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Exposé through music of media ignorance of West Papua

Strange Birds in Paradise: A West Papuan Story, feature documentary directed by Charlie Hill-Smith. Melbourne: The House of Red Monkey, 2010. 75min. www.strangebirds.com.au Soundtrack: www.wantokmusik.org/artists_strangebirds.htm

As the songman of freedom lies dying from an Indonesian bullet, his spirit spawns a great tree of life, feeding the irrepressible spirit of West Papuan liberation. The Birds of Paradise, for so long held prisoner by the Java warlord demons of destruction, pillage and brutality—sing for life, and fly to freedom.



THIS beautifully illustrated animation sequence epitomises the West Papuan desire for simple survival, an assertion that West Papuan people are the custodians of a true paradise that the Indonesian military mafia has turned into a hell on earth.

Combining one of the oldest musical traditions of Earth, and inspired by the liberation music of West Papua's executed poet laureate Arnold Ap, the groundbreaking film *Strange Birds in Paradise* shows the spirit of West Papuan resistance is alive and building, and refusing to accept more than 45 years of brutal occupation by Indonesia. Rarely does a film tell a hidden story of a truly miserable

situation with such beauty, and with great sensitivity in attempting to understand all players' perspectives in this ongoing tragedy. Australian director Charlie Hill-Smith has woven together many complex threads to create this rich and evocative tapestry clearly showing the 'mystery of life' in Papua today.

With innovative storytelling methods unseen in documentaries, Hill-Smith explores differing experiences and perspectives of Indonesia's colonial occupation of Papua, from everyday people, musicians, artists, academics, freedom fighters, refugees, activists; telling the stories of those who resist and have martyred themselves to protect the survival of one of the oldest, most linguistically diverse cultures, custodians of an earthly paradise.

Strange Birds accurately portrays the hope and occasional disconnectedness of those forgotten in the jungle, and the energy of the new generation. Particularly poignant today, it accurately depicts the losses of that new generation of civil resistance from Papua's new generation of elite forced to hide in insecure border camps after being hunted like animals. One failing is probably the lack of focus on the rise and transformation of the civil resistance movement inside, but one can read between the

lines in the value that is given to the power of songs for freedom.

West Papua is a place that is still off limits to foreign journalists and human rights observers, with Jakarta sharing a dubious honour with Syria and other dictatorships as among a few countries that ban independent verification of abuse. The film was shot undercover in West Papua and Papua New Guinea, with the film crew posing as tourists. *Strange Birds* shines a bright light on the otherwise ignored experience of West Papuans living a daily death. Capturing the intrinsic language of *singing for life* that is at the heart of Papuan culture, daily life, resistance and survival, *Strange Birds* advocates clearly the core message that music can rise above tyranny. An evocative soundtrack written by Arnold Ap, and arranged by Australian music legend David Bridie, with West Papuan singer-activists providing the beautiful Melanesian harmonies, bring to life some of the most important songs Arnold Ap wrote to rally his people to fight for their liberation.

Ap, a pioneering Papuan ethnomusicologist at Cenderawasih University, was arrested in 1983 by the Indonesian military for recording traditional West Papuan songs. Together with nonviolent movement founders Jacob Rumbiak and Thomas Waing-

gai, Ap helped pioneer a sense of ethnic pride for West Papuan culture that Jakarta wanted destroyed forever. Ap was executed extrajudicially in 1984, shortly after he recorded the song 'Mystery of Life', which was smuggled out via a prison guard to his wife. According to Ap: *'I sing to live, singing is a sign of life. If I am not singing it means I am already dead.'*

'Strange Birds' powerfully documents the power and reverence in which Ap's music is still held by West Papuan people, as the soundtrack to self-determination. Hill-Smith explains: 'I believe art is a weapon and culture is life. As long as the West Papuans can sing they will prevail and Arnold Ap will never die.'

Faced with the dilemma of how to counter more than 45 years of wilful ignorance of the West Papua issue by the international community, *Strange Birds* manages to highlight a powerful undercurrent that has maintained people's identity, and hope, through a genocide that has claimed over 526,000 West Papuan lives since 1962.

Jacob Rumbiak, an exiled West Papuan political diplomat and academic, describes *Strange Birds* as 'a diploma for somebody who knows nothing about West Papua'. Certainly, audiences in Europe, Asia and Australasia have been deeply

moved by the film, with many asking the question: 'Why do the international media ignore this issue?' Why indeed? One theory is the majority of international media is so embarrassed by its craven, complicit behaviour that to suddenly report it would highlight media weakness. Tyranny must be documented; resistance must be documented too.

West Papua's history means that any truthful analysis will necessarily examine the crimes of Indonesia's military and their multinational corporate enablers like Freeport and the timber industry, and also why the West turns a blind eye as a modern day Eldorado is plundered into a wasteland. The vast forests of Papua, protected for millennia by a deep and reverential connection with its inhabitants, are being felled illegally by the military to feed Australia's obsession for merbau outdoor furniture and flooring, and our insatiable need for palm oil. Wherever the Indonesian military kleptocracy decides to pillage next, the raiders attempt to eliminate any organised resistance by engaging punitive sweeps against civilians.

Hill-Smith, together with producers Jamie Nicolai and John Cherry, has used visually rich animation sequences by Colin Moore, and contemporary *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry to perfectly illustrate the mercenary

dynamics of Indonesian occupation, and the deep motivations from Papuan traditional beliefs to maintain hope and transform survival into freedom. Interweaving his own personal journey of discovery, Hill-Smith takes the viewer on an epic journey through West Papua's history, sharing the journey he had as his eyes were opened after blundering into a forgotten warzone. Adopting the persona of Javanese *wayang kulit* hero Samar, he shares his shock of hearing 'the guarded whispers of sons, fathers, and brothers murdered'. The fact-checked evidence presented is confronting and sobering, which makes for uncomfortable viewing for those who have enjoyed the fruits of genocide occurring in Papua.

This film particularly juxtaposes the experience of non-political West Papuan farmers, activists, exiles, and refugees, as well as the lives of those who through their beliefs were forced to flee. Travelling through the Baliem Valley, the film highlights the neglect of Papuan people's welfare by Indonesia, and the shocking lack of educational resources or medical care. Hill-Smith meets an eight-year-old boy Ruben, deaf, in great pain from an easily preventable ear infection curable by access to simple drugs. With the nearest hospital in Wamena, the Indonesian government refuses to

supply basic medical services where they are needed most.

It is evident that ordinary people in the Baliem Valley are now too terrified to talk. In the Baliem Valley the brutality of the Indonesian military climaxed in 1981 during an operation known by local Dani tribespeople as 'Wamena Bleeds'. Almost 14,000 people were killed during an air and ground assault on civilians in the Highlands area.

Strange Birds is a travelogue in some ways, but also an examination of the human and historical landscape of West Papua, as vast and undiscovered as the forests daily being destroyed by the bulldozers of the military logging companies. It deftly illustrates Indonesian nationalism as being a political construct to unify all the disparate peoples of a new Javanese empire, a land of impunity for the plunderers, as West Papua is a very long way from Java.

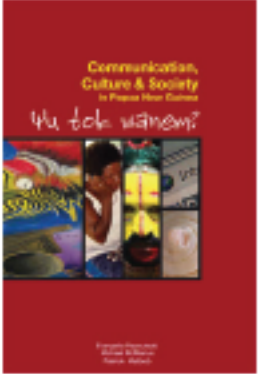
Strange Birds provides a timely reminder that people do not leave their home, unless they have no other choice that refugees only flee to survive heinous abuse. The students fleeing from the 12 March 2006 riots conveyed a *cri de coeur* for the future of the homeland that people must respond to. During filming, and feeling completely helpless in an environment like isolated Skotchiou village

on the PNG/West Papua border. The whole crew were all so thoroughly moved at the core of our beings by what we witnessed that there were no question of staying silent.

Is this film an honest examination of the situation in Papua? Yes and No. Uncovering a hidden history is never an easy task, but Hill-Smith, through his own experience as an exchange student in Indonesia, has set about understanding Indonesian peoples' perceptions of the occupation as West Papua. Far more than just talking heads, the story is told with sensitivity and truth.

Hill-Smith cannot be accused of showing one-sidedness, the insistence on showing the Indonesian side of the story is a trait that admittedly was a trifle annoying during production. But the finished product is testament to the wisdom of this approach, in that the extremely honest and candid Indonesian perspective demonstrates clearly that the military is not loved by the people of Indonesia either. As the film demonstrates clearly, no observer can see the reality of Indonesia's military occupation and condone their behaviour.

**COMMUNICATION,
CULTURE AND SOCIETY
IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA:
YU TOK WANEM?**





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