

**GARIN NUGROHO'S WEST PAPUAN FILMS:
THE 'WEST PAPUAN SPRING' AND ITS AFTERMATH¹**

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In this paper I will explore two films made by Indonesian director Garin Nugroho in Jayapura, the capital of West Papua over the years 2000 to 2002. The first of these films is the documentary/essay film *Icon: A Cultural Map* ('Aikon: Sebuah Peta Budaya'), filmed in May–June 2000, but completed only in September 2002. The second is the feature given the English release title *Bird-Man Tale*, but entitled in Indonesia *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* (literally 'I Wish to Kiss You Once Only'), and released in Jakarta in February 2003. The first of these films is about the West Papuan Congress of May –June 2000, a moment of extraordinary openness for the West Papuans, and the culmination of what is known as the 'West Papuan Spring'. The second film, *Bird-Man Tale*, deals with its aftermath, the repression that followed in West Papua. In the years since Suharto was forced to step down, the media in Indonesia, both the press and film and television, have achieved a considerable openness, particularly compared with the New Order period. But there are still some topics in Indonesia that cannot be freely discussed, with all the possible issues being squarely laid

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upon the table. One of these is West Papua. For this reason, these two films, which in effect complement each other, need to be better known than they are. Additionally these films are the culmination of Nugroho's concerns about the simultaneous exploitation and repression of regions by the Indonesian State, especially under the influence of Suharto, a concern first manifested in Nugroho's films of the mid 1990s.

In film in Indonesia Garin Nugroho has been the director most sustainedly involved in politically engaged filmmaking in the last years of the New Order, and in the early and later Post Suharto 'Reformasi' period. Nugroho has worked in both features and documentary. Apart from his first feature, *Love on a Slice of Bread* ('Cinta dalam Sepotong Roti', 1991), a new wave style road movie about a yuppie couple travelling across Java, all his features have had something to say about the New Order Indonesian State. With *Letter for an Angel* ('Surat Untuk Bidadari', 1994), set on the island of Sumba in Eastern Indonesia, Nugroho opens up, in an indirect and allegorical way, issues of the marginalisation of the regions in Indonesia, in his view a result of the Javacentric centralising tendencies of the New Order State. A year later, with *And the Moon Dances* ('Bulan Tertusuk Ilalang', literally 'The Moon Pierced by Wild Grass'), he explores Javanese culture itself, which he later describes, with reference to this film, as, 'encompassing at the same time refinement and cruelty, softness and tyranny, and a beauty based in feudalism'.² The central character in *Letter for an Angel* is an idealistic 12 years old boy, with an inquiring mind and a personality antipathetic to falsehood, caught in a no-man's land between tribal warfare and State sponsored thuggery. In *And the Moon Dances* the central characters are young adults, engaging with Javanese tradition in the confined milieu of a central Javanese music school. In each film, critique of the Javacentric State is muted, though present at a deep level: in the Sumbanese schoolboy's rejection of his school books that illustrate life only in terms of Javanese images and characters; and in the demands for conformity placed on the young people in the music school, and the intangible political machinations that surround the school itself, located in the Solo court. Eighteen months after Suharto's resignation, Nugroho made the first Indonesian film that deals explicitly with the massacres of 1965 from the point of view of the communist victims, and those not deluded by the military propaganda at the time, *The Poet* ('Puisi Tak Terkuburkan', literally 'Poetry Cannot be Buried').

² Statement by Nugroho in the voice-over at the opening of his essay film, *My Family, My Films and My Nation* (1998).

Nugroho's work in features is complemented by a small number of lesser known, but exceptionally powerful and revelatory documentaries and essay films, mainly about the marginalised in Indonesia, made at a time when a tradition of political documentary and current affairs in Indonesia simply did not exist. *Water and Romi* ('Air dan Romi', 1991) deals with conditions of slum life around the polluted river systems in Jakarta. Reportedly there was an attempt by the Indonesian security organisation, BAKIN (The Body for Coordinating Intelligence) to prevent the film being screened publicly.³ *Kancil's Story about Independence* ('Dongeng Kancil Tentang Kemerdekaan', 1995) explores the life of street kids in Jogjakarta, and led to the making of a feature with some of the same children, two years later, *Leaf on a Pillow* ('Daun di Atas Bantal', 1998). The essay film, *My Family, My Films and My Nation*, made six months after Suharto stepped down, articulates Nugroho's relation to his own films up to that time, making explicit political meanings latent or hidden within them, particularly their view of the Indonesian nation during the New Order. The most recent essay film, *Icon: A Cultural Map* ('Aikon: Sebuah Peta Budaya', 2002), presents a view of the aspirations of the marginalised peoples of West Papua. None of these documentaries has been shown widely within Indonesia, the first two being funded by sources external to Indonesia (the Goethe Institute and NHK, Japanese television), the last two being funded from within Garin's own workshop itself, and their distribution in Indonesia largely limited to campuses and to film festivals, even after the end of the New Order.⁴

Icon: A Cultural Map is a combination documentary and essay film on the celebrated West Papuan Congress of May–June 2000. For West Papuans, the Papuan Congress, held in Jayapura from 29 May to 4 June 2000, was an historic event. Its very name was a deliberate echo of the first Papuan Congress, held in 1961, at a time when West Papua was still under the administration of its Dutch colonial masters, and before it became part of Indonesia. Subsequently, West Papua was incorporated into Indonesia in two phases: the 1962 United Nations 'New York Agreement', which placed West Papua in its transitional phase temporarily under the provisional administration of Indonesia, and the so-called 'Act of Free

³ According to Nugroho, some agents in BAKIN recommended the Betacam master of *Water and Romi* be destroyed. Garin Nugroho, personal communication to the author, Melbourne, 13 June 1992.

⁴ These four documentaries are shortly to be released by Between Three Worlds Video and DVD, Monash Asia Institute, on a DVD entitled: *Indonesia at the Margins: Political Documentaries and Essay Films by Garin Nugroho 1991-2002*.

Choice' held seven years later, in 1969, when a highly select group of West Papuans, subject to intense pressure and education from Indonesian administrators, were to decide whether West Papua should become part of Indonesia.⁵ The West Papuan Congress of May–June 2000 voted to reject that incorporation, the Congress resolving that the course of Papuan history should be corrected. In other words, the Congress voiced disagreement with the integration of West Papua into Indonesia. The 2000 Congress was attended by a total of 20,000 people, from West Papua, from Indonesia as a whole, and from overseas.⁶ It had received support from Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who gave its convenor Theys Eluay, President of the West Papuan Presidium, one billion Indonesian rupiah to organise it.⁷ It was the climax of a range of new developments that occurred in West Papua in the two years after the fall of Suharto. Indeed, in February 1999 a delegation of West Papuans to Jakarta, known as the team of 100, had made a request to President Habibie that West Papua be given independence from Indonesia. Subsequently, on 31 December 1999, the next Indonesian President, Abdurrahman Wahid, during his two day symbolic visit to Jayapura to coincide with the dawn of the new millennium, had announced to West Papuan leaders that henceforth the Indonesian province of 'Irian Jaya' could be known as 'Papua', the name preferred by the indigenous inhabitants, a decision that was eventually passed by the Indonesian parliament.⁸ In the two year period between Suharto's fall in May 1998, and the May–June 2000 West Papuan Congress, there had indeed been a cultural and political revival of the West Papuans, widely known as the 'Papuan Spring'. The Congress proceeded with the participation even of high profile members of the outlawed OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka – Free Papua Movement), without the intervention of the Indonesian armed forces. This was certainly the most open period in West Papua since the takeover by the Indonesians

⁵ For a more detailed account of the Congress resolutions, see, Richard Chauvel, 'Where Nationalisms Collide', *Inside Indonesia* 67, July-September 2001, p. 6-7.

⁶ Agus Sumule, 'Inside the Special Autonomy Bill', *Inside Indonesia* 67, July-September 2001, p. 22.

⁷ Theys Eluay had in the 1960s been a supporter of integration with Indonesia, had taken part in the 'Act of Free Choice' in 1969, and later became a member of the provincial parliament, representing the ruling Indonesian party set up by Suharto, Golkar. He only became a supporter of West Papuan independence after Suharto stepped down as president. See, At Ipenburg, 'The life and death of Theys Eluay: the murdered Papuan leader was an ambiguous figure', *Inside Indonesia* 70, April-June 2002.

⁸ Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid: Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002, p. 293. Wahid believed that the only way to solve conflict was through negotiation and dialogue, and so had emphasized to the Papuans that discussion of independence would be tolerated on condition that it did not lead to violence.

in the early 1960s, and the only time in which many West Papuans felt they could have a say in their own future.

Icon: A Cultural Map documents aspects of this congress, particularly emphasising the way in which the Congress allowed for the re-expression of the culture of the West Papuans, a culture which, as shown in the interviews in the film, had been subject to repression, and the people to discrimination. The film does not report the conference resolutions, but shows grass roots support for independence among West Papuans, especially striking being one brief section of vox pop interviews, dealing directly with independence (a section of the film entitled: *Icon: 'M for Merdeka'*), where each of the West Papuans interviewed expresses a strong preference for full independence from Indonesia. As *Icon: A Cultural Map* continues to gather momentum, with a stirring display, as a full screen icon, of the banned West Papuan flag, the Morning Star, accompanied at this point by the Cassowary Battalion song (described earlier as a song of struggle, a song of the dream of independence) it moves from documentary to essay film, as Nugroho, narrating the film himself, develops a series of reflections on the semiotic implications of the symbols re-emerging at the Congress (the importance, as Papuan symbols, of earth and water, the cassowary bird and the *koteka* or penis gourd), after many years of suppression of the culture under the Suharto regime, and the way in which this rediscovery of their old symbols was exemplary for the whole of Indonesia.

Nugroho thus sees the Papua Congress—with its display of numerous icons and rituals, and its atmosphere of relative openness—as a kind of semiotic display, which he in turn interprets as a dynamic symbol of Indonesia undergoing crisis and—hopefully—change, produced by genuine openness and fast changing values. The West Papuan Congress is, then, a dynamic symbol of processes which other parts of Indonesia should emulate:

The history of Indonesia shows that Suharto for 32 years gave birth to a model, an ideal, a concept of value about what is called modern Indonesia. Suharto created Indonesia as an icon he would like to see. Indonesia became a giant factory with the aim only of development; and all the icons of this multicultural country had to be made uniform. ... All the legal systems, the systems of control, the educational system and agrarian laws (including a variety of regional customary land laws) were made uniform. Any icon that was a sign of resistance or which could not express the images desired by the regime were thrown away. ... What we see now is that, when reform is

underway and expression is given wide room, suddenly the icons previously taken out of the Indonesian iconic map have again entered the map.⁹

Both the brevity and the stirring fulsomeness of this 21 minute film emulate aspects of the actual West Papuan experience. The West Papuan Spring, of the two years after Suharto fell, was intense, but short lived. Within days of the conclusion of the Congress, an urgent meeting had been held in the Indonesian Department of Internal Affairs to discuss how to contain the emerging West Papuan situation.¹⁰ Within months there were reports that the army in Jayapura had been given *carte blanche* to take whatever action they considered necessary to curtail the aspirations of the Papuans. In late November 2000, Theys Eluay was arrested and imprisoned, on a charge that at a gathering at his home on November 12, 2000, he had called for independence. Although released into home arrest after some four months of detention, in March 2001, Eluay was murdered later that same year, in November 2001, by members of Kopassus (Indonesian Army Special Forces Command), instructed to ‘persuade’ him to no longer support independence.

Filmed at the time of the congress, *Icon: A Cultural Map* was only completed more than two years later, in September 2002, at a time when Nugroho was editing a feature he had recently filmed in Jayapura, *Bird-Man Tale*, released commercially in Jakarta in February 2003. Nugroho’s feature, *Bird-Man Tale*, deals with the 18 months aftermath to this Congress, commencing with footage from the May–June 2000 Congress, which some of the film’s fictional characters attend, and concluding at the time of Eluay’s death and subsequent funeral in late 2001. Ostensibly the film is about a 15 year old West Papuan boy (Arnold) and his obsession with an Indonesian woman who is not Papuan (played by the actress Lulu Tobing, of North Sumatran descent, her family name indicating they are probably from the predominantly Christian, ethnically Batak region). Arnold repeatedly sees this non-Papuan woman weeping, first seeing her when descends the gang plank of an inter-island ferry that has arrived in Jayapura, and then, subsequently, from a distance, when she prays at a Catholic church, where Arnold also worships, and where he works part-time as a cleaner after school. The film climaxes when Arnold invades her lodgings at night, to return a rosary she has left

⁹ Garin Nugroho, voice over to *Icon: A Cultural Map* (2002), translation by the author.

¹⁰ See, Richard Chauvel, ‘The Backlash: Jakarta’s Secret Strategy to Deal with Papuan Nationalism’, *Inside Indonesia* 67, July-September 2001. Online at: <http://insideindonesia.org/content/view/452/29/> (accessed 3 June 2008).

behind, but doing so in a way that precipitates an encounter with this woman whose name we never learn, but who, like Arnold, is a Christian in predominantly Muslim Indonesia. Being questioned as to his motives for his unsolicited entry into her lodgings at night, Arnold responds that he wanted to see her face close up, and eventually tells her, seriously, just before he leaves, that he wished to kiss her tears.

Other characters in the film include Minus, a school friend about the same age as Arnold, whose father is one of the disappeared West Papuans (possibly a member of the OPM), and Sonya, a neighbour, who is quietly keen on Arnold, but critical of his interest in the ‘the non-black woman’ (‘perempuan yang bukan kulit hitam’ – the woman who is not black skinned). In one extraordinarily painful scene in a confessional, Sonya declares to the priest (played by the Javanese, Adi Kurdi) that she hates the way the word black is always linked, in whatever language, to ideas of negativity and evil, whether in books or on television, and confesses that this had led her to have thoughts of enmity. Throughout the film Minus keeps his spirits up by whistling, claiming that he can summon up the ghosts of the disappeared through his capacity to whistle. Also important in the film are Arnold’s parents, whose home is ransacked by thugs probably connected with the Indonesian army, and particularly Arnold’s father, a teacher of Papuan traditions and folklore at the local high school. The father, a supporter of Eluay, goes into hiding at the time of Eluay’s arrest, concealing himself in a forest on a hill overlooking the harbour, often wearing as camouflage the cassowary bird costume that he earlier wore at the Congress of May–June 2000. Additionally, there is a scene where young Papuans, demonstrating in support of Eluay at the time of his arrest, sing the Cassowary Battalion song, and display the West Papuan flag, the Morning Star, as they drive in a truck, until they are ambushed by pro-Indonesia toughs.

There are a number of important enigmas in the film, facts that we never know, about which narrative information is withheld from both the audience and from some of the characters. We never know the name of the non-Papuan, Indonesian woman, and we are never told why she is weeping, nor for what she might be weeping. This lack of information about the causes of her behaviour gives the film a certain tension, commonly found in art cinema, where withholding of information is more acceptable than in popular cinema. Nevertheless, despite the mystery, there are some aspects to the presentation of this unknown woman that we can isolate. Although she is from Sumatra, probably via Jakarta, we never see her associate with non-Papuan Indonesians. Her lodgings are over the water, on a nest of piers on a farther reach of the Jayapura coastal area, where Papuans live. The church where she worships is attended largely by West Papuans, even though the priest is a Javanese. She

rarely speaks to anyone, often appears in isolation, and seems to be mourning, preoccupied with the loss of someone. Often she sits in her lodgings, reading the Bible, and obsessively drawing short parallel lines on the wall of her room, which she then crosses out. At one point, she leaves a purple ceremonial shawl—of a kind used by Batak people as a sign of respect in gift giving—on a tree over-looking the harbour. Some time later, wearing a white hood which partially covers her head, she, possibly inadvertently, joins in a ceremony with Papuans dressed in traditional costume, where they dance and chant around the shawl they have taken and laid out on the ground. However the exact nature of her connections to the Papuans is not revealed.

Also contributing significantly to the distinctive experience of the film are the lengthy scenes of religious worship by the Catholic community at the church. Although, at the church, later in the film, Arnold affirms to the priest that Christ's sufferings on the cross are now less real to him than is the weeping of the mysterious young woman, religious experience is part of the experience of these Jayapura teenagers. Words from the Old Testament 'Song of Songs' permeate Sonya's meditations and her teenage diary, giving poetic expression in the film to the intensity of her adolescent experience, and the changes occurring in her, but also to the experience and aspirations of others in the film. In the church where they worship (in fact the Christ the King Catholic Cathedral in Jayapura) singing plays an important role as a devotional practice in the services. Indeed the church service is experienced in the film, as it is in so many Christian churches in Indonesia, primarily as intense ecstatic community singing. This kind of singing is echoed outside the church, in a number of scenes, such as where a young woman chants her sorrows beneath a large crucifix, displayed for all to see, high on a hill on an island in the Jayapura harbour. Catholicism, in particular, is also present in three confessional scenes that play a role in narrative development, where the main characters (the non-Papuan woman, Arnold, and Sonya) at different times describe their states of mind to the priest. The Muslim Nugroho has stated that he deliberately gave prominence in the film to Christianity and to an Indonesian Christian community, in order to challenge predominantly Muslim Indonesia with an encounter with religious difference.¹¹

Although the budget for the film, and security issues, allowed only for a shoot of two weeks in Jayapura, and although filmed cheaply, not on film but on Betacam video, *Bird-*

¹¹ See, Philip Cheah, 'It's About Loving the Other' (Interview), in Philip Cheah et al. (eds.): *And the Moon Dances: The Films of Garin*, Jogjakarta: PT Bentang Pustaka, 2004, p. 117-120.

Man Tale is visually rich with the remarkable colours created by the sea, the jungle and the sky in this hilly tropical equatorial region. It is also aurally remarkable in the distinctive sound design developed for the film, and this is due to the incorporation into the film of a variety of different kinds of traditional and popular music of contemporary Papua. There are scenes in the film that make use of traditional chanting and drumming, such as scenes at the Congress, and also the ceremony involving the shawl of the non-Papuan Indonesian woman; and there are also episodes showing a flute and percussion band parading in the street, a style of music deriving from Dutch times. But more frequently the film makes use of a more modern, syncretic, popular West Papuan music, music known as Mambesak, a blend of traditional and contemporary song, using guitars and various percussion instruments, often with a discernible gospel influence. The original Mambesak evolved in the 1970s and early 1980s through the work of Arnold Ap, musician, anthropologist and curator of the Papua Museum at the Cendrawasih University in Jayapura, who founded a music and folkloric group known as Mambesak (which means bird of paradise). Arnold Ap was murdered while in the custody of the Indonesian army in 1984.¹² Ap was disliked by the Indonesian authorities because he invested so much in the preservation and development of Papuan traditions, and eventually he came under suspicion for his sympathies and links with the OPM. In the second scene in the film, there is a song sung in the classroom, 'E Mambo Simbo', under the direction of Arnold's father, which is an adaptation of Mambesak music, thus linking Arnold's father to Arnold Ap. Many movements in contemporary Papuan music see their musical heritage in a direct line to Arnold Ap. The very concept of Mambesak has political connotations. In this way the sound design of the whole film, while enriching the film musically, with sounds both of joy and lament permeating a community, is also intended to carry historical references both to Ap's music, so disliked by Indonesian authorities in the early eighties, and to his murder.

Parallel to the story of Arnold in the course of the film are a series of media reports on the events involving Theys Eluay. In the pre-credit sequence to the film we see Arnold's father setting out for the May–June 2000 Congress, taking with him his cassowary costume, and subsequent footage shows Theys Eluay at the centre of Congress events. Half way through the film, Arnold's family are startled to see television reports of the first arrest of Theys Eluay, and of his subsequent imprisonment, and his parents summon Arnold from his

¹² The life work of Arnold Ap, and his death, are outlined in Robin Osborne, *Indonesia's Secret War: The Guerilla Struggle in Irian Jaya*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985, p. 148-154.

bedroom to witness what is on the television news. Later we have another television report, of the news of the finding of the body of Theys Eluay, in his abandoned car, off the road and just short of plummeting into a ravine. The film climaxes with Arnold's encounter with the non-Papuan Indonesian woman in her lodgings, but there is a second or parallel climax to the film, which is the huge and moving funeral for Theys Eluay, with shots of Papuans sitting on the roofs of houses to get a view of the funeral, and a river-like procession of people moving down a hill, as the coffin is taken to the burial site. The footage of the funeral itself is neither a reconstruction nor a television report, but actual footage filmed in shots evocatively framed by Nugroho's team (capturing the sense of the grief of a whole community), the team dispatched to film the funeral at Sentani, near Jayapura, jointly with Papuans earlier working with Nugroho, after news of Eluay's death came through, and before *Bird-Man Tale* had been made or even fully conceived. This moving footage is framed by scenes of Minus recovering the power to whistle (which he had earlier lost), and whistling as he looks as he looks out over the town. The funeral of Theys culminates with a large gathering of Papuans at night on a soccer field, and this shot dissolves to a shot of Minus whistling over the deserted field the next day, again whistling in an attempt to summon up the spirits of the disappeared.

To sum up, *Bird-Man Tale*, in the guise of a story of adolescent obsession, is a palimpsest of various time elements in the history of West Papua, and of various traditions and chronicles that compose its layers, living and dead, some layers more clearly visible than others in the film. While the film culminates with the funeral of Theys Eluay, the Mambesak music, foregrounded early in the film, invokes the spirit and the memory of Arnold Ap and the tradition of subterranean cultural resistance that re-emerged more openly with the 2000 Congress. Although never mentioned, the film's central character, the 15 year old Arnold, would have been born only a few years after his apparent namesake, the musician Arnold Ap, was murdered in 1984. This explains why his parents are so keen that young Arnold now be an informed witness to the unfolding of contemporary events, particularly the events involving Theys Eluay. Lines from the Biblical 'Song of Songs', heard repeatedly on the soundtrack as Sonya speaks them, articulate the feeling of ardour, potential fulfilment, and yet separation, that is the experience of many of the younger characters in the film, whose experience is always one of partial marginalisation. The pervasive music in the film, both in the church and elsewhere, also creates a duality of optimism and sorrow. The brightly respectful and optimistic flute and percussion band march down the road in the sun to display their continuing belief in the arrested Theys, but sit in quiet sadness in the shade at the news of his death. This leads us to ask the question as to the role of sorrow and mourning in the

film, and to ask again, why the non-Papuan Indonesian woman is always weeping? Nugroho has declined to give an explanation for this, saying that it was a decision of the whole creative team working on the film that her weeping should not be given character motivation, in order to challenge the audience to find their own explanation for her grief. He then remarks that there are photos from the Vietnam war that have elicited very strong impacts in those who viewed them, even when they knew little of their full circumstances.¹³

There is, however, one detail in the film which it is easy to miss, and about which I have never seen any comment. Next to the pattern of scrawlings and crossings out on the wall of the lodgings of this Batak woman, who is often seen reading the Bible, is a large inscription in blue: 'Yoh 4:18'. On reflection and investigation, this is undoubtedly a sign pointing us to the Gospel of St John, Verse 4: 18, lines which includes the words: 'You have no husband'. Is it possible then, that we are being asked to read from this, that the non-Papuan Indonesian woman is mourning for a West Papuan man, whom she has lost, and who is dead, possibly also one of the disappeared? Further to this, is it possible for a non-Papuan Indonesian to mourn so intensely for a Papuan? The film, in both the unresolved mysteries of its human dramas, and in its music, is a lamentation, an extended act of mourning, not so much for Theys Eluay, but for all West Papuans, who for a time Eluay represented, an act of mourning for the suppressed people of West Papua. *Bird-Man Tale* is the first feature film to have been made in West Papua about the lives of West Papuans, made with extensive cooperation with West Papuans. The film was premiered in West Papua, an occasion of celebration. Nugroho's first encounter with West Papua was the making of *Icon: A Cultural Map*. With the making of this subsequent feature, he has ensured that the organised repression of the West Papuan aspirations in the years since the Congress in 2000 is also recorded on film.

¹³ Nugroho's discussion of this point is found in his interview with Philip Cheah, 'It's About Loving the Other', in Cheah et al. (eds.), *And the Moon Dances: The Films of Garin*, p. 119.