



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

John Waromi is a soft-spoken man. With his peaceful looks and dignity, one would hardly think of him as a freedom fighter. Yet, this sensitive and quiet man is a fierce advocate for the freedom of his homeland, Papua. The western part is occupied by Indonesia and is far from being the paradise we associate with the South Sea.

Following a conversation with the 56-year-old poet, it is this very perception of paradise one would abandon and acknowledge as the superficial chimera it is. This chimera rather, reveals our obsession with exoticism and immature concept of faraway places.

Papua has been subject to wicked colonisation in the past and its wounds are still so much part of the present: its psychological and physical remnants can be found in its landscapes and in its people – scars that will not be easily healed.

documentary *The Act of Killing*) also influenced the process of occupation in West Papua; a brutal appropriation without respect to the indigenous inhabitants.

A measure to silence the local population and their dissent was to bring in people from other islands who by-and-by made the Papuans a minority on their own soil.

West Papua is, in fact, Indonesia's first colony. Worldwide ignorance about the events that led to its colonisation, the nature of repression and the degree of resistance has made it possible for Indonesia to proceed with its destruction of Papuan life, largely unhampered by international condemnation. By their complicity and acquiescence, Western powers have lent their support to the atrocious crimes of the Indonesian Military in West Papua, crimes that are leading to the obliteration of the Papuan people.

The indigenous population's resources are exploited without permission sought or due compensation paid;

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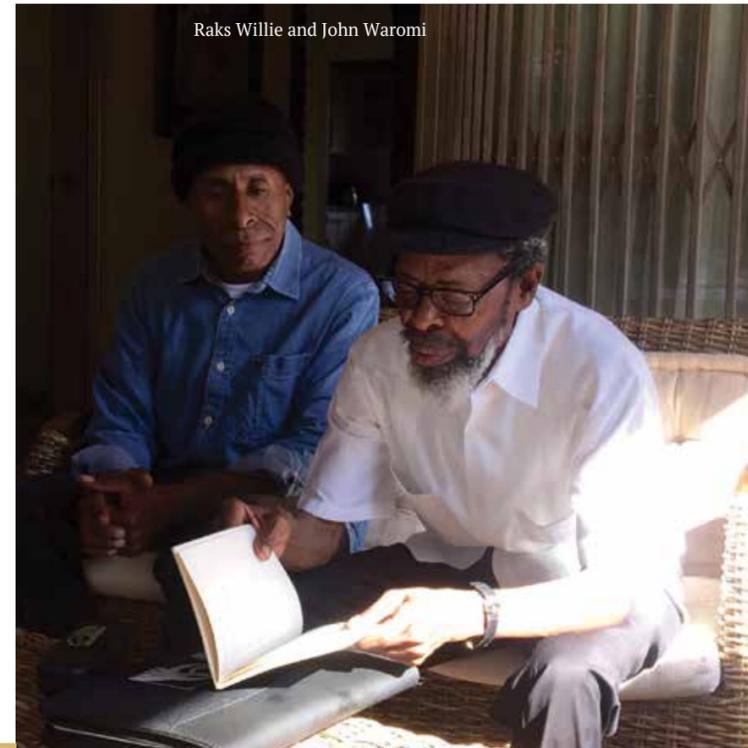
The eastern part of the island comprises the independent country of Papua New Guinea, one of the poorest in the world. This part of the island was colonised by the Germans and Australians before gaining independence in 1975.

Indonesia inherited the western part of the island from Dutch colonisers and the country considers the island a non-negotiable part of its island nation.

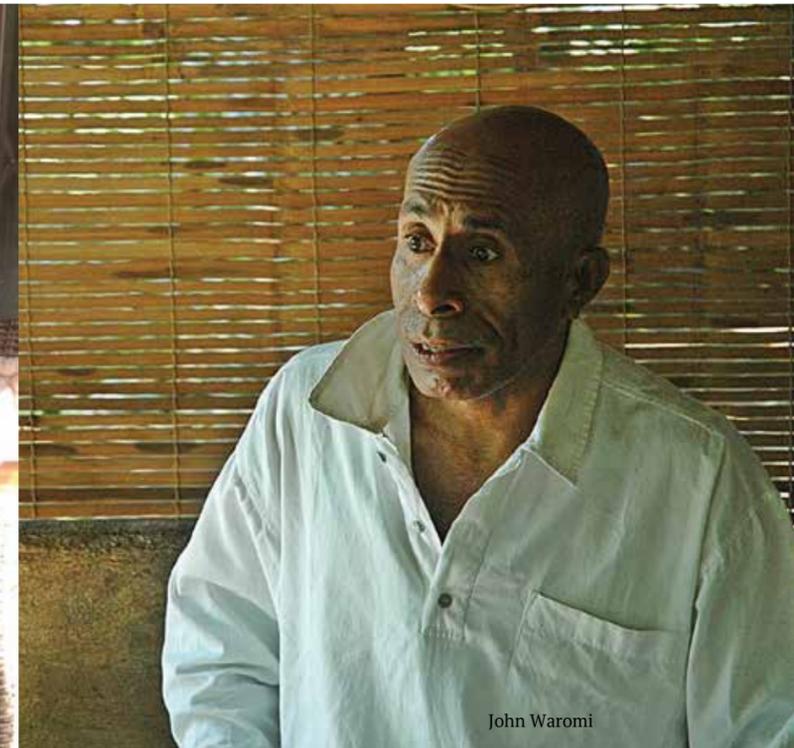
Indonesia's way since independence in 1945 has not been easy either. Dictatorship and one of the cruellest genocides of the so-called communists (depicted in the award winning

their traditions are derided; their land alienated in the 'national interest'; their political rights subsumed by the need for republican unity; their human rights abused in an organised manner. Notwithstanding the enormous social and environmental impacts of the Freeport mine, the forced labour of the Asmat people in military-run logging operations, overfishing by Japanese fishing companies, and the social exclusion and loss of traditional lands resulting from transmigration.

On the one hand, there is a strong sense of Papuan identity – as Melanesians who deserve their own nation on



Raks Willie and John Waromi



John Waromi

racial, geographic, historical and cultural grounds. On the other hand, there is the knowledge that the overwhelmingly powerful state is totally opposed to this concept. And that is the crux of the dilemma: the price of dissent is high, and the chances of achieving anything, particularly an independent West Papuan state, remote.

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One could say John Waromi is an unlikely poet – a very politically concerned poet though, who never loses sight of the plight of his people.

His work is both deeply rooted in the mythical traditions of his people and an overall humanity while also depicting his political struggle to overcome oppression and being silenced. In his poetry, Waromi mourns the struggling individual, cut off from all roots, far away from nature and social security.

John Waromi studied law and also worked as an actor in the famous Indonesian theatre group, Bengkel Teater, that was founded by Indonesian icon WS Rendra. Wherever John Waromi has travelled over the years, he took his fight and his dedication with him. Outspoken and fearless, he has used his poetry as a weapon against oppression; as a weapon against the oblivion of local traditions, cultures and histories. A long and winding road of a brave and warm-hearted man whose journey also brought him to South Africa this year, where he saw that freedom does not automatically bring reconciliation with it. A country in another state of development than his native one, yet full of hope and vigour to overcome separation and hatred. A new lesson to learn for the unavoidable fight that comes after political equality and freedom.

John Waromi was writer-in-residence at the Sylt Foundation in Johannesburg in April 2016. CF