

NOV 8 1973

05
5.1

A SAD TALE OF LONG AGO:

HOW MAGIC SIGNS WERE BROUGHT TO A FAR-OFF ISLAND.

Francis X. Hezel, S.J.

Many, many years ago a group of brown-skinned people lived on a small island in the middle of a great sea. Their life, it is said, was a happy one. When they weren't defending themselves from attacks by people from the islands nearby or recovering from a terrible storm, they had plenty of time for eating and fishing and talking with each other. The people of this island had everything that they needed. Or, at least, they thought they did!

Then one day a very big ship came to the island. The ship was larger than the biggest canoe ever made on the island, even larger than the men's house in the center of their village. It was the largest thing people had ever seen. "Perhaps we can buy the ship," one of the men suggested. But they soon found out that all the coconuts and taro on the island were not enough to buy the ship. Besides, the strange white-skinned men who came on the ship needed it to get back home. And so the people of the island met one night to decide how they could possibly get the ship. One of them said at the meeting: "If those men who live on the ship will not give it to us, we will take it. Let us surprise them and seize their ship." And all the men at the meeting approved his plan and they determined to attack the strangers that night.

That evening the young men paddled out to the ship in their canoes in the hopes of surprising the strangers for they thought that they would all be asleep. But when they drew close to the ship, one of the strangers saw them and shouted some words to his friends on the ship. Soon many of the strangers were standing along the side of the ship pointing long sticks at the men in the canoes. Suddenly there was a loud noise and a flash of fire from one of the sticks. Then more of the sticks spit out flames and smoke. The men in canoes were frightened by the loud noise, but they were even more terrified as they watched some of the men who sat close to them in the canoe fall screaming out of the canoe. They were greatly puzzled by the strangers' secret power, for the strangers knew how to make men bleed without throwing spears. And so they turned their canoes around and paddled to shore as fast as they could.

03 - 030688

On the next morning they watched as the great ship slowly moved away from their island and sailed to the east. They watched it until they could see it no longer.

* * * * *

Many years later three little boys were playing on the beach when they saw a huge white sail far off in the distance. They knew what it was as soon as they saw it and ran off to tell the others in the village. Every child in the island knew the story of how the white gods had come in the large boat many years before.

This time there were no plans to capture the strangers' ship, for everyone on the island was afraid of the power of these curious-looking visitors from afar. The people of the island just watched as the strangers came ashore on their island. Some of the women went to bring baskets of food to the strangers. The men brought coconuts for them to drink. Everyone was very frightened of the strangers.

The strangers passed six days on the island. Each day the people brought food to them and showed them where they could find fresh water. Everyone was surprised at how kind the strangers were. Whenever the people of the island brought them food, the strangers gave them pieces of bright red cloth or small pebbles of many beautiful colors. Soon people lost their fear of the strangers. Each morning they would hurry down to the beach with all the food they could gather, for they wanted the presents that the strangers gave out.

On the seventh day the chief of the strangers spoke some old-sounding words to the chief of the island and gave him many beautiful presents. Then he returned to his ship and within two hours the ship was gone.

* * * * *

More years passed and another great ship came to the island, and another and another. The people of the island usually treated their strange visitors with respect for they had not forgotten the stories their grandparents and great-grandparents told of the terrible power of the white men who lived far across the sea. Besides, they liked the wonderful presents that these men brought. There was the bright-colored cloth shaped to fit a person's body and the axes that didn't break when you used them to cut the ironwood tree. There were shiny fishhooks and strong pots for cooking. There was also the brown leaves that people set on fire so that they could suck the smoke into their mouths. Everyone on the island was eager to get these brown leaves. Whenever a giant ship drew near, everyone on the island would rush down to the beach to get more of these valuable things.

- 1 -

From time to time the people, as they thought of the wonderful presents that filled the strangers' ships, forgot the story of the first large ship. They would try to capture the ship by a surprise attack. But the mighty sticks of the strangers that spit out fire and smoke would make them turn back.

Then one day, one of the strangers remained with the people after his ship left. He brought with him one of the white man's mighty sticks and he explained to everyone the secret of its power to kill. He told them amazing stories of how the people lived on his enormous island. He also explained how his people could talk to one another through the strange signs they marked down. He drew some of these signs in the sand and told everyone what they meant. The people of the island knew that the power of these strangers must be very great indeed.

In time, some of the older men of the island came to the stranger to ask him how they, too, might gain the power to do some of the wonderful things that the white men could do. The stranger told them that they must first learn the meaning of the signs he could draw. The men went home very happy that night, for they wished to learn the secrets of the light-skinned people who lived far away. On the next day the stranger began to teach them how to draw the signs. And each day for many months afterwards the people studied the mysterious signs and their meaning.

* * * * *

The stranger died some years later, but many others came to live for a while on the island. Some of them married girls from the island and bought large pieces of land in exchange for the goods they gave out. As time went on, the strangers built a very big house for their chief. Their chief, they said, was to have power over all the other chiefs of the people. He had been sent from far away to protect them and to teach them the secrets of the white man's ways. But the people didn't mind very much. They only wanted to learn the meaning of the strangers' magic signs. Then they would be able to do the same wonderful things the strangers could do.

Sometimes the strangers would tell people about the spirits and gods they honored. None of the people really understood these curious stories, but they believed what the strangers said anyway. For the strangers' gods must be very strong if they gave them the power to interpret these magic signs.

The people of the island were very happy when the white chief announced that he would build many new meeting houses. He said that he wanted all the young boys of the island could all gather together to learn the magic signs. And still more white men came to explain the meaning of these things to the island people.

Many things on the island were now different. The island looked more and more like the pictures of the great island far across the sea from which the strangers had come. People did not sit under the mango tree much anymore and tell stories about the old heroes and how to catch land crabs on full-moon nights. They were afraid that the strangers would think they were foolish, for they noticed that the strangers themselves never did these things. All the people wanted to be as much like the strangers as possible because they admired them very much. When the white men tied a cloth strip around their necks, the native men of the island did the same thing. When the white men sang funny-sounding songs, the people of the island sang the same songs. Soon it was very hard to tell who was a stranger and who was not.

* * * * *

In time many young people from the island learned how to understand the mysterious signs. Now, everyone thought, we will be able to do the same wonderful things that the strangers can do. But they were disappointed to find out that they could still not do these things. They still did not know how to make huge ships or even the simple meeting houses where they learned how to interpret the signs. They could not yet speak with the authority of the white chief in front of the entire assembly. And they still were not able to get enough of the bright cloth or the complicated tools that the white men had brought. "We cannot do all the things that we expected to do," many of them complained. "What good are the strangers' signs?"

The older people who did not learn the meaning of the signs were disappointed, too. As they watched the young people each day, they wondered if they would forget the old ways. They wondered if they would forget the stories of the great battles long ago and of how their ancestors had first come to the island. For only a few very old people remembered what happened many years ago when the strangers first came to their island. But most of all they wondered if such things were very important at all. The young people were too busy learning the magic signs to listen to them tell of these things. Yet, their hearts were divided, for they still wanted their sons to learn the power of the strangers' signs.

One day the white chief called a meeting of all the people. When the chief heard that they were troubled, he told them not to be worried. He told them that he would build more meeting houses -- bigger than the old ones -- and keep the young people there for a longer time. Everyone agreed that this was a good idea. "If our young people have more time to learn the meaning of your signs, they will surely be able to do all the things the white men can do," the people said.

* * * * *

But this did not happen. And the people of the island became more bitter each day. Perhaps those strange signs that the white men use are not really magic, they thought. And they dreamed of the old days, almost forgotten now, before the foreigners came to their island. There was no white chief then, they knew. There were no white teachers speaking in their strange language. People did not have many beautiful things then, but they did not want as much. And so the young men became angry and began to throw rocks at the white men in the evenings.

One day their parents finally went to the white chief and told him their children would not learn the strange signs any longer. The signs, they complained, were not really magic after all. Let the strangers teach these signs to their own children. They themselves would teach better things. Then they walked to the largest meeting house to decide what they would teach their children instead. After some hours, they all agreed that they should teach what people of their island used to learn long before the coming of the white man with his magic signs. Then someone asked what they used to learn. There was a long silence.

No one remembered!