

Arnold Clemens Ap

His West Papuan legacy lives on

1 July 1946 - 26 April 1984

Abstract: Arnold Clemens Ap was born on 1 July 1946 on Numfor Island in Biak, at the time, part of the Dutch colony of Netherlands New Guinea. After schooling at church missions in Biak, he studied geography at the Teacher Training School of Cenderawasih University in Abepura, Jayapura, between 1967 and 1973. That year, he was appointed as the curator of the university's museum, known as Loka Budaya, which became a centre for West Papuan cultural revival. His work to collect and perform songs in Papuan languages played a vital role in the development of a West Papuan national identity, transcending colonial boundaries and inter-tribal conflicts. He was murdered by Indonesian special forces in 1984. This year, 26 April 2024, marked the 40th anniversary of the death of this charismatic cultural leader. For West Papuans, in exile and at home, it has been an important time for commemoration.

Keywords: Cenderawasih University, culture, decolonisation, human rights, identity, Indonesia, Melanesian, language, obituaries, oral tradition, songs, The Netherlands, West Papua

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IN 1969, Indonesia annexed the western half of the island of New Guinea, through the so-called Act of Free Choice (Maclellan, 2023; Musgrave, 2015). As Indonesian authorities began to expand legal systems and education in Bahasa Indonesia, a generation of young West Papuan intellectuals responded through a cultural renaissance, recording and performing traditional West Papuan songs.

For Arnold Ap, Sam Kapissa and Eddie Mofu, music was a vital tool for raising awareness about human rights abuses, environmental degradation and the social and political issues facing communities across West Papua. Their band, Mambesak, founded in 1978, was the forerunner of later West Papuan groups, from the Black Brothers to Black Paradise (Figure 1). Today, these traditions are carried on by groups like the Sorong Samarai band and the Black Sistaz (the daughters of former members of the Black Brothers).

Despite his popularity, Arnold Ap's work as an anthropologist, ethnomusicologist and musician was a threat to the Indonesian authorities. He was



Figure 1: Mambesak founders Arnold Ap (left) and Sam Kapissa: ‘Bird of paradise’ in the Biak language.

detained, imprisoned and later murdered by Indonesian special forces soldiers, supposedly killed while trying to escape from prison. On 26 April 2024, the 40th anniversary of the death of this charismatic cultural leader was marked. For West Papuans, in exile and at home, it has been an important time for commemoration.

Inspiration for a new generation

Ronny Kareni is a West Papuan musician, scholar and cultural activist. Based in Australia, he performs with the Sorong Samarai band and plays bass guitar for the Black Sistaz. For Kareni, Arnold Ap’s work to collect and perform songs in Papuan languages played a vital role in the development of a West Papuan national identity, transcending colonial boundaries and inter-tribal conflicts. Kareni’s performance with the Sorong Samarai band symbolises this notion of ‘one people, one soul’, from Sorong in the far west of West Papua, to Samarai in the east of PNG’s Milne Bay Province.

Kareni says that an important part of Arnold Ap’s legacy is the way that Mambesak used music and song to promote national consciousness among Papuans.

‘Their music pretty much speaks about the struggle of the people, whether it’s in traditional sounds or contemporary sounds—the struggle is in the songs,’ he explained. ‘That was profound in the work of Arnold Ap, Eddie Mofu and Sam Kapissa. They knew that West Papua was going to go through an episode

of dark history, where language preservation would be so important.

‘They understood there were diverse languages across the land mass of New Guinea, from the islands to the west of Sorong and down to Merauke,’ Kareni said. ‘They realised early on that they needed to collect and archive songs, so that the younger generation like myself, and those who come after, can still listen to the songs. It acts as a symbol of resistance. The historical documentation of the traditional songs and oral traditions recognises our identity, our history and our aspirations as West Papuans.’

Challenging colonialism

Arnold Clemens Ap was born on 1 July 1946 on Numfor Island in Biak, at the time, part of the Dutch colony of Netherlands New Guinea. After schooling at church missions in Biak, he studied geography at the Teacher Training School of Cenderawasih University in Abepura, Jayapura, between 1967 and 1973. That year, he was appointed as the curator of the university’s museum, known as Loka Budaya, which became a centre for West Papuan cultural revival.

Interviewed by The Jakarta Post in 2021, Papuan anthropologist Ibiroma Wamla said:

In those early days, Ap would depart to far-flung corners of Papua, sitting down with village elders and documenting each place’s traditional music, dance, sculpture and folklore. He would document everything: local words of wisdom, lyrics and poetry, the process of building traditional houses and even how they make traditional boats . . . Through his work as an anthropologist, curator and bandleader in the highly popular group Mambesak, Arnold Ap celebrated Papuan culture at a time when such expressions of indigenous pride could lead to arrest, intimidation and death. (Ibrahim, 2021)

In August 1978, Ap and Kapissa co-founded Mambesak (meaning ‘bird of paradise’ in their Biak language). They performed their own songs, such as ‘Orphan Child’, a lament in Biak that spoke of Dutch colonialism and the betrayal of Indonesian annexation (Glazebrook, 2008). Beyond this, they began performing songs in a variety of Papuan languages – music that still unites the disparate peoples of a nation with a population of more than two million. Ap collected songs that fuelled a sense of West Papuan identity, from coastal and mountain communities, from east and west, songs that celebrate a connection with the land. He also drew on the spirit and traditions of the Koreri movement, which flourished around Biak and Serui from the 1930s.

For young musicians today like Ronny Kareni, this preservation of traditional songs, melded with contemporary forms, is a vital contribution to the nationalist movement in West Papua.

‘By collecting and archiving these songs, it brings together tribal groups to sing songs that are not in their mother tongue,’ Kareni said. ‘Even now, 40 years on, I can sing those songs even if I don’t know the language. I don’t necessarily understand what the song says, but with the music I can chant with it or sing along with it, whether from Merauke or the Fak Fak area or from Sorong. It’s a testament to what Mambesak achieved, that generations like mine and the younger ones can carry on the spirit of nationalism.’

From the late 1970s, Ap, Kapissa and other band members understood the importance of using new technologies to share this traditional music across the nation. Every Sunday, they broadcast a weekly radio show from Jayapura, called Pelangi Budaya dan Pancaran Sastra (Rainbow of Culture and Radiance of Literature). From 1978, they recorded seven albums, with the music widely distributed through cheap but accessible cassette tapes. They also prepared four songbooks that collated traditional songs and music from across West Papua, published with the assistance of Cenderawasih University.

Murder most foul

From the early 1960s, the preservation and celebration of West Papuan culture was seen as potentially subversive by Indonesian authorities and a challenge to the unitary Indonesian nation. Noted human rights activist Carmel Budiardjo wrote that immediately after the 1969 Act of Free Choice, ‘a huge bonfire was organised in the main square of Jayapura, presided over by Indonesia’s Minister of Culture, Rusiah Sardjono. Symbols of public life, cultural artefacts, school textbooks and Papuan flags were set ablaze. About 10,000 Papuans were herded into the square to watch the ceremonial burning of what was described by Sardjono as “their colonial identity”.’

After five years of activity from the late 1970s, Mambesak’s growing popularity triggered a vicious response from the Indonesian armed forces.

On 29 November 1983, Mambesak performed for the West Papuan governor. The following day, Arnold Ap was detained by Kopassandha (an Indonesian special forces unit later renamed Kopassus, which became notorious for human rights violations in Timor-Leste, West Papua and across Indonesia). Following his arrest over alleged sympathies with the outlawed Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM), Ap was dismissed from his post at the university ‘on suspicion of subversive activities’.

For months, there were few details of his fate. By February 1984, however, family members fled into exile, after hearing rumours that Ap and other detainees were being tortured in prison. In April, the Indonesian authorities then announced that Ap and four other detainees had escaped from jail. Later investigations suggested there was no escape, but that a military officer unlocked Ap’s cell door on 21 April 1984, and ordered that he and the other detainees should be driven to a

military base camp on the coast. Just days later, on April 26, Arnold Ap, Eddie Mofu and two other detainees were shot or stabbed to death.

One Indonesian police officer, who later sought refuge in Papua New Guinea, said the authorities feared Ap as ‘extremely dangerous because of the activities of his Mambesak players and wanted him sentenced to death or given a life sentence, but could not find evidence for a charge in court’.

Mambesak’s Sam Kapissa died in Jakarta in 2000—many West Papuans believe he was also murdered by the Indonesian military, like other cultural leaders such as Chief Yafet Yelamaken, who also died of ‘food poisoning’ in 2002. In subsequent decades, bands like Black Brothers and Black Paradise maintained the spirit of Mambesak, with audiences in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and across Oceania. Today’s cultural workers like Ronny Kareni draw on this same tradition.

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