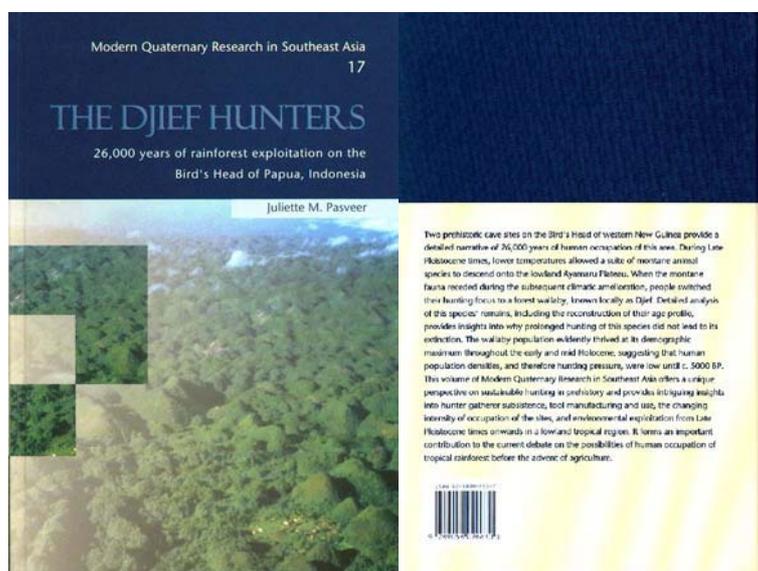


Pasveer, J.M. 2004. The Djief hunters. 26,000 years of rainforest exploitation on the Bird's Head of Papua, Indonesia. – Lisse, A.A. Balkema Publishers

Book review by P. Storm



Our ancestors and close relatives abandoned the forests a long time ago. Based on anatomy and the ecological context in which fossil remains have been found, one can argue that hominins, including modern humans, can be seen as bipedal apes adapted to life in open woodlands and savannahs. Consequently, for humans, the tropical rainforest is a harsh environment. In rainforests much of the energy is stored as (inedible) wood, there is not enough to catch, and the animals that may provide sources of proteins are difficult to capture because they are arboreal and/or nocturnal. Not surprisingly, therefore, that several scientists think that humans entered this hostile environment late during their evolutionary history. Humans are thought to have settled in this ecosystem when they became able to rely on food sources other than only hunting gathering. Not everyone agrees. It has even been suggested that *Homo erectus*, a hominin species that lived between 1.8 million and 100,000 years ago, was able to live in tropical rainforests. As is often the case in these scientific discussions, if anything is needed in order to advance the debate, that is information from the ground.

Juliette Pasveer provide us with such information in a comprehensive clearly written book that covers her pioneering detailed analysis of two excavated prehistoric cave sites on the Bird's Head of Papua. The two sites, Kria Cave and Toé Cave, are situated on the Ayamaru Plateau, and yielded botanical, faunal, human and cultural remains. Excavations include two pits of 1 square metre in the Kria Cave, plus two pits of 1 square metre, and two of approximately 0.5 square metres in the Toé Cave. For both sites series of radiocarbon dates are given. The initial occupation of the Kria Cave dates probably to 7000-8000 BP, and that of the Toé Cave to at least 26,000 BP. Thus, it is in the latter site that we find the basis for understanding the subtitle of her book. According to Pasveer (p. 79): "the (dated) cassowary eggshell was brought to the site by people".

The hardcover book has ten chapters and three appendices, one on human remains (by David Bulbeck), a second about fruits from the Kria Cave (by Kathleen McConnel) and a third about local knowledge of various vertebrate species in the Ayamaru region (by Elimas Kambuaya). The volume is very neatly arranged, illustrated with figures, tables and photographs. Besides two chapters that deal with the sites, there are two chapters devoted to artefacts (stone and bone) and chapters that deal with the exploitation of resources and ecological matters. In chapter 8 special attention is given to a forest wallaby, the brown dorcopsis (*Dorcopsis muelleri*), locally known as Djief. Pasveer (p. 293) concludes that this species "was clearly the preferred prey animal through time in the Ayamaru area", and this explains her choice for the title of the book.

As I work in the Collection Dubois of the National Museum of Natural History, Leiden, The Netherlands, a number of Indonesian sites are of special interest to me. The presence of human remains in the faunas of Punung (Java) and Lida Ajer (Sumatra) together with species of orang-utans (*Pongo pygmaeus*), gibbons (*Hylobates*) and sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus*) indicates that humans inhabited the tropical rainforest in Indonesia, during the Late Pleistocene. Pasveer offers an additional valuable piece of information to gain more insight into the knowledge of prehistoric humans living in tropical rainforests in Australasia. Now that we know that people lived in the rainforest during a period of 26,000 years in Papua, an intriguing question remains: how did they manage to survive? Unfortunately there is still some uncertainty, as Pasveer remarks (p. 336): "The two

excavated sites in the Bird's Head provide undeniable evidence for prolonged occupation of lowland rainforest, presumably without access to cultivated foods for much of this time." This leaves me with the hope that Pasveer will continue her interesting work in the region. Without doubt, this book is a must for everyone interested in Australasian prehistory and humans living in rainforests.

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