinea became Australian Territory of Papua. Hubert Murray became lieutenant governor in 1907. Later he became governor of Papua and remained as governor until his death in 1940.

Before Hubert Murray came onto the scene, Francis Barton, the first administrator of the Australian Territory of Papua, in early 1906, wrote to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin (1903-1910). He informed him of rich gold deposits found in the bed of Gira River.²⁴ He also pointed out that several gold-dredging areas had been surveyed and were opened for applicants. He stressed, however, that successful applicant might encounter the difficulties presented by the fact that the mouth of Gira was in fact located in the German territory. Barton then indirectly persuaded the Commonwealth Parliament to approach the German government in order to put an end to the difficulty.²⁵ The ministers, however, had doubts about free navigation of all rivers, beginning in one country and ending in another as suggested by the Colonial Office.²⁶ According to Van der Veur, the ministers sought the advice of the Administrator in Port Moresby to establish whether the Fly, Purari, and other important rivers fell within the terms of such arrangement.²⁷ If so it would be undesirable to give Germans unrestricted right of navigation. Barton, realizing the danger of allowing the Germans the unrestricted right of navigation, firmly suggested that the proposal be restricted to Gira and Waria Rivers.²⁸

²³ Resident Magistrate of Tamata's journal report of 25th March 1911, pp. 6-7 shows that there were already few miners working in Bia-Waria and were reported to have been doing well.

²⁴ A Correspondence from Barton to Deakin (1906), *Department of External Affairs*.

²⁵ A Memorandum from Governor-General's Office to Prime Minister Deakin, (2nd November 1906).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Van der Veur (1966: 45).

²⁸ A Memorandum from Atlee Hunt, (14th November 1906).

The Commonwealth Parliament then made necessary representation to the German government, but the Germans never rushed the matter. According to Van der Veur, they needed time to study it well because it then proposed to include Waria River as well. Van der Veur further explains that in October 1907, the German government finally concluded that before the question of free navigation of Waria could be considered it was necessary to determine the position to the 8th degree South Latitude from the coast to its point of intersection with the 147th degree of East Longitude. Thus, obtaining the bases for an adjustment of this portion of the Anglo-German boundary in New Guinea was then accomplished. The Joint Boundary Commission established in October 1908 was the result of this suggestion by the German government.²⁹

Miners and Officials

Prior to 1908 and during the British era (1884-1906), however, there was only an imaginary boundary. This imaginary boundary cut through the four rivers: Gira, Eia, Wuwu, and Waria, across the 8th parallel of South Latitude. The confusion created by the imaginary boundary, made the miners and British field officers always uncertain of whether they were on the right side. Some British miners and even the government officials took advantage of the uncertainties and crossed the boundary. Alfred Walker's crossing of an imaginary international boundary at Tawa-itire on the Wuwu River to Gaunzu village is an excellent example. This event is historically significant because:

- (a) A.L. Walker intentionally violated the Anglo-German Border Agreement of April 1884;
- (b) He was led by Village Constable Lelewa of Usi village on the Gira to make peace with the Zia who were attacked by the Binandere warriors with the use of guns in the previous year;
- (c) It was on this occasion that British colonial administration was illegally extended to the German territory by appointing a village constable at Gaunzu village, and
- (d) This event marked the first European contact in the Zia territory.

²⁹ Van der Veur (1966: 45).

Today the cement pillars at the mouth of Gira River and at Tawa-itire on the Wuwu River, once recognised and respected as international boundary markers are being dug up by the treasure-hunters. I was told by Mr Willy Sam from Wuwu (28th December 2005) that about a dozen young men were mobilised by a particular treasure-hunter who suspected gold-nuggets to have been buried by early miners because of the out break of World War one. The diggers finally found no nuggets so they put back the soil and levelled the surface. Mr Dau Wanu of Waingsoduna (1st January 2006) also said that another cement pillar on Bau Island along the Hercules Bay was dug up probably for the same reason.

Conclusion

Although the historical significance of the event requires certain enquiry, I intend not to do so at this stage. We can only wonder why Walker crossed the common boundary when he knew very well that he was violating an international law. If violation of an international law was serious enough, why did he appoint a village constable in the German territory? Did he commit all these offences out of confusion and uncertainties over the precise physical boundary? Or did he intentionally commit these offences because he had some other hidden motives for his empire?

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