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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Arrows Against the Wind

(1992: 35 min. edited)

Transcribed and edited by Darrell G. Moen

Caption insert: This film was shot secretly with the help of the West Papuan people, who for their personal safety must remain anonymous.

Narrator: West Papua is a country of vast jungles and tropical rainforests. Ecologically rich, our land is hailed the "Amazon of Asia" and is home to some of the world's most ancient cultures. For over 25,000 years, our people have lived in spiritual harmony with the land, worshiping Mother Earth with songs and ceremonies. Lying on the largest island of the Asia-Pacific region, West Papua adjoins its eastern neighbor, Papua New Guinea.

The indigenous inhabitants of both countries are Melanesian, of the same ethnic origin. Yet a border divides us as close cultural neighbors. Unlike Papua New Guinea, our country has remained hidden for a quarter of a century, cut off from the outside world. Indonesia took control of West Papua in 1963, and soon after banned visits by international observers. A veil of silence was drawn around our land, and outside world, to a large extent, forgot. This is the story of our peoples' unique culture and way of life.

It is also the story of our social, political, and environmental upheaval. Indonesia claimed West Papua as its 26th. province, just as later, it would claim East Timor as its 27th. province. Overcrowding in areas of Indonesia meant our country became an obvious site for transmigration of Indonesian settlers. Rich in land and resources, it was the perfect target for exploitation.

When the former Dutch colonialists gave up their control over West Papua in 1963, the United Nations insisted Indonesia hold an act of free choice where indigenous Papuan could for independence or Indonesian rule. 1969 saw 1,025 tribal leaders rounded up by the Indonesian soldiers and forced to vote for Indonesian control. The United States endorsed the act, and subsequently, the United Nations gave its seal of approval to Indonesia's annexation [of West Papua].

Expressions of Papuan independence which were encouraged by the Dutch were suppressed following the years of Indonesian takeover, and over 100,000 Papuans lost their lives. As a result of the repression, a liberation movement called the OPM or Free Papua Movement emerged in the 1960s. Their battle for self-determination continues to be fought with bows and arrows against an Indonesian army with helicopters and machine guns.

Henk Rumbewas (political refugee): OPM stands for the sun, moon, and stars. As long as the sun, moon, and stars continue to shine, our fight for liberation will continue to persist, our longing for freedom will always be there, to gain back our land, our dignity, and our pride as Melanesian peoples.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): Freedom of speech is forbidden in our country [by the Indonesian occupiers]. If I was interviewed in West Papua for a film and talked about the struggle of our people, I would be arrested and put in jail.

Narrator: In Jayapura, the capital city of West Papua, we have become fringe dwellers, living on the edge of a dominant, foreign culture. Patriotic ceremonies every month in Jayapura celebrate the independence Indonesian gained from its Dutch colonial masters in 1945. With an ironic twist, colonial history is repeating itself [with the Indonesians now as the colonial masters]. In 1969, Indonesian named its newly-acquired territory the province of Irian Jaya. But those who support our rights to our rights to self-determination refer to our land as West Papua.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): We have chosen the name West Papua for our country because Papua means "black skin with fuzzy hair." The Indonesians don't share this physical appearance. They have brown skin and straight, black hair. Culturally and ethnically, Melanesians are a different race of people from the Indonesians.

Narrator: In West Papua, over 240 languages are spoken by the tribal communities. Amidst such diversity, there is unity amongst our people based on shared tribal bonds and our close relationship with the land. One of the largest groups in West Papua are the Dani tribes who number about 200,000 people. In this remote region of the Baliem Valley, the Dani have retained their land, and their traditional culture has remained essentially intact.

Anthropologists believe that the Dani has developed one of the world's most sophisticated agricultural systems. Their green gardens, bordered by deep irrigation channels, carpet the valley floor. For centuries, the Dani have practiced sustainable farming, living in harmony and accordance with their land. The Dani lack so-called "economic prosperity" but human prosperity has flourished. Diligent and industrious, Orubak and his eldest son Dan work in the fields. Orubak's wife, Lakalok, collects

sweet potatoes with her sons. Sweet potato is the staple diet of the Dani, and they have named 70 different varieties.

Only a decade ago, the Dani were living in the Stone Age. They now confront, in the name of Indonesian development, the 20th. century. Many young Dani are now leaving their villages and moving to the capital town of the Baliem Valley. Here, they reach for the "fruits of civilization." These "fruits" often translate into menial jobs or the endless search for employment. Since most businesses are run by Indonesians, it is tourism that forms the basis of the Dani's cash economy.

In 1977, the Indonesian government organized the "Penis Gourd Program." The objective of this open policy of assimilation was to force the Dani to wear clothes, go to school, and speak Indonesian.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): The program was sponsored by President Suharto and it aimed to civilize the so-called "primitive" Dani. After the policy was introduced, there was a very big uprising among the Dani in the valley opposing it. This was severely suppressed by the Indonesian military and over 3,000 Dani people lost their lives.

Narrator: During these sad times, Dani elders were dropped to their deaths from Indonesian helicopters flown over the valley. Today, it is transmigration of Indonesian settlers that poses the most serious threat to the Dani's future. In 1969, Indonesia's transmigration policy was introduced in West Papua. Its aim was to relieve overcrowding in Java and Bali. 700,000 Indonesians have been relocated to our country. They now constitute nearly half the 1.6 million people in West Papua.

Numerous transmigration camps have been established in our country. Lying west of Jayapura is the Ahsow camp. Like most transmigration camps, the Indonesian settlers have cleared vast tracts of rainforests to make way for crops. Once our forests are destroyed, our people are alienated from and displaced from their ancestral lands. They receive no compensation for the loss of their sago trees, hunting grounds, and traditional livelihoods. Transmigrants are encouraged to believe that the opening up of unused land is in the name of development.

Unidentified Indonesian transmigrant woman [subtitled]: In the past, there was only jungle here. With transmigration, the land has been made productive and prosperous. That's why we came here.

Narrator: Indonesia's transmigration program has been financed by the World Bank, a powerful financial organization funded by the United States and other 1st. World countries. International protest has now led to a reduction in World Bank funding for transmigration. However, the program has only been scaled down. While official

settlers have been reduced, spontaneous or voluntary settlers are still actively encouraged.

Mortono (Indonesian Minister of Transmigration in a 1985 statement): By way of transmigration, we will try and integrate all the ethnic groups into one nation, the Indonesian nation. The different ethnic groups will in the long run disappear because of integration and there will be one kind of man.

Narrator: Looking for fertile land to entice settlers, Indonesia has now turned its attention to the Dani's valley. A road is now being carved across Baliem Valley. It will, for the first time, give Indonesian settlers easy access to the Dani's land.

Henk Rumbewas (political refugee): If the transmigration program is totally implemented in the Baliem Valley, it is going to be a disaster. The reason I am saying disaster is because Baliem Valley has the most fertile land in West Papua, the most beautiful valley. But it takes time to help the Dani residents of the valley and in the neighboring highlands to [adjust to this expected large influx of foreigners onto their territory].

And the government hasn't prepared these people. So I believe they are going to be the ones who suffer. We will lose this beautiful homeland and the Dani are not yet aware of the consequences in store for them. It will be a disaster for them.

Narrator: Until now, the Dani's traditional ownership of their land has allowed them to retain the roots of their cultural identity. If the Dani lose their land to the Indonesian settlers, they will not die out but the soul of their culture will wither away. Following the Baliem River south, the mountains circling the valley fall away to the lowland rainforests where the winding river tributaries give birth to new life.

This remote region on the south coast of West Papua is home to the Asmat tribes. Numbering about 70,000 people, the Asmat inhabit the largest alluvial swamplands in the world. Unlike the Dani, the Asmat have already lost their land to Indonesian logging companies. And in just one generation, their culture has been largely obliterated. Between 1974 and 1987, men and children were rounded up by Indonesian logging companies as a labor force. In return for their work, the Asmak received handfuls of tobacco to which they are now completely addicted.

The Asmat continue to whoop and cry [when felling trees] in an effort to appease the spirit of the dead tree. Although the men are now paid a commission for their work, it is a pittance of a wage when compared to the market value of the timber. Once the men are paid a dollar each for a tree, the logging company sells each tree for about \$500. At the logging camps, the Asmat have been enslaved by a cycle of poverty and despair. Their spirit has been broken.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): Indonesia doesn't recognize the Asmat's tribal land rights. In fact, in Indonesia all the land is owned by the state.

Narrator: Indonesia's constitution affords traditional landowners no right for compensation for the loss of their land. Once their timber is sold by Indonesian timber companies, profits line the pockets of an elite group of military men.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): If you trace the loggers' activities in West Papua to Jakarta, you'll always find an army general. So they use the military to run their logging operations.

Narrator: Business ventures based in Indonesia not only thrive on the profits of logging, but on the trade of what's left of Asmat culture and art. The working of wood lies at the heart of Asmat existence, but this is a dying art. Over the last 20 years, the Asmat woodcarvings have declined in quality, and while the Asmat region has been closed to outsiders, many of the traditional carvings have been shipped to Jakarta where they are sold for high prices by Indonesian traders.

While Indonesians show little respect for Asmat culture, other than its potential value [as a commodity], some of the missionaries in the Asmat region have shown considerable sensitivity. Unlike their Protestant counterparts in the Baliem Valley, the Catholic missionaries have tended to place an emphasis on the people's welfare and not on their conversion. Establishing educational programs, they stress the importance of environmental protection and encourage self-sufficiency in order to avoid dependence on Indonesian goods. Degrees of environmental and cultural pressure vary considerably in the Asmat region.

Until recently, the inland Braza River area had experienced minimal contact with the outside world. However, this is being counteracted by a hardline assimilation policy. Its objective - to Indonesianize the people. A leaflet on the Asmat culture clarifies the Indonesian government's position: "The Asmat community sociologically can be classified as a primitive tribe, being backward in all aspects of human life. Their ignorance of hygiene and nutrition results in a lack of mental alertness, concentration, and reduced intelligence." (Insert from 1989 Indonesian government leaflet on Asmat culture).

In an attempt to "civilize" the Asmat tribes, the Indonesian authorities are relocating the people to sterile villages along the easily accessible banks of the Braza River. The Asmat traditionally lived in [ecologically-adapted] treehouses which perched six meters above the ground. [Forced] assimilation has seen the destruction of nearly all of the traditional homes. Resisting the soulless uniformity of their new houses, the Asmat have designed bamboo extensions. Their cultural resilience finds expression in there

rickety structures, while the [ecologically unsound] houses sit empty and largely unused.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): West Papua is important to Indonesia because of its natural resources. Not only have our forests been plundered, our mineral resources have been systematically exploited. Our country is rich in oil, copper, and gold. These mining activities have brought enormous devastation to the lives of our people and to the ecological system of West Papua.

Narrator: The Freeport copper mine has displaced the Amungme people from their traditional lands. And many of the people have been forcibly relocated to settlements on the south coast. The Amungme have lost their once pristine environment to the industrial might of the 20th. century. Freeport International Inc. [in West Papua] is the largest copper mine in the world, and it contains an immense gold deposit.

Established in 1970 by the United States Freeport Sulphur Company, it epitomizes the exploitation of West Papua by multinational corporations as well as the Indonesian government. For over two decades, the activities of the mine have been hidden from the outside world as a well-kept secret.

Otto Ondawame (Amungme political refugee): The Indonesians make it very difficult for foreign journalists to visit West Papua and areas such as the Asmat region and the Freeport area are strictly forbidden to the outside world. This is due to the extent of environmental and cultural destruction taking place in these regions. Indonesians don't want the outside world to know what is actually happening in these areas.

An estimated U.S.\$125 million in profit leaves the Freeport mine each year, making the company Indonesia's largest taxpayer. However, the Amungme have never received any compensation for the massive exploitation and destruction of their land.

Narrator: One-third of the profits Indonesia receives goes to service its massive foreign debt owed to First World creditors. Many organizations have suggested that if the price is the global environment we all share, then it is time for the First World banks to write off these debts. But is that a solution? Would eradication of those debts ease the exploitation of West Papuan resources? It is unlikely. As long as there is a First World market and profits to be made from our resources, silence reigns and destruction rages.

Rex Rumakiek (political refugee): The international media ignore the plight of our people and the environmental devastation wrecking havoc in West Papua. It is in the interest of the multinational corporations operating in West Papua that the rape of our land remains unknown to the outside world.

Narrator: Why is it that Europeans and all other colonial masters have been able to justify every invasion as discovery? And every step of resource exploitation as development and trade? Constantly emptying out the forests and cultures that protected them, the world's rainforests are being rapidly destroyed. Current rates of deforestation in Indonesia are second only to Brazil. West Papua contains 34 million (34,000,000) hectares of tropical rainforests which accounts for a quarter of Indonesia's forests. Over half of the land has been divided into logging concessions.

What makes it feel so natural for intruders to invade our lands and take them away in the belief that for the first time they are being owned and used? Colonization in West Papua has not improved the lot of the people. Like the Amazonians of Brazil, our people are dying out as our environment is destroyed.

Henk Rumbewas (political refugee): The struggle for justice and freedom for the people of West Papua has a lot of meaning, not only for myself, but for all the people of West Papua. Sometimes I feel that the people of West Papua are pushing me, saying, "You have to tell the rest of the world what's happening to us!" So, I'm trying to speak for the voices of the people who are being tortured and killed, the people who were killed in the past, and the people who are still suffering today. Many people say we are not fighting against the Indonesian invasion. But actually, our cry for freedom is very strong and the struggle is still going on.

Narrator: As our people are forcibly assimilated into modern civilization, their wisdom and knowledge of the ages will vanish. If the world is to help us preserve our heritage, it must first recognize the value of our traditional cultures. As environmental issues become ever more prevalent, the world should learn to reexamine notions of "progress" and "development." For over 25,000 years, our people have understood that nature is the source of life, and they have respected it accordingly.

The First World has disastrously mismanaged the environment, and the effects are coming to light. With that light, comes an element of humility undermining the arrogant attitude that there is little to learn from our tribal cultures. We should learn from each other. There must be exchange, not assimilation. In the face of ever-increasing environmental destruction, the information we have to share is part of the future survival of the world, for we are the guardians of the earth.

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