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As Worlds Divide



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Images taken in Mentawai by Tariq Zaidi Photography

LOGLINE

Young Australian man travels to the remote, tropical islands of Mentawai to pursue a more meaningful life. What he discovers keeps him there for over seven years.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

After the collapse of the global economy in 2008, Rob Henry decides to leave his job in Melbourne and go in search of a more meaningful life. Arriving to the tropical Islands of Mentawai, Indonesia, he finds himself living in a small coconut farming settlement.

Filmed over the course of eight years, As Worlds Divide takes us on an intimate journey inside the lives of an indigenous people who are losing connection with their land and culture. The impacts are devastating, but for the Mentawai there is hope amidst a small community of tribes-people still living traditionally and abundantly in the forest.

LONG SYNOPSIS

As Worlds Divide follows the journey of Rob Henry, a young Australian who – after the collapse of the global economy in 2008 – leaves his Melbourne city-life behind and travels to the Mentawai Islands in Indonesia in the hope of finding a more meaningful life.

Living in a small coconut-farming village on a remote island, Rob quickly realises how inept he is - particularly with no knowledge of the languages being spoken. He makes problematic attempts at growing his own food and engaging in village life, but often to no avail. Determined to learn how the Mentawai people survive, he looks to the villagers for help.

As months pass by, Rob develops close relationships with those in the village, who take the time to teach him the local dialect and skills necessary to survive. His Mentawai friends begin opening up to him about their lives and the challenges they face. It soon becomes clear that, despite the idyllic appearance and abundance of natural resources, their societal systems are failing them. The people are struggling to survive.

Rob meets a village elder who reveals that when he was a child his family was forcibly removed from their land and into a resettlement village. Learning about Soekarno's assimilation program (incl. archival footage), Rob is disheartened; expecting that the entire Mentawai population has now been displaced from their Indigenous way of life.



Rob then learns that deep in the forest a small group of Mentawai tribes-people have maintained their Indigenous culture and are still practicing traditional ceremony and rituals. Eager to see what this 'tradition' looks like, Rob sets off immediately.

Travelling for over 10 hours in a dugout canoe, Rob arrives to the clan's home. The people are delighted he can speak their language and the Sikerei (shaman) welcome him in. Rob is shocked by how different these people are compared to those he'd met in the resettlement villages. It seems impossible that the Mentawai were all living this way only a few generations ago.

A shaman named Masit Dere and his wife adopt Rob into their home. He remains living there for over a year. During this time, they teach him about Mentawai cultural practices, values and the various roles within which have enabled them to sustain survival for thousands of years. Reflecting on his experiences living with resettled Mentawai who've been displaced from their culture, Rob realises just how much the majority population have lost.



Although colonised by the Dutch in the 1800s, the Mentawai Islands remained independent and, for the most part, the people free to maintain their traditional way of life. However, In 1950, shortly after Indonesia gained its independence, President Soekarno claimed ownership of the Islands. Four years later, he began introducing his resettlement programs, forcing the Mentawai to assimilate and forgo their tribal land and traditional culture.

The scale of this issue and all that is at stake for the future of Mentawai begins to take toll on Rob. He feels a deep connection to the people, land and culture, but finds it impossible to stay whilst knowing how severe the threat to their way of life. He decides to return home to Australia to try and make sense of it all.

Whilst trying to reacclimatise with Western life (quite humorously), Rob researches the plight of Indigenous Mentawai. Through this, he engages with two young Mentawai men, Esmat and August, who are studying at university on mainland Indonesia. Both are campaigning to protect their culture and they invite Rob to assist them.

Rob returns to Mentawai, with Esmat and August leading the way. Their mission is to instigate positive change by providing the community access to a cultural education, reconnecting their people with the land and their identity before it's too late.

WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR MENTAWAI PEOPLE?

Over the past 62 years indigenous Mentawai have been resettled into government-run villages. Within these settlements they use mainstream educational systems to promote nationalised ideology and offer no support for people to learn about their traditional culture and land.

In a survey conducted by August Sikatsila and a team of local researchers, it was found that 89.9% of the community believe they are not learning enough about their land or culture; even though it is believed more important to their survival than learning to read or write.



There is currently very little opportunity for employment throughout the Islands and so the skill, knowledge and connection to their culture and land is their primary source of subsistence. For most, this is what sustains the survival of their families, yet they have no access to this education.

The Mentawai elders still in possession of this ancient knowledge, in particular Sikerei, have expressed a strong desire to share it with the wider community. Teaching others about culture and survival has always been the role of Sikerei, but under the current settlement system the opportunity to do so does not exist.

Mentawai elders believe cultural education holds the key to preventing long-term suffering and poverty for their people. However, with the population of Sikerei rapidly diminishing (approx. 200 remain), the opportunity to pass this knowledge on to the next generation is on the verge of disappearing, forever. The time to act is now.





THE IMPACTS OF INDIGENOUS DISPLACEMENT ON A GLOBAL SCALE

Indigenous people make up 5% of the world's population. But, despite their coming from predominantly resource-rich areas, they represent 15% of the world's poorest people.

Yet, in spite of this awareness and these distressing figures, very little progress has been made. Indigenous peoples continue to suffer.

To be effective, solutions must be targeted at the root cause of the large-scale problems being faced by indigenous communities throughout the world: the displacement from their lands, resources, cultural knowledge, values and identity, and the lack of support for communities to re-establish this connection.

The way forward is for indigenous peoples to empower themselves, as communities, through education. But it has to be the right type of education. Current systems, whereby foreign curriculum is introduced in place of their own, are not only failing as proposed solutions but are in fact at the helm of its very cause.

What people forget to recognize is that indigenous peoples are the founders of sustainable development. Their survival, as societies, for tens of thousands of years across a vastly diverse range of ecosystems, should be evidence enough for this to be acknowledged.

To the contrary, these indigenous education systems and their unique cultures and understanding are being ignored as a possible means to sustainable solutions. And, through this abandonment and lack of recognition, a large number of these ancient cultures now no longer exist.

This is a critical time to fight for the protection of indigenous people and their human right to access and develop their own educational solutions so as to prevent long-term suffering and poverty.



KEY PERSONNEL



ROB HENRY | PRODUCER / DIRECTOR

Rob is an independent filmmaker with a passion for social justice and human rights. Born in Australia, he is currently making his feature-length Producing/Directing debut with *'As Worlds Divide'*, which began in 2008. As part of this project Rob has founded the *Indigenous Education Foundation*, which empowers displaced indigenous communities to develop and sustain their own educational solutions.



JANE USHER | EDITOR

Jane is an award winning film and television editor with over 25 years experience spanning into comedy, drama and feature film (both drama and documentary). Her recent Documentary credits include Editor on *'The Unlikely Pilgrims'*; Editor on *'The Will to Fly'*; and Editor on *'That Sugar Film'*, which is Australia's highest grossing documentary of all time and won Best Documentary at the 2015 AACTA awards.



AJ BRADFORD | SOUND DESIGN / MIX

AJ runs Tender Trap Studios and has been working in music/sound for over 20 years. Credits include composer for the ABC documentary *'Ned Kelly Uncovered'* and composer for the Hugo Weaving narrated feature documentary *'Inside the Firestorm'*, for which AJ won an AFI (AACTA 2010) Award for Best Sound In A Documentary. Sound designer credits include AACTA Social Shorts winning (ABC series) *'Australian Encounters'*, and most recently Music Editor for TV series *'8MMM Aboriginal Radio'*



DAVID KAHNE | COMPOSER

David is a Music Producer and Composer based in New York. He has composed scores for a number of films including Alex Gibney's documentary about Lance Armstrong entitled *'The Armstrong Lie'*. David has written three full-length ballets and produced albums for a vast number of international artists. In 1994 he was awarded a Grammy for Album of the Year. He has also held senior executive roles as Vice-President at both Columbia Records and Warner Bros Records.



PRODUCTION STILLS

We have an extensive library of photographs and video footage captured in and around Mentawai since the project began in 2008. A selection of these have been packaged and are available upon request. Alternatively, individual photographs or video as seen on the As Worlds Divide website or other can also be requested.



MAIN CHARACTERS



AMAN MASIT DERE

Masit Dere is Sikerei, a shaman. He and his wife adopt Rob into their home and share with him the Mentawai way of life. Proud and passionate about his culture, Aman Masit Dere is the key protagonist in indigenous Mentawai's fight to protect their cultural way of life.



JUMER

Jumer is Aman Masit Dere's grandson. Aged 3 when he first appears, Jumer - quite humorously at times - displays the path of Mentawai children being raised in the forest. Learning the ways of a tribal lifestyle, Jumer appears set to follow in his grandfather's footsteps.



ROB HENRY

Rob is a young Australian who takes us on a journey from his office job in Melbourne deep into the lives of an ancient tribal culture.



GAJEI

Gajei is Rob's closest neighbour in the coconut-farming community. Hardened by her struggles for survival here, Gajei, a mother of five, exemplifies the desperation present in those who've lost connection with their culture.



JUSTINACE

Justinace is Rob's closest friend in the coconut-farming village. Father of 2, Jablah is a hardworking man who provides very honest and insightful explanations with regards to the impacts of modernisation here.



AMAN TABILIK KUNEN

Tabilik Kunen is Sikerei, a shaman. Very animated and articulate, Aman Tabilik Kunen offers great insight into an important aspect of Mentawai cultural education - the core values and beliefs, and the role these play in maintaining a peaceful and sustainable existence.



ESMAT WANDRA SAKULOK

Esmat is a young Mentawai man who, after finishing high-school, completed a university degree in Jakarta. Realising the value of his culture, Esmat returns home to help educate others in protecting and being proud of their Identity.



