



Reviews



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An emotional,
eternal life
struggle for
peace, justice

***West Papua: Follow the Morning Star*,
by Ben Bohane, Liz Thompson and
Jim Elmslie. Melbourne, Australia:
Prowling Tiger Press, 2003. 152 pp.
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FEW BOOKS have been published in Oceania offering the political and social resonance achieved by some photojournalists in the Asia-Pacific region and further afield internationally. Books come to mind such as *Depth of Field*, a powerful

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collection of photographs of poverty and repression in the Philippines; the *Brotherhood*, a revealing portrayal of a corrupt police precinct in Manila by Alex Baluyut for the Philippines Centre for Investigative Journalism.

Or like *Nicaragua*, the Susan Meiselas study of a nation in revolutionary transition in 1981; and Don McCullin's *Sleeping with Ghosts*, celebrating his life's work in political photojournalism ranging from Biafra, Cambodia's killing fields, the Iraqi Kurds to the homeless in London.

McCullin's empathy with his subjects was captured in a photo of him carrying an elderly woman to safety during a Cyprus gunbattle.

But now *West Papua* is a worthy rival from Oceania. It is an evocative and moving testament to the struggle of a people for independence, first from the Dutch colonisers and more recently from more than three decades of brutal Indonesian oppression.

It is the work of Australian political economist and tribal art dealer Jim Elmslie, photographer and filmmaker Liz Thompson and photojournalist Ben Bohane, who was founding editor of the shortlived *Pacific Weekly Review*, a brave attempt to establish a regional newspaper based in Vanuatu.

Bohane, who has covered virtually every major Pacific political conflict in the past decade, from

Bougainville to East Timor and Fiji, was often the first journalist to interview elusive leaders such as Bougainville Revolutionary Army's Francis Ona.

Elmslie, who has lived and worked on the island of New Guinea since 1984, introduces *West Papua* with a lengthy introductory and historical essay that provides the context for the photographic gallery and personal impressions that follow.

Along with intriguing historical photos – 'face-to-face with new technology' in 1938 (p 14), Papuan conscripts listening to a radio broadcast on Japanese wartime defeats (p 25), and a Marind-anim woman's tattoos of scarification (p 27) – is an Agence France-Presse portrait of Chief Theys Eluay behind bars, shortly before he was abducted and murdered in 2001.

Elmslie argues that while the Indonesian military 'has a free hand, no meaningful reform is possible'.

This bitter legacy of Dutch colonialism was foreseen by Indonesia's first vice-president, Mohammed Hatta. Hattas was of the view that West Papua should not be incorporated into the [Indonesian] republic on the grounds that the Papuans were racially and religiously distinct, and that geographically West Papua was part of Melanesia, not Asia.

He foresaw only trouble in keeping the republic together by brute force.



Hatta's view was not widely accepted, as Sukarno, and later Suharto, strongly argued that Indonesia included all the possessions of the former Dutch East Indies. However, by maintaining West Papua within the republic they have, unwittingly, cast the die for Indonesia's future: a dismal future of economic decline, poverty and hopelessness in a rapidly degrading natural environment.

As with much of her work about neighbouring Papua New Guinea, Thompson's photographs celebrate the life and customs of *grasruts* Papuans and the breathtaking beauty of the landscape.

From the nubile unmarried Dani girls in their grassskirts ('assgrass') and *noken* (long string bags) and young warriors in their *koteka* (penis gourds) and pig fat smears (p 43) to the sexually explicit Indonesian billboards of Wamena in the Baliem Valley, Thompson explores tradition versus modernity.

She chronicles cultural mores such as the revered cultivation of the dead (pp 55-57)— 'their spirit world is intricately bound up with the spirits of their dead relatives who manifest in the form of ghosts' — and the custom of Dani women having their fingers cut (pp 60-61) off at the knuckle after the death of a close relative, and a funeral of a child (p 59).

Her pictures of the mist shrouded Baliem Valley (pp 40-41), more than 3000m above the Indonesian colony's tropical jungles, show glimpses of — as Robert Mitton (1983) once described it — 'the only place in the world where man has improved on nature ... it is as close to paradise as one could get'.

Unsurprisingly, the most overtly political photos are offered by Bohane. Apart from graphic documentary illustrations of the lifestyle of the OPM guerrillas such as military training and raising the *Morning Star* 'freedom' ensign close to the PNG border, he also provides a series of studies of the movement's leadership. As Bohane notes:

What makes the OPM different from many other liberation groups is its essentially decentralised nature and lack of a unified command structure. Ethnic rivalries, lack of telecommunications and simple geography all play a part in this, so essentially it has been left to regional commanders, sometimes in coordination, often times not, to conduct operations as they see fit.

Three main command areas have been most active in recent years: central command, led by Kelly Kwalik, Titus Murip and Daniel Kogeya; northern command (along the northern PNG border) led by Matthias Wenda; and



southern command (southern PNG border) led by John Koknak and Bernard Mawen.

Among international Papuan lobbyists are Franzalbert Joku, a prominent journalist based in Port Moresby, John Otto Ondawami and Rex Rumakiek (based in Australia). And human rights campaigner John Rumbiak, who has contributed to this volume with a preface.

Several photographs (pp 103-115) show southern command guerrillas on the move in dugout canoes and runabouts on the Fly River, along the PNG border, or training with wooden dummy guns.

Rather incongruously, commander Matthias Wenda is shown in a secret jungle hideout wearing an Air Niugini baseball cap; while commander Koknak taps away at his ancient Remington portable typewriter.

One of the best photos in *West Papua* is a silhouetted OPM guerrilla, naked, apart from his penis gourd and a rifle, on the brow of a ridge in the highlands above the controversial giant Freeport copper and gold mine.

One enduring question is why does the New Zealand media pay such little attention to Melanesia in general, and West Papua in particular? In terms of regional stability, the complex political struggles of western Melanesia will ultimately have far

greater global significance as well as being more vitally important to Australia and New Zealand than Polynesia.

As John Rumbiak notes in his preface, 'One may wonder what really is the Papuan struggle?' He answers his rhetorical question immediately, saying simply: 'It is a struggle for dignity, justice and peace for us all.'

Papua Merdeka!

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