Waves of migration from Asia and the South Pacific Islands to what is now Papua New Guinea have taken place for centuries. The people now referred to as Highlanders were among the world’s first farmers, settling the area thousands of years ago. The early Papua New Guineans worked and hunted with wood, stone, or bone tools and weapons. Indirect European contact brought the sweet potato to the island via Asia, radically changing the local diet and culture.

Though European explorers visited the island as early as 1512, Europeans did not begin colonizing the area until the 17th century. Because of territorial disputes, what is now Papua New Guinea was divided into a German territory in the north and a British territory in the south. Even with colonization, parts of New Guinea remained unexplored until the 1930s and virtually uninfluenced by the outside world until after World War II.

Australia governed the British area beginning in 1906 and took control of the German area after World War I. The Japanese briefly held a northern section of New Guinea during World War II. Following a 1949 trusteeship agreement, a legislative council composed mostly of Australians was formed in 1951 as the first step toward independent home rule. A House of Assembly, which had more indigenous representation, was convened in 1964, but internal self-government did not come until 1973. Independence was granted in 1975.

In 1988, an environmental protest over a copper mine on Bougainville Island escalated into a decade-long guerrilla war for the island’s secession, during which some 20,000 died, many through indirect causes such as malnutrition and disease. In 2001, the government of Papua New Guinea agreed to allow Bougainville greater autonomy and an eventual referendum on secession. The residents of Bougainville elected their first autonomous government in 2005; the federal government retains jurisdiction over defense and economic matters.

Papua New Guinea suffers from a number of social and economic problems, including widespread corruption and crime, chronic unemployment, underdeveloped infrastructure, an economy heavily reliant on international aid, and a national government with little control over affairs in outlying provinces. This complex set of challenges presents an ongoing threat to Papua New Guinea’s stability and progress.

References: