

RANSOMING THE FUTURE

**Trekking 'off the map' in Indonesian New Guinea
leads to an alarming confrontation with a tribe
struggling with their own cultural direction**

Story and photography by **Adrian Bottomley**



**FASHION PARADE**

The porters' clothes began to look garishly out-of-place as the team got deeper into Korowai territory where near-nudity was the norm.

**AGE-OLD SKILLS**

Women prepare fish traps, woven from forest leaves. Adept at using the resources offered by the forest, the Korowai seemingly have little need of money.

"HE WANTS RED MONEY," STAMMERED OUR GUIDE, the frightened whites of his eyes clearly visible in the dark. That afternoon, passing through Woman, a remote and largely deserted settlement, we had been perplexed by a strange assemblage of feathers, barbed arrows and cassowary bones that marked the entrance to the village. Nervously, our porters had ushered us in silence to the nearby river where we pitched our tents and swam. Now, on a moonless night, I strained to make out three Korowai men stomping menacingly beyond the glow of our campfire, their bows raised and pulled back, arrows aimed at my pounding chest. Five million rupiah, in red one hundred thousand bills, was their frantic demand, supposedly needed to pacify the spirits we had offended by trespassing. Equally sinister and surreal, it smacked of extortion. It had been a borderline crazy idea to come in the first place; had we overstepped the mark?

In 2008, my friend and expedition partner, Phyllis Hischer, a keen anthropologist and collector of Papuan art, had made initial contact with a large group of Korowai Batu, near Baigun along the upper Eilanden River. Their name means 'Stone Korowai', after the axe-making resources available to them in the hills nearby, in contrast to other Korowai clans downriver that lacked stone. There she witnessed a traditional gathering of local clans celebrating a sago grub festival: a rare, once-in-a-lifetime ritual held to foster fertility and prosperity. In the intervening years, reports of forced settlement filtered out of the jungle as the government 'encouraged' the tribe, with promises of money, schooling and clinics, to swap their remarkable treehouses for rows of rustic wooden shacks. Often, those promises went unmet. Now she and I had returned to the area on a trip that was part adventure, part fact-finding mission.

Our expedition began with a bum-numbing 12-hour longboat ride from Dekai, up the Brazza and Eilanden Rivers to Mabul, the largest of the new settlements. From there, we intended to head north to Baigun, find some of Phyllis' 'old friends' and then trek deeper into Korowai territory across the 'pacification line' – an imaginary border drawn by Dutch missionaries to demarcate those clans unaccustomed to outsiders. Finally, we hoped to exit the sea of green by hitching a ride back to Dekai on a construction truck we had been told trundled up and down a new road that was slowly being built into the highlands. Not that there was any sign of it at that point on Google Earth, let alone on any map.

For decades, hidden behind a curtain of thick jungle, the Korowai Batu were in an almost constant state of conflict: among themselves, against other Korowai clans and with the neighbouring Kopayap tribe. The fighting kept proselytizing missionaries at bay until the late 1970's and, more recently, prevented the encroachment of gaharu – agarwood – traders that have plagued the Asmat people further south. The hostilities were rationale for the Korowai remaining in their treehouses which lie at the heart of their cultural identity. At night, or when under attack, whole families along with their valuable pigs and hunting dogs could retreat to the safety of their arboreal homes, some of which tower 35m off the ground. These days, with the cessation of hostilities, the mid-air structures are shrinking in height but are still highly valued for the relief that they provide from insects.

The Korowai are widely acknowledged by anthropologists to have been among the last people on earth to practice cannibalism. Even today, there are reports of them still eating human flesh, although historically it was only practiced in very specific ritualistic

**FUNKY FUNGI**

The leaf litter sustains a rich diversity of insects, mosses and fungi.

circumstances that revolved around the concept of the 'khakhua', or male witch. The Korowai traditionally had no knowledge of the deadly diseases that infest the jungle and believed that these mysterious deaths that continue to kill most members of the tribe before the age of 40, are caused by witches who assumed the form of men. A dying victim whispers to their relatives the name of the person they believe to be the khakhua. Definitive retribution and the complete expunging of evil spirits is then achieved by consuming the witch. Men killed in fighting on the other hand, were never eaten.

"Sometimes things change, sometimes they don't," said Phyllis matter-of-factly, as we pulled up to Mabul, its shiny new jetty burnished red in the setting sun. I had no idea what to expect but it quickly became clear that, at least here, things had changed. A lot. Mabul had expanded exponentially and now housed sixty or so wooden shacks, a Catholic church, school and (empty) clinic. Everyone was wearing tattered clothing rather than traditional attire and swarmed around us as we unpacked our gear and painstakingly negotiated rates for porters.

Next morning we set off into the primary jungle. Colossal trees, with enormous buttresses, supported a canopy that kept temperatures surprisingly cool. It also reverberated with a cacophony of sounds: shrieking eclectus parrots loudly advertised their presence, while birds of paradise whistled tunefully, heard but seldom seen. The booming calls of the giant hornbill made me miss my old motorbike, while at night, crickets and toads ramped up the decibels still further, as fireflies danced in the trees. The place was overwhelmingly alive. Everything cut, clung, scraped and snagged. Mosquitoes whined and bit incessantly. Leeches and pig flies drew blood. And nothing ever dried.

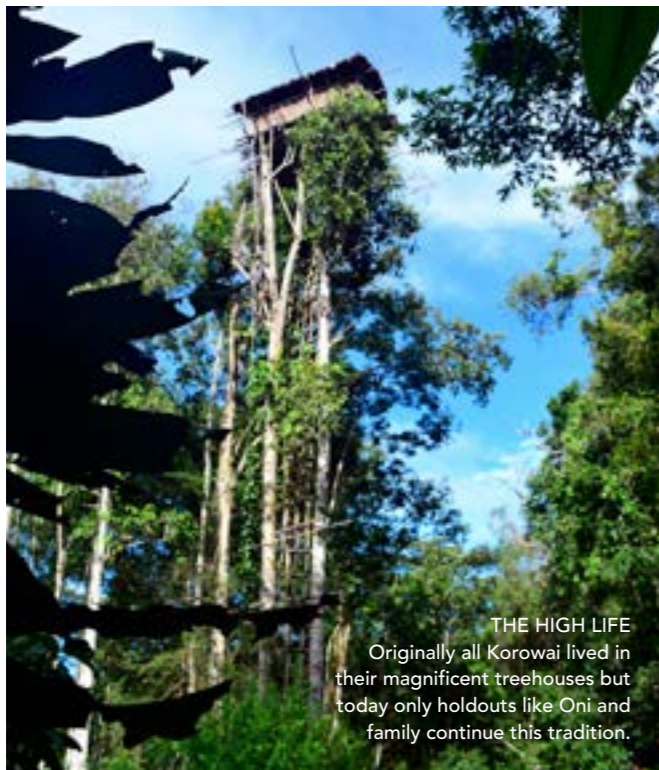
Within a day of Mabul, we came upon our first Korowai treehouse, resembling a giant bird's nest at a quick glance. It certainly felt high enough to be one as I climbed the rickety ladder, trying not to look down as the rattan ties and wooden rungs strained and creaked under my weight. It was deserted – close to Mabul, the structures were seemingly occupied only 'upon request' and had mostly been commissioned by international film crews, some of whom had never even shown up to pay for their construction. The treehouses were not inhabited: everyone now lived in the village, so we pushed on northwards towards Baigun, a day-and-a-half away, in search of more than just a photo-op.

We were now in uncharted territory. Few white faces have ever ventured beyond Mabul so this was no place to have an accident. I was traversing yet another slippery log bridge, my nerves fraying at the sight of the river raging beneath, when I voice called out. 'Sore' ('Afternoon' – in Indonesia you say hello based on the time of day), it said, though as I was barely halfway across the log, I struggled to look up. Gingerly, I inched towards the bank and gratefully grasped an outstretched hand.

Oni was tall and wiry, with unusually large feet and greying hair. He was wearing a pig-tooth necklace, two rattan hoops around his waist and a tobacco leaf wrapped around his foreskin. In his other hand he held a bow, a cluster of barbed bamboo arrows and a dead

CASTLE IN THE AIR
Though Kokowai treehouses are today built lower to the ground, still all have a precarious ladder which few visitors handle with the ease that locals display.





THE HIGH LIFE
Originally all Korowai lived in their magnificent treehouses but today only holdouts like Oni and family continue this tradition.

tree kangaroo (which I later discovered tastes like liver-y lamb). We followed him home and climbed a ‘ladder’ of footholds carved into a single, stout wooden pole up to his treehouse.

Sat on a platform about twenty metres off the ground, the house was built around an ‘ironwood’ tree. The floor, made of interwoven bamboo strips, was covered in tree bark and divided into two separate areas for men and women. The smoke-blackened roof was woven from palm leaves and decorated with fish and cassowary bones, turtle shells, and crocodile skulls. A lovely breeze cooled the now slightly bemused residents within: Oni’s two wives wearing nothing more than sago skirts, his sister (likewise), two hobbled hunting dogs and a piglet.

We were made at home and I was offered a piece of baked sago to chew on and a bamboo pipe. Both are staples of the Korowai. The sago was rubbery and gritty at the same time, while nicotine is clearly the drug of choice (frustratingly the Korowai didn’t seem to have mastered the art of making alcohol). Children as young as five routinely roll up and puff away. In a community rife with malaria, where half of all children die young, the relative health risks of tobacco obviously pale in comparison.

I asked Oni if he ever went to Mabul to visit his two adolescent sons. “Never,” he replied with evident disinterest. He is one of the older generation still living an isolated, traditional life, and exuded



ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE
Whether they live in treehouses or government-supported villages, the Korowai are clinging uncertainly to remnants of their culture.

Reluctantly, we handed over the spirit-calming cash. Instantly our armed antagonists transformed before our eyes and without a hint of irony, offered to accompany us towards the road, all smiles.

the calm confidence of someone free from the pressure to be who they are not. The younger generation that I had encountered in Mabul, on the other hand, were clearly grappling with the tribe’s tentative, yet rapid steps out of the stone-age. In the new settlements, hierarchical and collective social structures are starting to break down and an ancient repository of knowledge is sadly being consigned to the past. Elders have the option of staying put or returning to the trees. The Korowai youth, however, are increasingly detached from the natural environment and cling tightly to their signal-free phones, symbols of a tenuous link to the edge of a materialistic world that has – at least thus far – marginalised and failed them.

It strikes me that this detachment is a phenomenon that many of us struggle with on a more subtle level, with the popularity of ‘back to the wild’ programming on our television sets just one example.

Perhaps our romantic tendency in places like Papua to focus on the tribal rituals, traditional dress and age-old construction techniques is an echo of our own often suppressed need to reassert fading cultural identities in a globalised world.

After two days with Oni, we decided to push even further north towards Burumakot to try and find Uganto, one of Phyllis’ ‘old friends’ from the sago feast. A fiercely independent Korowai warrior, he, like Oni, lived by the old rules of the jungle and had five wives.

“He may be still out there, in the jungle, about two days away,” said our guide, after we announced the plan, “but our porters refuse to go. They say he steals their women.”

Without porters, we set off to trek as lightly as possible, assured by our guide that we could live off the land. The jungle is so universally green, that any flash of colour immediately catches your eye, yet nearly all our enquiries about tasty-looking fruits or fungi



PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The jungle is almost always wet and is usually flooded. The 'dry' season is between May and October but 'dry' is a relative term.

How to get there

Garuda and Lion Air offer flights to the capital of Indonesian Papua – Jayapura – originating in Jakarta and stopping in Bali and Timika en route. From Jayapura, there is one daily flight by turbo prop to the town of Dekai. From there it takes one day to reach Mabul by boat, although alternative jumping off points to the Korowai region will probably develop over time, with the completion of the new road.

What to take

To trek in the region you will need to take almost all food (which can be purchased in Dekai) and camping equipment with you. Beyond Mabul there is no trekking infrastructure at all, so everything needs to be planned and prepared, expedition-style. Anti-malarials (e.g. malarone), a small water purifier, antibiotics (cuts get infected easily and are slow to heal) and insect spray are essential. The best footwear is probably a good quality pair of jungle boots e.g. Wellcos.

Paperwork/permits

Trekking in the region technically requires a travel permit that you need to apply for beforehand in Jayapura though it is possible you will never be asked to show it.

How to do it

There are local trekking companies in Jayapura offering basic trips to Mabul which some still advertise as fantastical first-contact trips. Trekking independently beyond Mabul as the author did is difficult and relatively expensive. You will need a local guide and porters you can trust completely. Be prepared for a true seat-of-the-pants adventure.

About the author

Adrian Bottomley is the owner of Whistling Arrow, www.whistlingarrow.com, a Hong Kong-based trekking specialist which organises expeditions across Asia.

tended to be urgently rebutted. One exception was 'buah merah', which looks like a red jackfruit and is believed by the Korowai to be a remedy for almost anything, including cancer, although its curative powers seemingly do not extend to the elephantiasis or ringworm which we continued to see all around us. For the most part, we ate small catfish and pudgy sago grubs, each as slimy as the other. My personal favourite was banana heart, which, when fried, and you are famished, almost tastes like bacon.

Uganto was not there. His old treehouse (they are typically rebuilt every six to seven years) was 'locked', the ladder barred at the bottom by two crisscrossed branches. A 'woman's hut' nearby, where Korowai mothers give birth and live separately for a few months with their newborn babies hinted at a recent addition to the family.

We camped and waited for two days but no one came. Perhaps they had also resettled? Perhaps they had retreated even further into the jungle, wary of the encroaching road? They, like all 4,000 Korowai, have a tough decision to make. What to keep and what to change? What should they hang on to as Korowai and what should they adopt as newfangled Indonesian and Papuan citizens?

Without Uganto, a local strongman, we were fairly exposed this far north as we pushed on towards the road. We had run out of clean clothes, were covered in insect bites and had lost weight. Our sole

goal now was to reach the road and, hopefully, a ride back to Dekai. The last thing we needed that night was a prehistoric stick-up.

Being the victim of extortion is never fun but the presence of loaded bows brought a whole new level of jeopardy. The expression 'being shafted' crossed my mind later but at the time it was no laughing matter. I was bewildered though, feeling a kind of euphoria due to the utter strangeness of the situation. I'd seen nothing that the Korowai had obviously had to buy: their building materials and food came from the forest, the tobacco was home-grown and they wore no clothes. We were experiencing first-hand one of the ramifications of the whirlwind cultural transition that the Korowai are attempting: until very recently, the Korowai had never seen money or had any use for it. The government just hands them as much as they need to build shacks in the new settlements so they assume that any outsider has an unlimited supply of the stuff. Consequently, they just pluck numbers out of the sky.

Reluctantly, we handed over the spirit-calming cash. Instantly our armed antagonists transformed before our eyes and without a hint of irony, offered to accompany us towards the road, all smiles.

I couldn't help but be irked by the loss of the money and along the way I toyed with the idea of negotiating a rebate with our newfound friends. I soon thought better of it though. We were

helplessly beholden to their knowledge of the land. Without them we might easily be lost forever. Not to mention the fact that they had bows and knew very well how to use them.

One day later, we reached the road where we camped overnight, before flagging down a gigantic truck the next day. The driver looked at us dumbstruck and ushered us into the back where, sat atop a large fuel tank being transported to Dekai, we both lit up a clove cigarette and savoured the sweet smoke. Sod it. It had been a hard trip and we deserved it. We laughed, relieved to be 'safely' on our way back to a proper bed and a good meal. Swarms of giant fruit bats were swooping out of a deep red sunset, looking like squadrons of World War II bombers. The trip had been hugely ambitious, and mentally and physically gruelling. We'd eaten grubs and kangaroos, picked about a billion bugs off our bodies and clambered into treehouses the height of tower blocks. Above all we had witnessed a people on the cusp of massive anthropological change, switching sago for Samsungs. After all the effort, our payoff was golden, fleeting moments of reflection such as this. Which reminded me . . .

"What the hell are they going to do with all that money? The nearest shop is almost a week's walk away," I shouted over the clanging as the truck bucked and swayed down the rough road.

"Haven't got a clue," said Phyllis, smiling. **AA**

PHOTO (BELOW): PHYLLIS HISCHIER



IT ALL STARTED HERE
The Korowai sago grub fertility festival, witnessed by Phyllis Hischier in 2008.