

PREFACE

Flying Fish, Flying Tourists

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Fishermen from Biak, a small island off the coast of New Guinea, lure flying fish into traps with magic songs. “Facing to Java in the west, then Fiji in the east, then Australia in the south, and Japan in the north, the fishermen call out to their scaly relatives,” reports Danilyn Rutherford, a cultural anthropologist. Rutherford’s book about national belonging on Biak, *Raiding the Land of the Foreigners*, reveals surprising tricks used to catch the fish. Borrowing foreign phrases and inventing new words, the fishermen startle and amuse their airborne prey. A coy American catcall remembered from the Allied occupation of the island in 1944 — *Hey woman! Come on!* — captivates the fish with strange language. The fishermen extend invitations to a wild party. Buzzing along the surface of the water like miniature bomber planes, the shiny fish veer off their flight paths and into the fishermen’s canoes. Ashore the fishermen reveal their bait and switch: the flying fish, honored guests at a lively feast, are roasted whole and eaten.

Flying tourists, like flying fish, are also courted by Biak performers. In the mid-1990s, Indonesia’s national airline, Garuda, flew a regular route from Los Angeles to Jakarta via Honolulu, Biak, and Bali. At midnight local time, the jet made an hour-long fueling stop on Biak’s runway. By predictable routine, groups of bewildered transnational travelers were deposited in a tiny airport transit lounge. The tourists functioned as bait, drawing crowds of Biak villagers to the glass airport windows. “Briefly detained on their weekly migration,” writes Rutherford, the tourists “were also the fish.”¹

In June 1994 I unexpectedly found myself in this waiting room as I was en route to be a high-school exchange student in Indonesia. Biak was dark beyond the glow of the airport lights. Sweet fumes from clove cigarettes hung in the air. Posters depicting indigenous people wearing penis gourds and



West Papua in a global context. In the eyes of cartographers, New Guinea is shaped like a cassowary, a large flightless bird endemic to the island. The tail end of the cassowary is the independent country of Papua New Guinea (PNG). A straight line along 141° east longitude separates PNG from West Papua, the half of the island under Indonesian control. The bird's head is in West Papua. Biak is the small northernmost island in the bay above the bird's neck. *Map by Damond Kyllö.*

vibrant bird of paradise feathers adorned the walls. Dancing in grass skirts and performing songs for the international travelers, a local string band replicated idyllic images of the Pacific islands. After the music concluded, I was ushered back into the plane and whisked away to Java, the center of power in Indonesia—an archipelago of some 17,500 islands that stretches east from Biak for over three thousand miles. Over the next six months, I attended high school in one of Java's sprawling cities and picked up the ability to speak the Indonesian language. Still, this unexpected airport encounter lingered in my memory.

Biak is part of West Papua, the half of New Guinea under Indonesian control. European and American adventurers have long traveled to West Papua hoping to discover people living outside of history, tribes supposedly living in the Stone Age.² The Biak string band that greeted me at the airport was clearly playing to this timeless ideal. Rutherford's work later led



A man from the Mee tribe in the traditional dress of highland West Papua. *Photograph by Eben Kirksey.*

me to understand that the performers were trying some bait-and-switch magic of their own during the nightly refueling stops—secretly laying the groundwork for a surprising trap.³ Tourists expecting a tranquil paradise, or perhaps an encounter with Stone Age peoples, are routinely shocked to discover a military occupation beyond the airport gates.

The people of West Papua first raised their independence banner, the Morning Star flag, on December 1, 1961. At the time they were Dutch colonial subjects, lured by the dreams of national freedom then sweeping the planet. Two weeks later the Indonesian military invaded and began what was arguably genocide.⁴ During the coming decades of Indonesian occupation, thousands of indigenous West Papuans were killed in bombing raids, displaced by military operations, subjected to arbitrary detention, executed, or “disappeared.”⁵ Forced sterilization campaigns and neglect of basic public health programs resulted in slower, perhaps more insidious, declines in West Papuan populations.⁶

Few outsiders can distinguish Papua New Guinea, the neighboring coun-

try that is familiar to anyone who has taken an introductory anthropology course, from West Papua. Officially known as Irian Jaya, until the name was changed in 2000, this seemingly remote place easily slips out of geographic memory.⁷ With similar conflicts raging in other parts of the globe—Tibet, Palestine, and Darfur—West Papuans have had difficulty in getting the international community to take notice. The reaction of many people upon hearing about yet another underreported and asymmetrical war is to simply turn away.⁸ As a result, West Papuan activists have become savvy at capturing the attention of tourists and other visiting foreigners. The dancers at the airport were the first of a long line of West Papuans who grabbed hold of my imagination with surprising images, actions, and dreams. Years later, when I set out to study West Papua's independence movement, I was drawn into a struggle for freedom that I was just coming to understand. I found myself starting to expect the unexpected.

Only a handful of West Papua's 263 distinct language groups have been studied by cultural anthropologists in long-term ethnographic research projects.⁹ This book does not claim either the depth of these localized studies or the thoroughness of a historical account based on the study of a definitive archive. Rather, it traces ideas about freedom, ideas contained in the Indonesian word *merdeka* (free, independent, liberated), as they moved through time and among West Papuan cultural groups.¹⁰ This book charts the contours of West Papua's independence movement as it gained ground over a ten-year period, from 1998 to 2008, and beyond. What follows is not a monograph with pretensions to completeness. Instead I offer partial perspectives, a story of compromises, situated within multiple entangled worlds.

Like the Biak fishermen who appropriated the catcalls of the Allied troops, I have borrowed words and ideas from others. This book is intertextual, a fusion of multiple different stories. Conversations with the scholarly literature—meditations on timely debates in anthropology, cultural studies, and political theory—appear as a subtext throughout the book in expansive footnotes.¹¹ My own observations—as a transit passenger, as a bystander at Indonesian military massacres, and as an advocate who accompanied West Papuan activists in political meetings—serve as a route into published materials, obscure historical documents, and spoken testimony.¹² I deploy multiple genres and narrative forms: figurative indigenous parables alongside literalist accounts of history, personal memoir alongside ethnographic description. The result is an unconventional anthropological

study, a multisited ethnography, about people and political formations in motion.¹³

Indigenous leaders, visionaries, and ordinary people let me record their tales. Over the course of my research, I conducted more than four hundred interviews, mostly in the Indonesian language and a creole slang called Logat Papua.¹⁴ Some stories I heard will be familiar to anyone who follows daily news reports from other conflict zones—stories about torture, about U.S. government support for a military occupation, and about aspirations for independence. Other stories surprised me. I learned about a government campaign of terror initiated by “Mrs. Dracula” and about how my ancestors, the whites, stole the magic of modernity.¹⁵ Indigenous activists used images of inequality and terror as well as figures of hope—of multiple messiahs and promised lands—to probe the bounds of realism and realistic possibility.¹⁶

Amid campaigns of state violence, West Papuans embraced the sort of hope that arises only in times of complete hopelessness.¹⁷ People from all walks of life searched future horizons for signs of coming transformations.¹⁸ At the same time, indigenous activists began to find small cracks in the architecture of power. They began to secure financing from multinational corporations, political support from foreign governments, and concessions from the Indonesian occupiers. Studying the strategic engagements of West Papuans and listening to their remarkable dreams, I developed an argument about freedom in entangled worlds. In short, wedding the strategy of collaboration with an expansive imagination opens up surprising opportunities in the field of historical possibility.