

## THE TREETOP PEOPLE OF NEW GUINEA: A SUMMER FILM SPECIAL

Living in an unmapped, isolated region of Irian Jaya, the western half of the big island of New Guinea, the Korowai met their first anthropologist in June 1993--Paul Michael Taylor of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. Curator of Asian Ethnology and Director of the Asian Cultural History Program, Taylor has devoted over sixteen years to the study of the languages, ethnobiology, and cultures of Indonesia.

Along with his research collaborator John Burke Burnett and student intern Norman H. Wibowo, Taylor travelled with a four-person film crew to this easternmost province of Indonesia, to begin research on the ecological history of the area, studying how the Korowai relate to their rainforest environment. The Korowai live in treehouses soaring thirty to ninety feet above the ground, building new ones every few years throughout their "gardens." A Korowai "garden" includes not only the small cultivated area below the tree house, but also all the rainforest in the clan territory. Those with rights to these gardens are known as the "lords of the garden."

The film follows Taylor and his entourage as they travel upriver by dugout canoes and then by foot through the rainforest where they negotiate mud and creek crossings and long "tightrope" walks across fallen logs. Pushing to the edge of the so-called "pacification line" (the line beyond which inter-clan warfare is still active and outsiders cannot venture), they trekked through flooded landscape, where the water on the "paths" between treehouse clusters often reached mid-thigh and contained clinging leeches.

Taylor chose this location with the help of former Dutch missionary Gerrit van Enk, who lived among the Korowai from 1983 to 1993. Neighbors of the better-known Asmat, among whom the late Michael Rockefeller collected beautifully carved



dugout canoes and elaborately sculpted house posts, war shields, spears, and body ornaments, the Korowai share some of these material culture objects such as shields and bows and arrows. Unlike the Asmat, however, the Korowai have never been the subject of anthropological study until now.

In addition to the film crew, three Indonesians were hired as kitchen crew and field site supervisors. These three, as well as Paul and his intern Norman Wibowo, knew the Indonesian language that serves as a lingua franca throughout the region of Irian Jaya, where there are over 250 local languages. A few Korowai had learned some Indonesian from the Dutch missionary van Enk, making it possible for them to tell Paul in Indonesian what their fellow Korowai were saying. Paul could then simultaneously translate from Indonesian into English for the film crew, and, at the same time, begin to learn the local Korowai language himself. As the film producer Judy Hallet explained, "Paul's language ability in the field was extraordinary to watch....Because he was so gentle and relaxed and the Korowai so trusting of him, he provided a perfect bridge between us and people whose language was completely unknown to us" (Hallet, personal communication).

According to filmed eyewitness accounts by Korowai adults, the Korowai and a few neighboring groups practiced cannibalism in the recent past. Taylor believes these filmed eyewitness accounts present evidence that will stand up to expert evaluation. Therefore, Western New Guinea

where the role of cannibalism still can be studied.

"Treehouse People/Cannibal Justice" is a collaboration between a scientist, Paul Taylor, and a film producer, Judith Dwan Hallet, working jointly with Hearst Entertainment/Arts & Entertainment Network (U.S.), Tele Images (France) and the Smithsonian Institution. Each kept a field journal.

While Taylor and Hallet shared many of the same goals for the film, they reveal different approaches, perceptions, and experiences in their "journals." Even their method of writing was different: Hallet made notes in the field, then created a "journal" after her return, based on her records, later recollections, and Taylor's translations of interviews he made in the field. Taylor wrote his journal daily, partly in English and partly in local languages. When he transcribed the journal later, he clearly distinguished annotations and translations made after his return from those made on-the-spot. In addition to expressing different perceptions, these two "journals" record amusing anecdotes, highlighting not only two cultures in contact, but two different people working in two very different professional roles.

**HALLET** writes (June 9, 1993): "In the film, we need to introduce New Guinea as a land of mystery, myths, headhunting.... We can show jungle, faces, stock footage of early expeditions.... We can talk about Michael Rockefeller and the Asmat." That same day, **TAYLOR** records, "Their original concept of filming the anthropologist going to 'contact' a previously uncontacted group of people is outdated: 1) 'contact' is not a genre of valid anthropological research, and 2) even if it were, everybody here is already 'in contact'."

On June 12, **HALLET** writes, "Paul is starting to learn Korowai. He says one of the best ways to start learning a language is by learning how to count." Three days later **HALLET** writes, "Paul is spending a great deal of time learning the genealogy. He says this is a good way to begin to learn

about a culture.... Paul says the kinship terminology is based on the Omaha skewing system.... For us it is practically incomprehensible and definitely too esoteric for our film." **TAYLOR** writes (June 15): "I translate introductions into English for the [film] crew. It's their first introduction to the Omaha kinship system, since several of Yakob's grandfathers are his age or younger. I used the example... that the Italian word for grandchild and nephew are the same (nipote); a 'skewing' of generations that reflects the old Omaha kinship system of ancient Latin. Thus the expression 'Omaha skewing rule.'"

On June 15, **TAYLOR** made the following entry: "The film crew finds the place 'beautiful,' 'gentle,' 'incredible,' etc.--and the filming schedule still dominates. But my own ideas and opinions are becoming surprisingly influential, since I'm the only one who can speak to the people here and interpret what they're saying.... they're sure they're supposed to film me doing science, but less sure exactly what that entails. Unfortunately, much of it [science] isn't 'filmic'." Later, in his journal (June 21), **TAYLOR** wrote of the interest the Korowai had in his field guide on birds. "Everyone regularly gathers around my copy of Beehler et al.'s *Birds of New Guinea*, discussing the many color plates. 'They think it's a menu,' someone on the kitchen crew said."

**HALLET** records some of the dialogue among the Korowai themselves in her journal. Such conversations were often recorded by the sound recordist (sometimes accidentally), and translated later. They illustrate a continuing Korowai bafflement at the unexpected presence of their guests, and a strong concern for their safety. For example, two Korowai men were recorded talking after they'd been asked to build a palm-frond shower-enclosure for the portable, hand-filled, solar-heated shower:

1st man: "What are they doing? Are they making a bird blind?"

2nd man: "No, they are making a shower."

1st man: "But there is no water there.  
What a funny place for a shower."

Another conversation was accidentally recorded during a film sequence when a tree was being chopped down:

1st man: 'Be careful of the foreigners. They are climbing the platform, and we are cutting down the trees, and they could be in danger.'

2nd man: 'If they fall off the platform and get hurt, who is capable of carrying them? They are so big.'

1st man: 'Oh that would be impossible! No one is strong enough to carry them.'

Near the end of their stay, TAYLOR laments the lack of time for intensive interviews (June 27): "Judy, Reuben, et al. [the film crew] are understandably frustrated by the lack of visual excitement in these interviews. The informant who allowed a major breakthrough in the interpretation of cannibalism is the village chief of Manggel--not a photogenic character to begin with, and less so since he insists on wearing his one t-shirt (that says 'Cartier' on it). He's very much an outsider here, in many ways, as a government-appointed village chief...but he's...a central character in the modernization of the region."

The film traces Taylor and Hallet's journey deep into the rainforest, to ever more remote tree house clusters, where they begin to hear about the role of cannibalism in the Korowai recent past. In his journal entry (June 25), TAYLOR states: "I'm now beginning to think of cannibalism as part of the Korowai criminal justice system, and to think there are two kinds: 1) the sentence of death followed by cannibalism given to criminals on an individual basis--in which a clan expels one of its own members to be killed and eaten by a neighboring clan with which it maintains reciprocal arrangements for carrying out such sentences; and 2) the murder and cannibalization that is the consequence of interclan warfare, in which an enemy may be killed and eaten." The "second kind is widely reported but the first kind...is an exciting new discovery."



HALLET on June 25 writes in her journal: "The chief of Manggel, Funayare, describes in great detail how you kill and eat someone....With such detailed description of cannibalism, we decide to film a series of illustrative but abstract scenes by the river. The men can build a fire and wrap sago leaves around the stones and cook the sago over the burning coals. These scenes can play over Funayare's explanation of cannibalism...Although we never saw it, there is definitely cannibalism practiced here...Paul says it is as bad to define the Korowai as a culture that simply practices cannibalism as it would be to define the American culture based on capital punishment and death row."

Taylor pointed out that many of the plants and animals in this lush environment are unknown or of rare species, found nowhere else in the world. He collected, often with the help of the Korowai, samples of rare insects, snakes, mammals, and plants for an Indonesian university that is collaborating in his research.

The film, "Treehouse People/Cannibal Justice," will be shown on A&E Entertainment Network, Sunday, July 10, 1994 at 8 p.m. Teachers and students studying Southeast Asian cultures, rainforest ecology, and geography, world history, and anthropology will enjoy this informative and visually beautiful film.

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