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Anthropology Book Forum

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Sukundimi Walks Before Me. 2026. Directed by Matasila Freshwater and Lachlan McLeod. Walking Fish Productions. Brown Sugar Apple Grunt Productions, Screen Australia. Doc Society and Vic Screen. 95 Minutes.

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In this remarkable video, written and directed by Matasila Freshwater, a Solomon Islands filmmaker with a background in both anthropology and media studies, the raw ambiguities and sad flaws of postcolonial power in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are on full display.

The video is set along the Sepik River, which flows from the central highlands for about 700 miles through floodplains and wetlands to its mouth on the north coast of the country--and is the largest undammed river system in the Asia-Pacific region. The river, of course, is also one of the originary sites of modern, British anthropology where Gregory Bateson did the 1920s fieldwork from which he wrote his ground-breaking ethnography (1936). In light of the stream of research that has since been done along the river (to which I myself have contributed), it should come as no surprise that among the many things the video illustrates is how local-level economy and society in the region have largely remained both resource and cosmologically dependent, which is to say, unchanged, despite the passage of an entire century. And perhaps this lack of development constitutes a key background to Sukundimi Walks Before Me and to the classic underdog story it tells.

The narrative is basically an account of how a small, indigenous NGO, led by Emmanuel, “Manu,” Peni, who is an articulate, middle-aged man with kinship ties to one of the river villages, undertook the great challenge of trying to stop construction of a huge, open-pit gold and copper mine that is located on a tributary of the upper Sepik. Its owner, PanAust, is planning to commence building the Frieda River mine in 2029, and has allocated more than US\$7 billion for the project. It apparently has the backing of the PNG government in the hopes, of course, that it will be a jackpot for the public purse.

From Peni’s perspective, the type of mine puts the entire down river ecology, and thus the lifeways of the subsistence-based, middle- and lower-river peoples at risk, if and when structural or technical breakdowns occur, as they inevitably do and have done elsewhere in PNG. They boat along the river, going ashore at one village after another. As they do, exquisite glimpses appear, of its eddies and ripples, of boys at play along its edge, of eagles scooping up fish, and

the crimson sky at dusk. We also see scenes of unalienated work. Women paddle off in their dugout canoes to fish or attend regional markets where they sell or barter fish. Men build houses. And both genders produce a flour made from the pith of sago palms, their carbohydrate staple. These images, serenaded as they are by the other-worldly, breathy rhythms of bamboo flutes, convey both the embeddedness and identification of village society in the riverine environment and its ongoing connection to the ancestors, whose “voices” the flutes are understood to express.

Villagers assemble in their Male Cult Houses to meet Peni and his group. Men sit on patrician benches that line the sides of the floor of the rectangular buildings, and women gather on the grass in earshot as Manu Peni delivers his arguments against the mine. The mine will kill the fish in the Sepik, jeopardize their children’s future and create the real prospect of inland resettlement. Everyone must appreciate, he goes on, how heavily in debt the project is and how it therefore must rely on “investors.” Who are they? Foreigners who pay no taxes but will profit from it. The company’s promises, of submarine travel and salaries for all, are nothing but a sham. With the backing of powerful ancestors, like Sukundumi, the river-spirit credited with having created their way of life, they asks that people sign the anti-mine petition his group is circulating.

The reception they receive along the river is positive. In one village, men and women even put on body paint, dress up raffia skirts and ornamental finery and dance while beating hand drums on a large platform that has been configured across a double-hulled canoe that drifts just off shore. A second group dances on its banks while a large gathering watches the whole show. As night begins to fall, a woman invokes Sukundimi whom, she whispers, “walks before me” on the river.

Peni’s crew eventually reaches the two villages located at the mouth of the Sepik where women are filling their canoes with saltwater shellfish. In one of their Male Cult Houses, a middle-age man angrily denounces the mine as “false development” to which Peni concurs and offers a kind of populist provocation. “The government,” so he declares, “doesn’t represent you or the interests of the river... We are the government. We have 7800 signatures. This is our power... [We] have the ultimate say in this! The final decision rests with [us].”

At the end of the video, blunt captions restate his message: the signatories of the Sukundimi Declaration and the ancestor-spirits who embody the riverine environment pledge to be “the vessels of the Sepik River... [and] to protect her...with our live,” and demand that the mine be banned.

This video not only depicts a threat to the Sepik River, it also portrays a more common problem, which is how transnational, extractive industry can put local environments and indigenous societies at risk and does so with the support of the postcolonial state. Unhappily, however, its representation of Manu Peni’s stalwart activism in defense of village autonomy and riverine ecology, while compelling in several ways is ultimately unpersuasive. It remains to be seen how, even with Sukundimi’s support, whether, or to what extent, an underdog can or will win the day. The moment is unfinalized, or, at worst, impossible, which is what, Alan Bird, a leading

provincial politician, in a speech he gave at a meeting that Peni and his group sponsored. The mine, he then supposed, would inevitably be built, “whether we like or not,” given the stark power of global capitalism. The uncertainty of the video’s conclusion—the juxtaposition of Bird’s fatalism and its heros’ staunch vow—is perhaps the last of its achievements that this review should acknowledge, both for the little bit of hope it leaves us with at the moment, but also for the despair it instills so effectively.

Author bio

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