West Papua:
Violence and oppression against musicians in forgotten conflict

With human rights observers and foreign media banned from working in West Papua, a ‘forgotten conflict’ of what some Papuans term ‘Indonesian occupation’ has been off the international radar. During decades Papuan protest musicians have been oppressed, censored and even killed in this conflict, reports Clara Moksha.

By Clara Moksha

West Papua is the western side of the island of New Guinea. West Papuans share the island with their Papua New Guinean neighbours. The arbitrary north–south border line demarcates the former Dutch and British colonies dividing the island in two – “like a piece of cake,” as Benny Wenda, musician and West Papuan independence leader in exile, describes it:

“We are the same people. We are Melanesian.”

West Papuan musicians often associate themselves with this broad Melanesian culture, sharing in the dance, ukuleles, tupa snake skin drums and four part harmonies of other Pacific islands, but the freedom to express their cultures and music which their fellow islanders enjoy, is completely contrasting.
Three consecutive colonisations
To understand the current situation of the Papuan musicians, you must know about the island’s history and why Papuans are under pressure. During the 16th century the Portuguese invaded West Papua declaring it ‘Terra das Papuas’ – ‘Land of the curly hairs’. The Dutch then drove the Portuguese out and took control of what they called ‘Irian Jaya’.

In 1963, West Papua was then declared an independent nation. The new nation was encouraged by the Dutch to create its own flag and national anthem, and Papuans were supposedly to be trained by government officials in Holland to prepare them for self-government. But these future leaders are still in Holland today, living in exile, unable to return. So what went wrong?

Indonesia, seeing the opportunity to exploit West Papua’s natural resources, invaded the island later that same year, in 1963, and then six years later carried out, under UN supervision, a notorious ‘Act of Free Choice’ known to most of the Papuan population and human rights observers as the ‘Act of NO choice’.

Some 30,000 Tentara National Indonesia troops were shipped into West Papua in 1969 when this supposed referendum were to take place, whereby 1,026 ‘representatives’ were chosen to vote on whether West Papua should remain independent or become part of Indonesia.

Jacob Rumbiak, a Papuan musician and human rights advocate recollects: “My uncle was locked in barracks for six weeks. They were told ‘If you vote to join Indonesia, you will be safe. But if you vote to separate from Indonesia, your tongue will be cut out and you will be killed’.”

UN officials oversaw the referendum, and chose to turn a blind eye to the way Indonesia obtained power over West Papua.

Media blackout during genocide
Since being under Indonesian jurisdiction, West Papua has been off the international radar with human rights observers and foreign media banned from working there. West Papua, as prominent barrister and writer, Charles Foster stated, is a ‘forgotten conflict’.

Papuans have been calling for independence and freedom of expression for the past 50 years. However, the violence and oppression has continued to this day. It is estimated that over 400,000 West Papuans have been killed since Indonesia occupied their land, with NGOs and academics documenting and exposing this to the international community, calling on the UN to recognise it as genocide.

Censorship
A prison sentence of up to 25 years has been given to Papuans simply for holding their symbol of independence, the Morning Star flag. Musicians and cultural advocates have also been targeted by the regime over these years, and as a lot of musicians are themselves political activists and most Papuans are themselves musicians, as music is part of life in West Papua, all sectors of Papuan society have been affected.

As in other parts of the world, there are no actual music censorship laws, or transparency in
what is deemed ‘illegal’ and what is not. However singing anything about the desire for independence and freedom of expression, is seen as a threat and as ‘makar’, treason, by the Indonesian state which can lead to a long imprisonment, often without a fair trial.

Or, if you are very popular in West Papua and your success and music is seen as too much of a threat, stirring up too much imagination and pride in the people, then you could be assassinated.

Arnold Ap
This is what happened to legendary Papuan musician, anthropologist, writer, and cultural advocate Arnold Ap. He was killed in 1983 by Indonesian security forces, but his music still lives on in his people. The musician is celebrated throughout West Papua and everyone knows of Ap and his songs and his role as promoter of Papuan identity.

Arnold Ap was a driving force behind the popular call for recognition of Papuan cultures, their languages, art, song, music, dance, narrative histories, and the preservation of these through his post as curator at the Cenderawasih University Museum, in the capital Jayapura.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Arnold Ap ignited interest in his own culture from Biak Island and those of the mainland, collecting recordings of songs in the 200 languages that inhabit the valleys, riverbanks and coasts of his homeland. With fellow Mambesak band member, Sam Kapissus, Ap collected materials from across the country for his ethnographic work, writing papers on many aspects of Papuan culture.

He wanted to foster a sense of pride in being Papuan, in his culture and identity which Indonesia was – and still is – trying viciously hard to suppress and eliminate. Recordings of Arnold Ap’s music are precious resources. His albums are often smuggled through military checkpoints and across mountains with battery powered cassette players and used to educate the next generation on their music and freedom songs.

In 1983 Arnold Ap was arrested along with another band member, Eddie Mofu. Three months later they were both dead.

This is the last song Ap composed. He recorded it on a cassette player whilst in prison, then wrapped it in an envelope and gave it to a guard to give to his wife. The song talks about himself but also it is a picture of Papua. Papua is like an eagle hunted by Indonesian military and killed, as John Rumbiak describes.

This life is a mystery

In this reality
I’m imprisoned in my world
The only thing that I long for
The only thing there is
I’m waiting for nothing less
than freedom
Alas the sad eagle,
that eagle it was hunted and killed
Musicians in exile
On meeting political activists and musicians in West Papua it is difficult not to notice the array of musical influences and inspiration emblazoned on their t-shirts. Reggae is a big influence, and Papuans draw inspiration from the music and lyrics of shared struggles. However, being a musician in West Papua is not easy, and there are those that have managed to escape the country and live in exile, making music accessible to the outside world from elsewhere.

One such musician is Benny Wenda. His village was bombed by Indonesian troops when he was a child. His auntie was raped in front of him. He later became a political activist and leader of Demmak, the Koteka Tribal Assembly in West Papua, working for independence from Indonesia.

Wenda was arrested and put on trial with a possible 25-year prison sentence, accused of a crime he did not commit. After being badly beaten he somehow managed to escape, cross the PNG border and get to the United Kingdom where he now lives with his wife Maria and their six children.

Maria wrote songs whilst Benny was in prison and they now tour the UK with their band, The Lani Singers, playing these same songs in their native Lani Language, telling as many people as they can about what is happening to their people.

Benny Wenda also set up the Free West Papua Campaign on arriving in the UK, and this has grown in momentum. Benny uses his music as a way of talking about his experiences of living under occupation, and through it he can connect to his people and ancestors in West Papua.

The Lani Singers debut album, ‘Ninalik Ndawi’ – ‘Freedom Songs’, has been heard by people all over Papua and the Wenda’s are famous back home. However, the CD would be a dangerous possession to be caught with in West Papua, as the cover has the Morning Star flag emblazoned on it and the songs reflect the political situation.

Controversially an Interpol red notice was issued for Benny Wenda’s arrest last year and remains active despite increasing criticism from Fair Trials International and other civil liberties groups. This is seen as an attempt by Indonesia to stall Wenda’s campaign by preventing him from travelling and carrying on with his work internationally.

Connecting through music
Donny Roem with his two young brothers and 42 other refugees crossed the Arafura Sea from West Papua to Australia in an outrigger canoe in 2006 and have since recorded music with political activist and human rights advocate Jacob Rumbiak for the film ‘Strange Birds in Paradise’.

For Donny Roem, music is essential to his Papuan identity:

“I want to make music all my life. For me personally, music has been a great tool for telling the world about West Papua. Music can unite us, and this is the reason Indonesia doesn’t like it at all. They want us to be apart, they want us to hate each other and music has been great for us,” he says.
Roam’s songs, like all Papuan music are banned from being sung publicly and on the radio in his homeland. However, people will always sing. When Roem and the other refugees were on their journey to Australia, they were singing all the way and when they got to Australia and were held in the detention centre, they were still singing.

Now residents of Australia, unable to return to their homeland, song can be a powerful remembrance and creative reflection. Roem and other Papuan refugees joined George Telek, a popular Papua New Guinean musician, on stage at the Sing–Sing concert in Australia, to sing Telek’s ‘Freedom for West Papua’ in his native Pidgin. Telek’s support from neighbouring Papua New Guinea is significant, when politicians from his side of the border have been slow to react to the genocide in West Papua.

Arnold Ap’s family, forced to leave West Papua after his death, now live in Holland. His sons, Oridek and Manduser are continuing their fathers legacy, re-recording his songs and composing new ones, and tour the Netherlands with their Papuan Dance troupe, named after Ap’s own band, Mambesak.

Oridek: “I love to make music and try to write songs, because for me it is a way to express myself, it is a way to strengthen my soul and my spirit. Mostly I sing songs in my native Papuan language, because these songs always take me to my homeland. But I also love to sing English songs, as I grew up with music from Bob Marley, Lucky Dube, Alpha Blondy and Bob Dylan.”

Black Brothers, a West Papuan band whose music and liberation songs also include influences from reggae and political elements inspired by the Black Power movement, are now working from Papua New Guinea because of the attention they received from the Indonesian security forces.

Music in West Papua today
Despite the intense oppression, music making still continues within West Papua. From the mountains to the cities, songs are sung within homes, out in the gardens and on journeys, whilst walking across mountains and around the fire. Music is life in West Papua, it is not a separate entity.

There are many cultural groups playing traditional music and youth programmes set up by activists to engage the younger generation in their culture and history through music. As they have only known a West Papua under Indonesian occupation and experienced treatment as a second class citizen, so the importance of creating self-respect and understanding that things could be different, amongst the youth is tantamount to change.

Victor Yeimo, international spokesperson for the West Papua National Committee, says: “The moments that express the suffering of the Papuan people do so through music, song and dance. Music and dance flows in all activities of the lives of Papuans. If you go to the villages, you will find a song full of life, song laments, the beauty of nature worship song or songs of homage to ancestors who were killed by the invaders.”

Band of human rights activists
The band Black Paradise, who is based and works in West Papua, is a cultural group composed of young people trying to continue what was pioneered by Mambesak. Most of the
members of this group are also human rights activists working for the human rights group ELSHAM, based in Jayapura.

Working to defend human rights cannot be separated from their music. Members of Black Paradise have journeyed to Timika, a town under the shadow of gold and copper mining giant Freeport. The company strictly protected by the military, has caused severe environmental damage and created a great number of social conflicts.

While in Timika members of Black Paradise investigated human rights abuses, and also collected traditional songs of the area. "One example is ‘Akai Mbipae’ – a song that tells of the pain created by the mining giant’s presence, told by a mother who is crying because people have damaged the environment" says Yeimo.

**Songs in the highlands**

Sometimes spontaneously composed, songs can have their own journeys around a fixed melody, others are songs of the ancestors passed down through countless generations. Lyrics reveal the intensity of life under military occupation, recall events and experiences so they are never forgotten.

A group of extremely brave women right up in the highlands told me how they were raped by Indonesian military whilst walking a two day journey to the nearest town. These women did not want their husbands to know for fear they would go straight to ambush the nearest Indonesian military post and get themselves killed, so when the men came back into their homes, the women stopped talking and broke into song:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We get stared at in towns and threatened} \\
\text{One day our dream will come true} \\
\text{Now we are singing} \\
\text{But one day the bullet will eat us} \\
\text{We want to go to school but we don’t} \\
\text{Maybe our children will go} \\
\text{We want to cross a road} \\
\text{but from each direction are police or military} \\
\text{That is why we are here} \\
\text{We already gave a message to you guys} \\
\text{You arrived at the right time}
\end{align*}
\]

In another village, men were singing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Some people have already died} \\
\text{But they died for us} \\
\text{For our ancestors} \\
\text{They have shed blood} \\
\text{for the next generation} \\
\text{This is a song for the ancestors}
\end{align*}
\]

Out of earshot of the nearest military post, these songs remain safe. But the singers take an immense risk. Hence, few formal settings allow for concerts of West Papuan music organised by Papuans themselves. Instead, there are those organised by the Indonesian authorities as
propaganda tools to attract tourists and promote their ideals of a Papuan culture within Indonesia.

**Fake cultural festival**

*The Baliem Valley Festival* is just that. Ironically an annual celebration of Indonesia’s Independence Day, it takes place in the highland town of Wamena. It is essentially a tourist stunt during which Papuans in traditional dress perform their dances and war cries for an audience of government officials and visitors, whilst the Indonesian military march alongside them flying the Indonesian flag.

This farce promoting Indonesia’s cultural diversity through a public show of the ‘tribes of the Baliem Valley’ is far from reality and a far cry from what Papuan musicians want to be associated with.

Australian musician David Bridie said: “You are not going to suppress a popular resistance movement by banning singing.”

West Papuans will never stop singing. So there is hope.

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**About the author**

Clara Moksha is an anthropologist, filmmaker and photographer based in Brighton, UK. For more information concerning West Papua, The Lani Singers, and the Free West Papua Campaign, contact Clara Moksha on e-mail: claramoksha@yahoo.co.uk

**More information about West Papua and its music:**

- Benny Wenda, musician and independence leader: [www.bennywenda.org](http://www.bennywenda.org)
- The Lani Singers: [www.thelanisingers.com](http://www.thelanisingers.com)
- Pacific Music label, with Black Paradise and Telek: [www.wantokmusik.org](http://www.wantokmusik.org)
- West Papua and its independence movement: [www.freewestpapua.org](http://www.freewestpapua.org)
- Film on the Independence Movement: [www.forgottenbirdofparadise.net](http://www.forgottenbirdofparadise.net)
- Songlines of West Papua in Wild by Jay Griffiths: [www.jaygriffiths.com](http://www.jaygriffiths.com)
Photos
Above: Benny Wenda speaking at Refugee Week, explaining why his people need independence. (Photo by Clara Moksha)

Top of article:
1: Arnold Ap's family, Mambesak dancers, holding his picture (Family's own photo)
2+3: Musicians and freedom fighters in the highlands of West Papua (Photo: Clara Moksha)
4: Maria Wenda performing with the Lani Singers at Refugee Week (Photo: Clara Moksha)

Map of West Papua
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