



ART AND SOLIDARITY: THE MELANESIAN WALL OF ART

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Solidarity is a powerfully loaded term. Deriving from nineteenth-century French, the word describes a “unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest.”¹ It is a notion that stirs, binds, and resonates perhaps most strongly during moments or events of crisis. Since taking temporary control of West Papua in 1963, and following the further consolidation of its unlawful rule through the UN-sanctioned and now discredited Act of Free Choice 1969 ballot, Indonesia’s brutal occupation of West Papua has been responded to with complex lines of solidarity and resistance, as well as complicity, among the diverse nations and cultures of the Asia-Pacific region. Today, Indonesia continues to solicit geopolitical support for its territorial claim to West Papua with its charge of non-interference and the assertion that the sovereignty of nations should be respected. Citing the national interest, the Australian government turns a blind eye to the Indonesian military’s violations of human rights in the name of unwavering solidarity with its regional ally.

Yet the beliefs of citizens are not always in accord with the questionable actions of their governments. The Sampari Art Exhibition and Sale for West Papua is an expression of the solidarity many Australians feel for the plight of our West Papuan neighbours. Further afield, an “agreement of feeling or action” that West Papua should be accorded the human right of self-determination unifies individuals across the Pacific. While this sense

of regional solidarity is shared by every artist contributing work to the Sampari exhibition, it is especially prevalent in the Melanesian wall of art, established as a feature of Sampari 2016 to celebrate the sympathy and unique political support of artists and cultural producers from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands, for their Melanesian kin. Indigenous West Papuans strongly identify as Melanesian and for nearly two decades lobbied for inclusion in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), founded in 1986 to promote economic growth among Melanesian countries. In June 2015, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) was finally granted observer status, an important step towards gaining political recognition in the region. The fate of West Papua's application for full membership, however, is complicated by the MSG's recent recognition of Indonesia as an associate member. At the time of writing, the outcome of the ULMWP's bid hangs in the balance.

In the world of contemporary art, the question of whether artists can, or should, wade into the arena of politics is a vexed one. It is a debate that frequently involves heated discussion over the recuperation of critique and protest by the broader framework of neoliberal capitalism. In this environment of passionate disagreement over the role of the artist, the organisation of cultural events like Sampari along lines of solidarity, the bringing together of diverse artistic works in the name of a single cause – freedom for West Papua - provide an important outlet for expressing desire for change at a community level. Contributions to the Melanesian wall such as Monica Gunawan's vivid painting of a strong Melanesian woman rebuking tribal traditions by raising her bow and arrow to hunt, *The Dream Hunter*, speak to the power of solidarity that runs along gender lines. This is especially poignant in *Hope*, an empathic photo-portrait of a West Papuan woman in Indigenous headdress, submitted by a photographer based in West Papua whose identity must remain anonymous to protect his safety. Solidarity with and between women acts as a subtle mode of resistance as it manifests not only in art but in everyday life, the realm wherein the personal becomes political and grassroots change often begins.

Humour and satire is another means through which solidarity is expressed as in Campion Ohasio's contribution to the Melanesian wall, a cartoon titled *Heroes or Traitors of West Papua*. First published in the Solomon Islands newspaper the Islandsun in 2015 on the day the leaders of the Melanesian Spearhead Group met in Honiara to vote on West Papua's membership, Ohasio's drawing depicts a man flailing in the sea. With the West Papua morning star flag in one hand, he reaches out to the MSG leaders seated in a canoe to raise him from the clutches of the great white shark of Indonesia. This liberty to express a strong point of view through satirical humour without threat or fear of retribution, no matter how provocative the message, is one of the hallmarks of a free society and a point of solidarity that unites artists across cultures.

By contrast to the satirical cartoon, craft work is often characterised as apolitical in the discourse of western art. Yet the exchange of art and craft objects in regions like Melanesia have long been implicated in complex political and social relations. Writing about the role of tapa bark cloth in Oceania, Nicholas Thomas observes how "connections between kinship, affinity, rank and elaborate forms of cloth persist."² The inclusion of fibre arts in Sampari's Melanesian wall of art, specifically the bags of Alice Kaloran of Vanuatu, are reminders of how the production and exchange of objects forge points of connection between Melanesian cultures. For writers such as the late Epeli Hau'ofa, recognising such connections provides a politically transformative corrective to the notion that Island cultures are somehow separated and isolated by the sea, pointing to how Pacific Islanders belong, rather, to an oceanic community based on voyaging.

Other submissions suggest the project of decolonisation in the region is far from over. Allan Mogerema and Tony Wesley Everett's *Free Paradise* speaks to the concern for environmental sustainability and autonomy over natural resources in administered territories. Identity politics is explored in submissions by Kingston Uyassi and Patrick Tonga while the fate of future generations is invoked in works by Lamert Ho, Martin Lance, and Mere Rasue. In 2018, there will be renewed international focus on Melanesia's

future when New Caledonia votes on the question of its independence by referendum. For West Papua, the struggle for recognition as an independent nation remains ensnared in a complex geopolitical situation. Yet the feeling of solidarity that events like Sampari convey for Papuans reveal that beneath the official rhetoric of governments that nothing can be done there simmers a deep sympathy and passionate desire for justice among ordinary citizens that seeks an outlet in real and meaningful action.

Notes

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.1698.

² Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, p.150.