

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. ■

Roger Paget

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The Spirit of Hiroshima

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY
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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

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experience of children. Older and more sophisticated viewers will want better storytelling and a more thorough analysis of the political, military, and humanitarian issues than this film provides.

The film begins by introducing us to the Tonai family, an attractive young couple and their two sons, aged eight and twelve, who live in present-day Hiroshima but who have never been to the annual commemoration of the atomic bombing on August 6. The Tonais have decided to give their children a history lesson and to attend the memorial service together, and we accompany them as they eat breakfast, take the train into the city center, and attend the ceremony.

As the Tonai family proceeds with its preparations, we meet three survivors of the bombing, who each tell us the story of their experience: Matsubara Miyoko, a schoolgirl in 1945 who apparently was one of

the Hiroshima Maidens brought to the United States in the 1950s for reconstructive plastic surgery; Sasamura Hiroshi, the principal of an elementary school; and Masuda Tsutomu, a teacher-turned-painter. *The Spirit of Hiroshima* cuts back and forth among these witnesses, the Tonais, and historical images of the bombing.

The film tells its story through children—the Tonai boys and the survivors who were either children themselves during the war, or teachers working with children. This emphasis highlights the inhumanity of the bombing and appeals to viewers' emotions. However, the film also acknowledges at several junctures that Japan had been waging an aggressive war in Asia and that Hiroshima and its environs were military targets; and Masuda Tsutomu, the painter, asserts that Japan had in fact provoked the bombing by its aggression. The film thus provides a well

balanced, albeit essentially anecdotal, account of the Hiroshima catastrophe.

For adult viewers, the film is unsatisfying. The witnesses, particularly Ms. Matsubara, sincere as they undoubtedly are, seem scripted and wooden. Their accounts are poorly integrated into the story of the Tonais' journey and easily overwhelm it, making it seem superfluous. There is little real analysis of the reasons why the bomb was dropped or its long-term significance. We do not get to know the Tonai family well enough to identify with them, nor are pertinent questions broached about their obvious ambivalence toward Hiroshima's identity as the first city decimated by nuclear weapons.

The Spirit of Hiroshima is thus best suited for younger, less critical viewers. For more advanced high school and college audiences, alternatives would include the ABC News special *Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped* (1995) and *Enola Gay and the Atomic Bombing of Japan* (History Channel, 1995), which interrogate the bombing from "revisionist" and mainstream positions respectively. John Junkerman's *Hellfire: A Journey From Hiroshima* (First Run Features, 1987) examines the work of the painters Maruki Iri and Toshi, and does a superior job of approaching the bombing through the work of artists who devoted their lives to exploring its meaning. ■

David G. Goodman

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The Hidden Story

A Documentary

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED
BY RANJANI MAZUMDAR
AND SHIKHA JHINGAN

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1996. VIDEOCASSETTE.
58 MINUTES



Photo courtesy of Women Make Movies

The *Hidden Story* is a social history of peasant women whose stories have rarely been documented in traditional sources on Indian women. The video/oral histories of four women from different geographic regions of India, set in 1987, are part of the *Women Make Movies* series. They represent the social structures of the respective communities that have bound these women and reinforce the conclusions in the book, *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*, edited by Bharati Ray. The film illustrates the dual limitations of gender and caste that play an important part in the lives of these women.

The video begins with a Hindi movie song. The camera captures the view of the rice



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