

YABON-A SYMBOL FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM IN WEST PAPUA

Louise Byrne, December 2001

The Age August 17, 2001

Freed porker, not free Papua, hogs limelight



Pork walk: Yabon the pig with his owner, West Papuan independence fighter Jacob Rumbiak. Picture: AAP

By ROYAL ABBOTT

A pet pig stole the limelight yesterday as a West Papuan freedom fighter and Australian church and trade union leaders called for federal support for the indigenous independence movement.

At a meeting in the Victorian Parliament, the leaders urged Prime Minister John Howard, who is making his first official visit to Indonesia, to back the movement for self-government in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. Independence advocates refer to the province as West Papua.

Roman Catholic Bishop Hilton Doaklin chaired the gathering, which drew together officials from the ACTU and Victorian Trades Hall Council as well as representatives from all main Australian churches and a sizeable number of ethnic groups.

At the close of the formalities, attention shifted to Yabon the pig, the companion of West Papuan independence fighter Jacob Rumbiak.

For five weeks, Mr Rumbiak has shared his St Kilda flat with Yabon as a reminder of home while he tries to muster Australian support for self-determination in his homeland.

Yabon was not welcome inside parliament and had to be locked in a car.

Once Mr Rumbiak had finished his address, he turned his attention to liberating Yabon.

Pigs underpin Papuan village life. Without pigs, marriages cannot be arranged, and as much as their ownership can cause disputes, a quarrel is often sealed with the gift of a pig.

Papuan ceremonies lose their potency without pigs, so although yesterday's function proceeded unimpeded, Yabon's absence did not go unnoticed.

While delegates had coffee, Mr Rumbiak was outside allowing Yabon to stretch his legs.

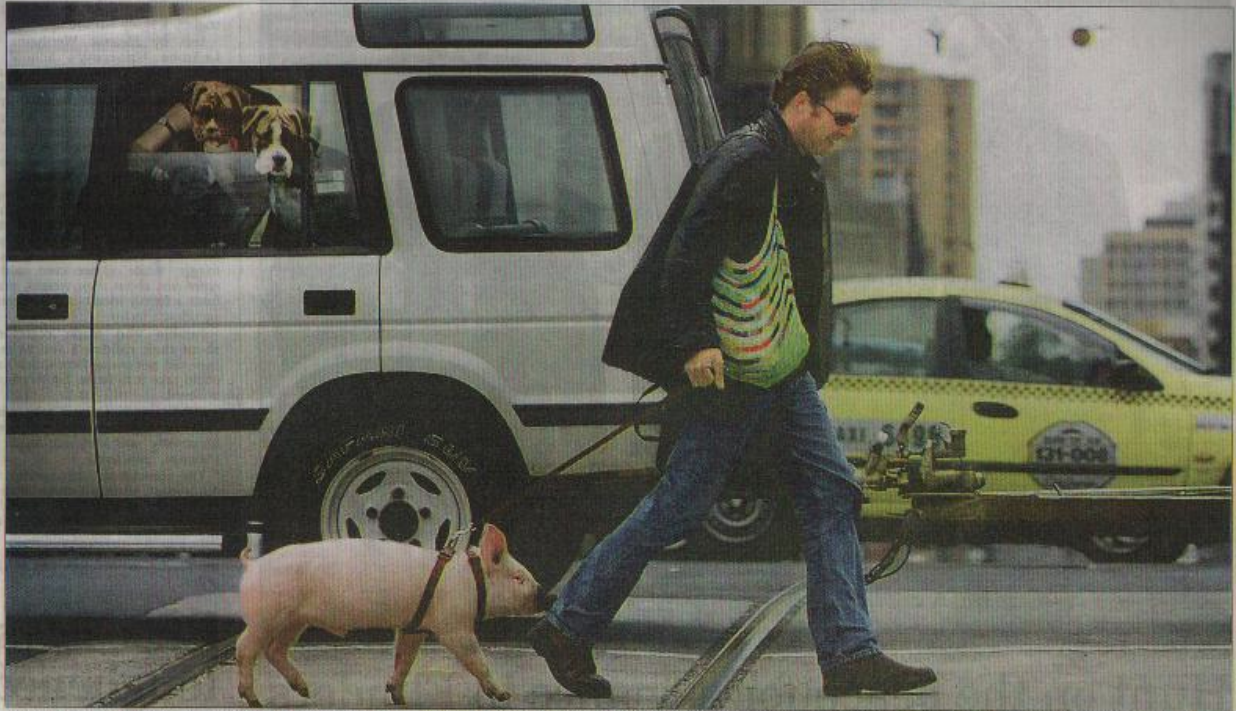
But that did not detract from his plea that Australian support was essential for independence for Irian Jaya.

For too long now, West Papuans have had no voice in international forums, he said. It was time Australia extended a hand to help its neighbor, he said, trying to hold a squealing, struggling Yabon. AAP

Yabon, the hero of this story, was born in the temperate climate of rural Victoria, bred to be vacuum-packed in a Coles Christmas hamper. He has become, instead, an important symbol for peace and justice in West Papua, for breaking the tension between Jakarta and Jayapura.

Pork avenue, just the place for a road hog

The Age 27 Aug 2001, P3



Walkie-porky: Yabon, pictured in Melbourne's city centre, is a Very Important Pig right now. It will be his job to lead the West Papua delegation to the Yumi Wantaim seminar, coinciding with PNG's 26th anniversary of independence, which begins on September 15 on the banks of the Maribrnong. PHOTO: HEATH MISSEN

THE AGE, 27 AUGUST 2001, PHOTO HEATH MISSEN

Caption: *Walkie-porky: Yabon, pictured in Melbourne's city centre, is a Very Important Pig right now. It will be his job to head the West Papua delegation to the Yumi Wantaim seminar, coinciding with PNG's 26th anniversary of independence, which begins on September 15 on the banks of the Maribrnong.*

In the highlands of New Guinea, the Bird of Paradise-shaped island on the western rim of Melanesia, men coat themselves in pig fat to keep out the cold, and little girl-mothers grieve when their pets are trussed, ready for market or for sacrifice. Pigs are the centre-piece of religious and social life. Their blood sanctifies land for ceremony, and opens negotiations between families for a marriage. They are financial capital, and if cash is required, perhaps to pay school fees or fund a funeral, a pig will be sold. They underpin the village economy, and are still the most popular form of compensation in the art of Melanesian peace-making.

“When our people from the islands meet a family from the highlands, we cook *barapen*, have a feast. We cook pig—which the mountain people usually eat, and fish—which is more usually the diet of the islanders. In that way we share our customs, and eat together. That’s our polite form” says Jacob Rumbiak, a former lecturer at Cendrawasih (Bird of Paradise) University in West Papua, who endured ten years of isolation in Indonesian jails, including Cipinang Prison with East Timor’s

Xanana Gusmao. “It’s been difficult to be Melanesian since the Indonesians occupied my country in 1963. One of the first things the military did was massacre the pigs”.

In East New Guinea (PNG) pigs lost some of their value when the framework of the new nation state was assembled in 1975. Hundreds of small socio-political units were destabilised by the swift elimination of their autonomy, and have not yet settled as bigger, regional identities in the national parliament. Similarly, the institutions of the modern state, which weren’t built upon Melanesian foundations, don’t yet communicate effectively with their constituents in the mountains. A boar’s head, printed on the twenty kina note, reminds an increasingly frustrated people of the exchanges that had been central to a kaleidoscope of relations. Pigs facilitated dialogue between families, between communities, between man and nature, and between man and god. If communication broke down, there were repercussions. Someone would die, perhaps the gardens would fail. Blood sacrifice helped resemble equanimity and order. Papuans continue to believe that the quality of atonement garnered by ceremonial slaughter of a home-grown pig cannot be achieved when bits of paper are passed around instead. The architects of independence in 1975 may have been short-sighted when they marginalised the sacred from their new order.

On the other side of the border, pigs are still the king of the castle for West Papuans. But not for Indonesians, who current president is the daughter of the man who installed the occupation in 1962. Why Pak Sukarno, then President of pork-taboo Indonesia, colonised the western rim of Christian Melanesia is a matter of debate. Indonesians claim West Papua was part of the Dutch East Indies, and therefore, automatically, of the post-colonial republic as well. The Dutch, who had scheduled self-determination for their colony in 1970, say their well-funded program was betrayed by the international community in 1962. America claims its diplomatic manoeuvring diverted a belligerent Sukarno from seeking more support from communist Russia and escalating the terrifying drama of the Cold War, with President Kennedy telling the Dutch Ambassador in Washington “those Papuans of yours are just 700,000 and living in the stone age”. Australia, squatting self-consciously in Papua New Guinea, supported West Papua’s self-determination in the fifties, but later Americanised its propaganda and proclaimed “Australia cannot break off relations with a neighbour of 125 million (Indonesian) people on behalf of those few people”.

West Papuans were not consulted about the expulsion of the Dutch from their territory. Nor were they privy to a contract between the new Indonesian administration and the US Freeport-McMoran mining company, signed in 1967, two years before the UN Act of Free Choice ballot. They reject the claim that the Dutch East Indies was automatically Indonesian. What, they ask, of the Dutch colonies of Surinam in South America, Barbados in Central America, and Guinea Bissau in Africa?

On 1 May 1963, when the United Nations handed West Papua to Indonesia, President Sukarno

declared the territory a military zone. The next day, his Minister for Culture lit a bonfire in the main square of the capital, and ten thousand Papuans witnessed the incineration of cultural artefacts and written history. By the time of the referendum, six years later, a generation of West Papuan leadership had 'disappeared', thousands of villagers were dead and hundreds of villages had been strafed. Pigs (and the Dutch guilder) had been replaced by the *rupiah*; the soldiers appalled by the prominence of the animal in highland households, had slaughtered thousands.

After the referendum in 1969, Brigadier-General Sarwo Edhie presented a planeload of pigs from Bali to the Ekari people in the Central Highlands. The pigs were infected with *taenia solium* (tapeworm) a parasite which triggers a pathological condition in humans called cerebral cysticercosis. Malaise, epilepsy, psychosis and death were noted in the Ekari in 1972. In his article Transcultural tapeworm trafficking—the Indonesian introduction of biological warfare into West Papua, Dr David Hyndman claimed the parasite had infected most of the Ekari by 1975, had spread to the Western Dani of the Baliem Valley, and had reached Ok Sibil on the PNG border. In 1985, twelve cases of cisticercosis were reported in refugee camps in Papua New Guinea.

West Papua has been closed to the international community since 1963, so there has been little monitoring of the arrests, killings, disappearances, and massacres. Churches estimate 400,000 people have been killed. Families continue to be uprooted from self-sustaining lifestyles on traditional land and set on the fringes of unhealthy urban sprawls. There are a million transmigrasi from other Indonesian islands trying to survive, the result of badly-planned and barely-managed programs. Papuan students learn an Indonesian-language curriculum devised by Javanese; many have not seen a map of their own country. The military work with commercial operators, clear-felling ancient wood from the heart of unique forests, levelling mountains to extrude precious minerals, sucking gas and fish from a marine environment that was pristine until the sixties.

The deeply Christian West Papuans continue to pursue their non-violent campaign for independence, a movement nurtured by a network of disciplined organisations that criss-cross the territory's political, physical and cultural landscapes. They emphasise dialogue-generated negotiation, a conflict resolution technique central to West Papuan indigenous thinking, which Dr Thomas Wainggai, one of West Papua's most powerful intellectuals, developed in the eighties as a national strategy of resistance. Dr Thomas' first disciples were West Papua's big men, the leaders of the traditional religions, who were able to coalesce a basic tenet—to love rather than hate your enemy—with the laws and discipline of their indigenous heritage. Since non-violence is also central to Melanesian and Christian philosophies, the movement in West Papua has attracted the support of kin nations in the Pacific, and, increasingly, the rest of the international community.

Dr Thomas died in Cipinang Prison in Jakarta in 1996, defeated by Indonesian barbarism, but

having triumphed as a remarkable strategist—for by then West Papuans had developed a network of organisations working for independence through non-violent means. This includes the traditional leadership, Christian church groups, women’s groups, student organisations, academics, political parties, non-government organisations, and a *transmigrasi* group called AMBERI. Even the military wing of the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka) is pledged to defend, but not to attack.

And what of Yabon, the Australian pig? When Jacob escaped from an incarceration centre in Indonesia and was granted asylum in Australia, people told him it would take a massacre, like the Santa Cruz in East Timor, to spark interest in his homeland’s struggle. This distressed him, given the escalation of militarisation since the downfall of Suharto in 1998. To cheer him up, a couple of fun-loving activists bought him a baby pig, which he named Yabon in honour of the tiny village in the highlands where he was born. “Then things started looking up. I walked Yabon every day, like a dog, to exercise him. People talked to me. Teachers asked me to address their students. Journalists rang for stories. It was amazing to watch my pig creating space for West Papua’s story in Australia. Then an old chief from home rang and said ‘Son, are you really taking our culture to that country?’”