

*The struggle for the independence of Papua people*

## **Irian Jaya, a salty sea ballad**

*The legendary South Seas sometimes are spotted with blood. In Irian Jaya, Indonesian part of New Guinea, they have lived for years as in East Timor: brutal violence on the population in the total silence of the media. With one difference: Papuan "guerrillas" fought Indonesian army with bows and arrows.*

(published in the monthly newsmagazine "Galatea", May 2000)

The first thing is the name. Irian Jaya: a nice name, easy to remember. A false name. Damn hypocrite, like the history of Indonesia, that here, as in East Timor, meant only colonialism.

Irian Jaya, an acronym ("*Ikut Republik Indonesia Anti Netherlands*") which means "victorious United Republic Indonesia against the Netherlands". A name that is a total negation of identity, because one can not exist only "against" someone or something.

For the people here, this land is called "West Papua", in English, or "Papua Barat" in Indonesian. Borrowed words, but it is the only way to overcome the Babel of 250 languages spoken in second-largest island in the world (after Greenland), an island that a Spanish navigator, Ynigo Ortiz, called "New Guinea" in 1545.

Middle of nowhere in the South Seas, north of Australia. Beautiful and mysterious, enchanted and inaccessible as a lost paradise. Equatorial forest and mountains with permanent snow (the highest peaks soar to five thousand meters).

The view is impressive already from the plane pointing to the Sentani Airport, built by Americans in 1944, when Jayapura, the capital, became the basis of General MacArthur for the final attack to the Japanese.

The first impact with people immediately highlights a reality: the officers and men in uniform (a few, actually) are Indonesian, as well as store managers and most of the best drivers.

The others, watching the stranger with a lot of curiosity and shyness, have black skin and curly hair. They are the real inhabitants of this land, called Melanesians for the dark skin or Papuans, Malaysian word which simply means "curly hair".

You quickly realize that, despite the natural beauty and exotic charm, tourism is still a marginal reality: most people prefer Indonesian rupees to U.S. dollars, few people speak English.

The houses, the local markets are modest, but there is no feeling of misery, no one asks for alms (sometimes cigarettes), children greet or smile. All around, green mountains and storm clouds: here the water falls abundant, torrential sometimes, much of the rain forest is impenetrable.

There are practically no roads, every city would be isolated without the planes. The island, almost a small continent with only seven million inhabitants divided into two states (Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea, independent since 1975) is closed on itself, fiercely wild, naturally hostile to foreigners, who were sometimes victims (missionaries and explorers), more often perpetrators. Cannibalism was practiced here, someone still think to find here in the "Central Highlands" or in the Baliem Valley man to the stone age.

But the idea of "contemporary primitive man" is rejected by modern anthropology, because it is a concept that easily lends itself to racist distortions. Aborigines of the near Australia know it very well. Treated for years as humanoids, as they had a poetic culture, a jealous but free relationship with the land, which they knew every inch and respected deeply (as told in Bruce Chatwin's "Songlines").

Papuans were not made to be close in reserves, they did not become the minority in their home, they was not humiliated by alcohol and social workers. Their spirit of freedom, a thousand times threatened, appears to be indomitable. "One can speak of a sense of religious freedom - says Father Alfons van Nunen, Dutch missionary, a Franciscan, 78, in Irian Jaya - West Papua from 1953 -" with

a strong demand for individual and collective salvation, which is manifested example, in cargo cults".

The cargo cults are the original response of the indigenous religion to the first contacts with West. Impressed by the extraordinary richness of the material goods of *Ogai* (term used to indicate virtually all foreigners) and by the fact that some unknown objects seemed to rain from the sky, or emerge from the sea, Papuans "took possession" of objects as a gift from the celestial ancestors and sign of the coming (more precisely the return) of a messiah who would lead into an era of well-being and happiness before the inevitable end of the world. Sometimes the transition from material to spiritual sphere covered even the words: all objects granted by God were *pabrik*, by Dutch *Fabriek* (industry). Divine industry, the men had nothing to do.

For Papuans wealth is not wealth if it is not shared, and the greater good is pigs: the best breeders have to feed many people and give many parties. Only this way you come to be regarded as "big man", and with the personal charisma, the ability to convince, to be heard.

Anyone can aspire to become "big man", ie to lead the village, but only by the consent of the community. The power is not transmitted by inheritance, it can never be separated from individual skills. This libertarian, almost anarchist, spirit was (and is) no doubt helped by the tiny size of human groups: until the sixties, ninety percent of the settlements was made up by one hundred (or less) people communities.

The inhabitants of New Guinea, scattered in hundreds of tribes often in conflict with each other, forced to communicate with each other only through other people's languages, however, show an amazing common view when it comes to protect each other from foreigners. Patriotism without a country was somewhat strengthened by the slow but steady spread of Christianity, the religion of *Ogai*.

The paradox is only apparent: especially from the Fifties, when this part of the island was still under the control of the Dutch (in the other side there were Australians), movements inspired by the figure of Jesus developed, looking for the moral salvation, they preached for the liberation from all forms of foreign domination. The key word is *Merdeka*, Indonesian word meaning freedom in the sense of independence (individual freedom is *bebas*).

"Our independence was sold to Indonesian President Sukarno by the UN, thanks to American support", said Benny Giay, a professor at the University of Jayapura (see interview note). Sukarno, leader of Indonesian nationalist movement from 1928, had led the struggle for the independence of the huge colonial possession known as Dutch East Indies.

A true empire that went from the island of Sumatra, close to Malaysia, to New Guinea, including Java, Borneo, Bali, Celebes, the Moluccas islands and a myriad of other (including East Timor, shared with the Portuguese).

Three and a half centuries of Dutch rule were absolutely blown away by Japanese invasion of 1942. The Japanese wanted to awake the pride of Asia against West in all their new possessions, but their imperialism was so brutal that triggered almost anywhere (from Vietnam to New Guinea) the forces of national resistance.

Sukarno had an extraordinary charisma, and he proposed himself more like a messianic leader than a political leader, playing on the obscure and deep-rooted religious sense of people, apparently Muslims (the majority) and Christians (the minority).

A few days after the surrender of Japan, 17 August 1945, Indonesia proclaimed its independence. But the Democratic Netherlands, just emerged from five years of Nazi occupation, did not want to lose their colonies, and they ventured into a dirty war of which there has hardly been any historical memory (as opposed to other struggles for independence, from Vietnam to Algeria). At 1949 end, the Dutch let it go, Indonesia became independent with a project of the federal state and with the President Sukarno.

The western part of New Guinea, the future Irian Jaya, the most neglected of Dutch East Indies, remained outside of new Indonesian state, which almost immediately abandoned the federal project to become a populist, completely centralized dictatorship characterized by aggressive nationalism and based on the dominant role of the army.

Sukarno had good relations with Mao's China, he initially proposed himself as a catalyst for the "non-aligned countries", standard-bearer of the Third World, who went into history.

Bandung Conference in 1955, in Java island, is a milestone in the political path that brings the former colonies to win a majority at the UN in 1961. In the fifties Sukarno was one of the world foreign champions to the Cold War, along with Tito, Nasser, Nehru, Archbishop Makarios.

Indonesian dictator embraced the free market logic, however, and moved decisively towards the West, also because he had to deal with the strong communist movement in the South-East Asia, with strong penetration in the army. In this context, he finds the unconditional support of the U.S., obsessed by Soviet nightmare, by humiliation suffered in Cuba and increasingly involved in the Vietnam conflict.

In this context the dream of independence of Papuan people fades. The watershed year was 1961.

A pivotal year for the whole world: according to British historian Geoffrey Barraclough, it could be considered the beginning of contemporary history.

It is the year of the first man in space, the beginning of the Kennedy presidency, but, first of all, the year of the first reversal of historical perspective: the point of view on the planet is no longer exclusively that of the colonial powers, and soon nor that between East and West, American empire against Soviet empire.

But the Cold War in 1961 is still struggled at the four corners of the planet, even in the South Seas. Thus, the Dutch deceive Papuans by giving them the tests of independence, starting from the inauguration of the Council of New Guinea, a great experiment of "primitive democracy": the assembly members were representatives of all tribes and clans, who are appointed by people with traditional criteria (certainly not with improbable polls and ballots).

On November 18, 1961 the flag of West Papua (white star on a red and white horizontal stripes and blue, almost identical to that of Cuba) and the national anthem (*Hai tanakhu Papua*) are officially recognized.

Too good to be true. The dream of independence lasted little more than a year: the time the United Nations take to open the doors to Indonesia, in May 1963.

Sukarno had obtained what he wanted very strongly, with the decisive support of American diplomacy. An almost unconditionally support, in the name of anticommunism, of the worst butchers of the planet is an U.S. specialty: the demonstration in Indonesia is the indiscriminate massacre of Communists and sympathizers of the left following the aborted coup (allocated to Communist segments of the Army) in Autumn 1965: dead people were probably 500 thousand. Û

To be sure, soldiers led by General Suharto pensioned off the old Executioner in 1967. But also the new leader had mystical vocations and established, together with the dominion of his family and the party-state (*Golkar*), the five principles of the national system of life (*Pancasila*), topped the list by placing faith in a Supreme Being.

In the same year there are the first report of Papua rebellions, quickly suppressed in the blood.

The referendum on whether or not Indonesia, established by the UN in 1963 ("Act of Free Choice") to be held in 1969, under the secretary of Burma's U Thant, became a farce staged by Indonesian authorities, who chose a thousand people to vote unanimously adherence to Indonesia.

In 1973, Suharto gave the colony the name of Irian Jaya. Papua people were explained that they had already achieved independence, in August 17, 1945.

Meanwhile, Indonesians had destroyed industrial quantities of shells (the local currency) to advance the use of the rupee, they had forbidden to carry bows and arrows, and in some areas they had even introduced a ban on wearing the *koteka*, the cylinder that hides the penis, tied at the neck or the waist, which for many indigenous people was practically the only men clothing ( testes are not covered), to spread the use of Indonesian clothing.

A militarily organized reaction was born in 1977, with the first raids of OPM, "*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*" (Organization for free Papua").

The original core was made up by former Papuan soldiers of Dutch army who gathered in Manukwari, Bird's Head Peninsula. Today there are six teams in all the provinces of West Papua. "We were armed only with bows and arrows - Apumbakar Kenda Wenda says, secretary of the

group number 6 - sometimes we could take weapons from Indonesians".

They were then able to have some sub-machine gun from the separatists of Bougainville island, but their arsenal remains very low. Everyone of the group come from Baliem Valley, or the town of Wamena, in the heart of West Papua, the true epicenter of the insurgency and the scene of the most violent repression. Now they live across the border with Papua New Guinea, guests, along with many refugees, of the brothers who live in the lucky and independent part of the island, influenced (and economically exploited) by Australia. They know the forest as their pockets, the only real defense against the incursions of Indonesian army (first they bomb, then they get the helicopters machine-gun the villages, and finally the special teams to make scorched earth). Each of them has a dramatic story to tell. Often they have lost all the family, they saw dead bodies disemboweled, burned churches, tortured people. They know that many of their children were thrown overboard by Indonesian aircraft or helicopters, a notorious technique in South America. For a year now, following an agreement with the government for new Indonesian President Wahid, the violence is almost finished. But only a few weeks ago, Indonesian police opened fire on a crowd of protesters in Jayapura who had "dared" to raise the flag of West Papua (the name should be officially recognized). Symbols are important, Papuans have only symbols. The OPM took the challenge on the political level: no one wants to continue the war. However, while Papua repeats in chorus "full Independence", Indonesian consul of Vanimo, Markus Budi, who has a reputation for being an open and progressive man, states with disconcerting candor the official policy: an only, strong and compact, Indonesia, he does not even accept the idea of federation. And meanwhile, strange movements of troops towards the island are reported. The lesson of Timor may have been useless. Indonesian soldiers are murderers in kid gloves, trained, armed and framed (especially the notorious Kopassus special troops) by American military experts. There is virtually no body of peacekeeping troops that does not see the red and white flag of Indonesia, from Cambodia to Bosnia. That says a lot about diplomatic support available to this emerging Asian Tiger, the fourth nation in the world with over 200 million people. But the shy, very kind Papuan guerrillas are aware of this.

That is why they pray after every meeting, every political debate. They know that in these situations, the struggle is the struggle of hope. They know about a little oppressed people that freed itself from the slavery of Pharaoh of Egypt. An unheeded cry, however, rises to heaven. The cry of our brothers with black skin and curly hair is: "*Papua Merdeka!*"

**Cesare Sangalli**

*The quiet determination of prof Giay*

## **The foreigner does not pass**

Benni Giay is not a "big man" (although his father was), even if he teaches at the University of Jayapura. "I do not have any pig", he says smiling. He is photographed wearing a T-shirt and slippers, he does not seem to care about the academic prestige, despite the specialization made in the United States.

He teaches history, anthropology and theology (he is Protestant). I wonder if when he comes back to his village in the Central Highlands, he wears only *koteka*, the case for the penis. Benni Giay only 50 years old, but he seems to enjoy the reputation of a Grand Old Man. Indonesian government banned one of his recent books, but till now it lets him alone. And he calmly expresses his ideas of independence, with a soft voice and a look that could be described as "Gandhian".

**-You say that the need for political freedom is deeply rooted in your people. But may there be a national identity among 250 tribes who speak different languages?**

- It is an identity that comes from common experience, that of resistance to foreign domination. Even before the Dutch arrived in this area, there were Muslim sultanates of Indonesia (for example, Tidore) who tried to raise taxes and who enslaved many of our ancestors. This strengthened the sense of rejection against any foreign influence, almost always perceived as aggression. It is a consciousness you find in cities or in the heart of the forest, even in people without any instruction: everyone experiences today the presence of Indonesian army as an intolerable burden. This traditional approach engages in religious consciousness.

**-How?**

-The tribal religion is a means to express the desire for liberation. The so-called "cargo cults" or "cargo movements", are an example: there were prophetic, millenarian movements of salvation, and they became more intense as the repression of the Dutch first, then of Indonesians was stronger.

**- What was the influence of evangelism?**

- The first evangelization followed German colonization of the northern coast. The first Protestant missionaries were the pastors Ottow and Geisler, who arrived in 1855. The impact was completely negative, because people saw the missionaries as agents of Indonesian Tidore Sultan, who, despite being a Muslim, gave a sort of "license" to the Christian missionaries. This ambiguous policy was run by the Netherlands, which used the Sultan as an obstacle to German and English colonial expansion. The Dutch had not the slightest interest in New Guinea: their purpose was to protect Moluccas, the real center of the situation in these seas. For many decades, the missionaries maintained an attitude of confrontation with the traditional religion. The Christianization took place amid a thousand difficulties. Until the fifties, there were more dead religious men (particularly by diseases) than the converted ones. But today, Christian religion helps the spirit of independence. Both the Catholic Church and the various Protestant churches are united in defending the rights of Papuan people.

**How do you assess the political situation? What are the prospects for an independent West Papua?**

– We must immediately make clear that Indonesians are a neo-colonial power. The army is present in large numbers, even if it remains in the barracks, so you do not notice much. Indonesian immigration continues, it is part of national policy. The integration of people is only apparent, in fact, Indonesians are a group completely apart and even if they are born here, they are perceived as foreigners. Many of them have weapons, ready to react violently. But the OPM and all other members of Papua society look for an absolutely peaceful way to confirm our right to self-determination, recognized by the United Nations and humiliated with the fake referendum in 1969. We have confidence in the ongoing change with new president Wahid. Our struggle, however, will never end.