

Indonesia: Riding the Tiger

Kings and Coolies (52 Min.)
Freedom or Death (55 Min.)
The New Order (53 Min.)

PRODUCED BY CHRISTINE OLSEN
DIRECTED BY CURTIS LEVY

FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES
& SCIENCES
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1997. VHS. COLOR/BLACK & WHITE

This is a stunning three-part video triptych of twentieth-century Indonesia. *Kings and Coolies*, the first panel, captures the special stamp of Dutch colonialism as it gave way inexorably to the forces of nationalism. In the second panel lies *Freedom or Death*, the heady struggle for independence, which also firmly established the default modes of Indonesia's present political dynamics. And finally, *The New Order* brings us up to the penultimate moments of the Suharto regime, now rudely dismissed, but hardly replaced. Indeed, *Indonesia: Riding the Tiger* gains credibility in the current trauma of shattered economic success and doubts about Indonesia's survival in its present form.

Christine Olsen and Curtis Levy have put together a documentary work of art ideally calibrated to the needs of the turn-of-the-century university and secondary school classroom. Comfortable in the applicable technologies, they interweave multiple archive and living human resources to tell a very complex story in comprehensible narrative and imagery. They accomplish this, admittedly, by deft excision

of swaths of material that the conscientious historian would not cut, and by emphasizing, in bold relief, a simple thematic line throughout the three videos.

Over and over we see the century in terms of its continuities; however dramatic the chronological transitions—from Dutch colonialism to Japanese imperialism to nationalist revolution to parliamentary democracy to militarized modernization—the dominant theme is one of submission and authority. Military repression in the 1990s is uncannily reminiscent of normal behaviors in the previous regimes.

From the first moments of these videos we jump back and forth across the social and political generations of the century, ever in graphic witness of the mockeries of justice and injustice. Although this is obviously not a uniquely Indonesian story, the viewer gradually appreciates how certain universal issues of authority may indeed have special manifestation within a single nation's narrative.

One of the neatest techniques Olsen and Levy employ is the voice of actual Indonesian participants in much of this history. While plenty of academics, politicians and other notables also appear in these videos, the individuals who stand out are those who did not "succeed" in conventional senses.

Now in most cases in their late 70s or 80s, these wrinkled, impossibly snaggle-toothed iconoclasts at the lower end of the economic spectrum reminisce, in English (usually, and remarkably), and offer the most credible and indelible moments in support of the general narrative. Their extraordinarily expressive faces and articulate observations exude a dignity and acceptance of what life has brought them that captures something central to Indonesian character, while it

also conveys what the New Order has suppressed and squandered.

Indonesia: Riding the Tiger is foremost the product of producer Christine Olsen and director Curtis Levy. But other contributors also deserve recognition. Photography by Geoff Burton, translations by Ron Whitton and Robyn Fallick, research by Rosalind Bentley, Rogier Smeele and F. Suwardi, and narration by Paul Barry all help to raise the quality of the series. Archival sources include the Netherlands Information Service, the Australian War Museum, and the Netherlands Film Museum. These sources have been culled for those items perfectly on target for use in this story. Skillfully combined with rich present-day interviews, the decades come alive—and our classrooms are the beneficiaries.

Each video juxtaposes past and present, with archival footage jumping forward to the 1990s, and back again, over and over again. The viewer sees vividly, in ways the tourist can never observe, how events earlier in this century may still drive perceptions of reality now. However, an unintended consequence of these chronological ricochets is that the narrative segmentation of the three videos grows somewhat confusing. For use in instructional settings all three videos should be viewed, for each video contains material supportive of the other two segments of narrative.

Potential purchasers should not expect coverage of Indonesia's recent months of economic upheaval, military thuggery, and anti-Chinese violence, but all of the essential elements of these current events are poignantly presaged in *Indonesia: Riding the Tiger*. This reviewer has seen no other documentary treatment that rivals this series as a riveting instructional aid in teaching

about contemporary Indonesia. The textures and sophistication command multiple viewings, for, like a rich text, each viewing reveals important additional depth. Moreover, even in a general class on Southeast Asia, I believe, a first-rate single-country treatment, such as this, is more valuable educationally than a sprinkling of regionally diverse offerings. This series is exemplary. ■

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The Spirit of Hiroshima

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1996. VHS VIDEO. 56 MINUTES.

The Spirit of Hiroshima is an introduction to the issues surrounding the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and to the attempts by Japanese in that city today to make its legacy meaningful to themselves and to future generations. It is a well-intentioned but not altogether successful film that will be most useful with younger audiences, who will respond to its emphasis on the