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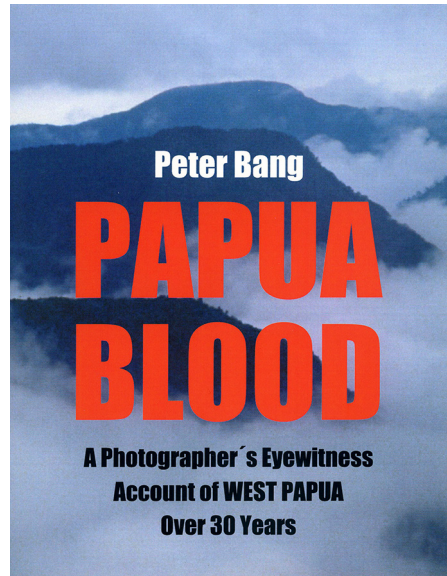
# Indonesian repression and betrayal in West Papua

***Papua Blood: A Photographer's Eyewitness Account of West Papua Over 30 Years***, by Peter Bang. Copenhagen, Denmark: Remote Frontlines, 2018. 248 pages. ISBN 978-87-430-0101-0  
***See No Evil: New Zealand's Betrayal of the People of West Papua***, by Maire Leadbeater. Dunedin, NZ: Otago University Press, 2018. 310 pages. ISBN 978-1-98-853121-2

TWO damning and contrasting books about Indonesian colonialism in the Pacific, both by activist participants in Europe and New Zealand, have recently been published. Overall, they are excellent exposés of the harsh repression of the Melanesian people of West Papua and a world that has largely turned a blind eye to human rights violations.

In *Papua Blood*, Danish photographer Peter Bang provides a deeply personal account of his three decades of experience in West Papua that is a testament to the resilience and patience of the people in the face of 'slow genocide' with an estimated 500,000 Papuans dying over the past half century.

With *See No Evil*, Maire Leadbeater, peace movement advocate and spokesperson of West Papua Action Auckland, offers a meticulously

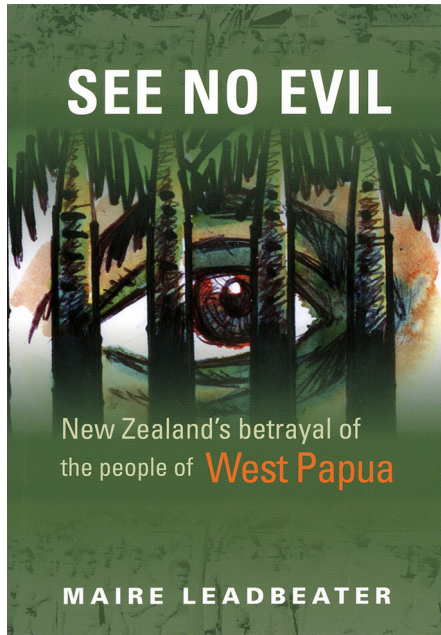


researched historical account of New Zealand's originally supportive stance for the independence aspirations of the Papuan people while still a Dutch colony and then its unprincipled slide into betrayal amid Cold War realpolitik.

Peter Bang's book features 188 of his evocative images, providing colourful insights into changing lifestyles in West Papua, ranging from pristine rainforest, waterfalls, villages and urban cityscapes to dramatic scenes of resistance to oppression and the defiant displays of the *Morning Star* flag of independence.

Some of the most poignant images are photographs of the use of the traditional *koteka* (penis gourds) and traditional attire, which are under threat in some parts of West Papua, and customary life in remote parts of the Highlands and the tree houses of the coastal marshlands.

Besides the photographs, Bang also has a narrative about the various



episodes of his life in West Papua.

Never far from his account, are the reflections of life under Indonesian colonialism, and the extreme racism displayed towards the Papuan people and their culture and traditions. From the beginning in 1963 when Indonesia under Sukarno wrested control of West Papua from the Dutch with United Nations to the approval six years later under a sham 'Act of Free Choice' against the local people's wishes, followed by the so-called 'Transmigrasi' programme encouraging thousands of Javanese migrants to settle, the Papuans have been treated with repression.

### 'Disaster for Papuans'

Bang describes the massive migration of Indonesians to West Papua as 'not only a disaster for the Papuan people, but also a catastrophe for the rainforest, earth and wildlife' (p. 13).

'Police [and] soldiers conducted frequent punitive expeditions with reference to violation of "laws" that the indigenous people neither understood nor had heard about, partly because of language barriers and the huge cultural difference,' writes Bang (p. 11). The list of atrocities has been endless.

There were examples of Papuans who had been captured, and thrown out alive from helicopters, strangled or drowned after being put into plastic bags. Pregnant women killed by bayonets. Prisoners forced to dig their own graves before they were killed. (p. 12)

A book that provided an early impetus while Bang was researching for his involvement in West Papua was *Indonesia's Secret War* by journalist Robin Osborne, a former press secretary for Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan, the leader who was much later ousted from office because of the Sandline mercenary affair. This book also influenced me when I first began writing about West Papua in the early 1980s.

After travelling through Asia, a young Peter Bang arrived in West Papua in 1986 for his first visit, determined to journey to the remote Yali tribe as a photographer and writer interested in indigenous peoples. He wanted to find out how the Yali people had integrated with the outside world since missionaries first entered the isolated tribal area just 25 years earlier.

When Bang visited the town of Angguruk for the first time, 'the only wheels I saw at the mission station were punctured and sat on a wheelbarrow ...

It was only seven years ago that human flesh had been eaten in the area’ (p. 16).

During this early period of jungle trekking, Bang rarely ‘encountered anything besides kindness—only twice did I experience being threatened with a bow and arrow’ (p. 39). The first time was by a ‘mentally disabled’ man confused over Bang’s presence, who was scolded by the village chief.

### Political change

Ten years later, Bang again visited the Yali people and found the political climate had changed in the capital Jayapura—‘we saw police and military everywhere’ following an incident a few months earlier when OPM (Free Papua Movement) guerrillas held 11 captives hostage in a cave.

He struck up a friendship with Wimmo, a Dani tribesman and son of a village witchdoctor and healer in the Baliem Valley, that was to endure for years after he was adopted into Wimmo’s family.

Years later, Bang met tribal leader and freedom fighter Benny Wenda who, with the help of Australian human rights activist and lawyer Jennifer Robinson, was granted asylum in the United Kingdom in 2003: ‘I felt great sympathy for Benny Wenda’s position on the fight for liberation. By many, he was compared to Nelson Mandela, although he was obviously playing his own ukelele’ (p. 81)

Wenda and Filip Karma, who at the time was serving a 15 year sentence for ‘raising the *Morning Star* flag’, were nominated for the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize.



Bang founded the Danish section of the Free West Papua Campaign and launched an activist Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/FreeWest-PapuaCampaignDenmark/>

One of the book’s amusing and inspirational highlights is Bang’s secret ‘freedom paddle’ on the Baliem River when he used a yellow inflatable rubber boat and a pocket-sized *Morning Star* flag to make his own personal protest against Indonesia (p. 123). This was a courageous statement in itself given the continued arrests of journalists in West Papua by the military authorities in spite of the ‘open’ policy of President Joko Widodo.

In a special section, Bang devotes 26 pages to the indigenous people of West Papua, profiling some of the territory’s 300 tribes and their cultural and social systems, such as the Highlands communities of Dani and Yali, and the Asmat, Korowai and Kombai peoples.

### **Fascinating insight**

Peter Bang concludes: ‘Nobody knows what the future holds. In 2018, the Indonesian regime continues the brutal crackdown on the native population of West Papua.’

This book is a fascinating insight into West Papuan life under duress, but would have benefitted with tighter editing by the English-language volunteer editors. Nevertheless, it is a valuable book with a strong political message.

In contrast to Bang’s authentic account of life in West Papua, Maire Leadbeater’s *See No Evil* book is an activist’s historical account of New Zealand’s shameful record over West Papua, one that is just as disgraceful as Wellington’s record on Timor-Leste during the 24 years of Indonesian illegal occupation. New Zealand’s behaviour towards East Timor has at least been tempered by a quietly supportive post-independence role.

Surely there is a lesson here. For those New Zealand politicians, officials and conservative journalists who prefer to meekly accept the Indonesian status quo, the East Timor precedent is an indicator that we should be strongly advocating self-determination for the Papuans.

One of the many strengths of Leadbeater’s thoroughly researched book is that she exposes the *volte-face* and hypocrisy of the stance of successive New Zealand governments since Walter Nash and his ‘united New Guinea’ initiative (p. 66).

‘A stroke of the pen in the shape of the 1962 New York Agreement, signed by the colonial Dutch and the Indonesian

government, sealed the face of the people of West Papua,’ the author notes in her introduction. Prior to this ‘selling out’ of a people arrangement, New Zealand had been a vocal supporter of the Dutch government’s preparations to decolonise the territory.

In fact, the Dutch had done much more to prepare West Papua for independence than Australia had done at that stage for neighbouring Papua New Guinea, which became independent in 1975.

### **Game changer**

Indonesia’s so-called September 30th Movement in 1965—three years after paratroopers had been dropped on West Papua in a farcical ‘invasion’—was the game changer. The attempted coup triggered a massive anti-communist purge in Indonesia leading to an estimated 200,000 to 800,000 killings and eventually the seizure of power by General Suharto from the ageing nationalist President Sukarno in 1967 (Adam, 2015).

As Leadbeater notes, the bloodletting opened the door to Western foreign investment and ‘rich prizes’ in West Papua such as the Freeport gold and copper mine, one of the world’s richest.

New Zealand politicians and diplomats welcomed Indonesia’s change in direction. Cold War anti-communist fervour trumped sympathy for the victims of the purge; and New Zealand was keen to increase its trade, investment and ties with the ‘new’ Indonesia. (p. 22)

The first 13 chapters of the book, from



‘the Pleistocene period’ to ‘Suharto goes but thwarted hope for West Papua’, are a methodical and insightful documentation of decolonisation and New Zealand’s changing relationship are an excellent record and useful tool for the advocates of West Papuan independence.

However, the last two contemporary chapters and conclusion do not quite measure up to the quality of the rest of the book.

For example, a section of fewer than two pages on ‘Media access’ gives short change to the important media role in the West Papuan independence struggle. While Leadbeater quite rightly castigates the mainstream New Zealand media for a lack of coverage for such a serious issue, her explanation for the widespread ignorance about West Papua though is simplistic:

A major reason (setting aside Radio New Zealand’s consistent reporting) is that the issues are seldom covered in the mainstream media. It is a circular problem: lack of direct access results in a dearth of objective and fully rounded reporting; editors fear that material they do receive may be inaccurate or misrepresentative; so a media blackout prevails and editors conflate the resulting limited public debate with a lack of interest. (p. 233)

### **Mainstream ‘silence’**

She points out that the mainstream media coverage of the ‘pre-internet 1960s did a better job’. Yet she fails to explain why, or credit those contemporary New Zealand journalists

who have worked hard to break the mainstream ‘silence’ in spite of the absence of specialist foreign editors in the local media, ill-informed mainstream editors and the closure of the country’s national news agency NZPA in 2011 (Robie, 2017).

Leadbeater dismisses in just three sentences the courageous and successful attempts by at least two New Zealand media organisations—Māori Television and Radio New Zealand—to ‘test’ President Widodo’s new policy in 2015 by sending two crews to West Papua. Since then, she admits, Indonesia’s ‘shutters have mostly stayed shut’ (p. 235).

One of the New Zealand journalists who has written extensively on West Papua and Melanesian issues for many years, RNZ Pacific’s Johnny Blades, is barely mentioned (just the RNZ visit to West Papua), *Tabloid Jubi* editor Victor Mambor, who visited New Zealand in 2014, Paul Bensemman (who travelled to West Papua disguised as a bird watcher in 2013), *Scoop*’s Gordon Campbell, Television New Zealand’s Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver and documentary maker Tere Harrison (who produced a short film, *Run It Straight* in 2016) are just a few of those who have contributed to growing awareness of Papuan issues in this country who have not been given fair acknowledgement.

Even in my own case, a journalist and educator who has written on West Papuan affairs for almost four decades with countless articles and who wrote the first New Zealand book with an extensive section on the West Papuan

struggle (Robie, 1989), there is a remarkable silence.

One has a strong impression that Leadbeater is reluctant to acknowledge her peers and the selective sourcing weakens her work as it relates to the millennial years.

The early history of the West Papuan struggle is exemplary, but I look forward to another more nuanced account of the contemporary struggle. *Papua Merdeka!*

### Note

1. Dr David Robie was awarded the 1983 NZ Media Peace Prize for his coverage of Timor-Leste and West Papua in '*Blood on our hands*'.

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