Papa Bilong Chimbu

A 54-minute documentary.


Versions available: English, German, Pidgin English (Tok Pisin)

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One Line Synopsis
The story of a man’s journey into an unknown culture that was to become his home.

One Paragraph Synopsis
In 1937 a young missionary, Father John Nilles, arrived in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. There he would stay for the next 54 years, living with the people of Chimbu, learning their language and way of life, introducing them to his God and Western culture. More than just a priest, he would become an anthropologist, linguist, politician and clan leader. Through Nilles’ extraordinary archive of photos, diaries and letters as well as interviews with those who knew him, filmmaker Verena Thomas pieces together a portrait of this fascinating man – her great-uncle. What she discovers is an unexpected new family, who had made ‘Papa’ Nilles one of their own. Presenting a personal perspective on ‘big picture’ history, Papa Bilong Chimbu offers a thought-provoking insight into the complexity of cultural exchange.

Long Synopsis
In 1937 a young Catholic missionary, Father John Nilles, arrived in the highlands of Papua New Guinea – one of the first whites the local people had ever seen. There he would stay for the next 54 years, living with the people of Chimbu, learning their language and way of life, introducing them to his God and Western culture. More than just a priest, he would become an anthropologist, linguist, politician and clan leader.

In Papa Bilong Chimbu, filmmaker Verena Thomas embarks on a journey of her own. Through Nilles’ extraordinary archive of diaries, letters and photos (which have never been seen before) as well as interviews with those who knew him, she pieces together a portrait of this fascinating man – her great-uncle.

What she discovers is an unexpected new family, who had made ‘Papa’ Nilles one of their own. More than a decade after his sudden departure, they continue to feel a deep sense of loss and injustice.

Set against a backdrop of colonialism, war, religion and the birth of a nation, Papa Bilong Chimbu offers a personal perspective on ‘big picture’ history by tracing the story of one man and his legacy. It’s a story about respect and what it means to belong. A thought-provoking insight into the complexity of cultural exchange, and the beauty, vulnerability and strength of a country and its people.

Note
Papa Bilong Chimbu is Pidgin English for ‘Father of the Chimbu’. Chimbu is now commonly spelled ‘Simbu’ but the older spelling is used here for consistency. The local language is known as Kuman.
Director’s Statement

My great-uncle John Nilles had always created a fascination in me, a fascination with his life, with the foreign culture he lived in, with the ‘far away’. I remember when I was eight years old I was excited about receiving letters from him and about having stamps that no one else had. (It’s those beautiful, evocative, brightly coloured stamps that form the opening animation in *Papa Bilong Chimbu*, and set the tone for the graphics throughout the film.)
Papua New Guinea, as a country, held a similar fascination. In 2001, I finally had the opportunity to travel there – on my own with a video camera – intending to record some of the people, history and culture I had heard about for so long.
I was overwhelmed by how warmly the people of Chimbu received me, as Nilles’ great-niece, and how vividly they remembered him. He had died when I was 15 and, although he was a figure of some renown back home in Germany (our village even had a street named after him), his image, for us, was created largely by his absence.
The more detail I discovered, the more amazing I found his story and the history that was part of it. In his roles as missionary, anthropologist, linguist, politician and clan leader, John Nilles’ life was directly linked to the recent history of Papua New Guinea, especially in the highlands. Through my conversations with the Chimbu people I also came to realise that my great-uncle’s departure, towards the end of his life, was still a matter of contention and a source of grief. He had lived in the Chimbu province for 54 years and that was where he was meant to be buried. Instead, his remains were in Germany, where he had died in 1993.
It had never occurred to me that his leaving would affect the people of Chimbu so much. In making this documentary I wanted to acknowledge their sense of loss and disappointment, find out more about what they remembered, and create a document for them in recognition of my great-uncle and their shared history.
But it is also important to me to bring this story to a wider audience as I believe it offers us a different, less simplistic perspective of traditional culture, the impact of colonialism and the role of missionaries to the views that I, for one, had grown up with.
I feel too that the media depiction of Papua New Guinea is often negative so I wanted to make a positive film about the experience I had had and the wonderful people I had met.
With these new aims in mind, I returned to Papua New Guinea in 2004 with anthropologist Sandra Welkerling on sound and Bao Waiko (whose father is Papua New Guinean) as cameraman. Again, it was like being welcomed into one large, open-hearted family.
I had never experienced so much attention from so many people. And it wasn’t because I was a tall white German girl; it was because I was related to Papa Nilles.
Biographies

**Director/Producer**
**Verena Thomas**

Born in Germany, Verena Thomas is now based in Sydney, where she completed a Masters of Media Arts and Production at the University of Technology. For the last decade she has worked in the Australian and international film and television industries as a motion graphics designer and editor. During that time, she has focused primarily on non-fiction and has been involved in a number of award-winning documentaries. She combines her technical knowledge and interest in strong visual concepts with a passion for social and political documentary. *Papa Bilong Chimbu* is Verena’s first long-form documentary as director and producer. In 2006, she returned to Papua New Guinea to show the film at a series of community screenings. Now, as part of her Doctorate of Creative Arts, she is working to set up media workshops in the Chimbu province of PNG to enable the people to record and tell their own stories.

**Co-producer**
**Penny Jope**

Penny Jope graduated with a Bachelor of Media Studies from Melbourne’s La Trobe University in 2002. Her first short documentary, *Drive: Making Regional News*, won an ATOM (Australian Teachers of Media) award for best tertiary documentary. After graduating, she moved to Sydney and started collaborating with Verena Thomas on projects such as the award-winning short documentary *Unfinished Business* (Winner, Art of Documentary Canberra and ReelLife Sydney, 2003). Recently Penny was unit manager on the TV series *MythBusters* for Discovery Channel and Researcher on *Taboo* for National Geographic. She is currently working for the Channel Nine travel program *Get Away*. *Papa Bilong Chimbu* is the first long-form documentary she has produced.
Quotes from Papa Bilong Chimbu

Fr Nilles was not a white man; he was a Kanaka. – YUANIS MIUGKE

He was the father of the Chimbu. We call him Papa. – ANGELA BONGGERE

One Sunday in Denglagu when I spoke about God, the creator of all things, one big man stood up shouted loudly, ‘Patere, Patere, you listen. What you said now is from your faith but not what we believe.’ This reaction taught me three things: first, that he understood my words; second, that he did not agree with me; and third, that I would have to find new ways to explain my concept of God to make him understand. – EXTRACT FROM FR NILLES’ BOOK They Went Out to Sow (Romae 1987)

When the missionaries came... we were so excited about the new goods they brought, so we threw away [our] belief in [the] sun and moon. – NOAH DIANGE

He knew us very well and followed our culture, so we trusted him and we followed his instructions. Some customs are bad, he told us to get rid of. The good ones we should keep. – JOSEPH TEMBE

I must admit that, despite having lived among the Chimbu for a long time, there are still many things about them which I cannot fully understand. – EXTRACT FROM FR NILLES’ SPEECH ON HIS 75TH BIRTHDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 1980

You took him to your home and we don’t know whether you killed a pig. – ELIZABETH GAMBUGL
Brief Chronology

1884 Southeastern part of the island of New Guinea becomes a British colony, known as the Territory of Papua. Germany quickly follows and claims northeastern part of New Guinea as the protectorate of German New Guinea, also known as Kaiser-Wilhelmsland.

1905 John Nilles is born in Germany.


1921 The two territories of Papua and New Guinea are merged, later becoming a UN Trusteeship under Australia.

1933 First missionary arrives in the Papua and New Guinea highlands – Fr Schaefer, a German Catholic, establishes the first mission station in the Chimbu valley at Dimbi.

1935 Australian government temporarily restricts access to the highlands after two missionaries, Fr Frank Eugene and Fr Karl Morschheuser, are killed.

1937 Fr Nilles arrives in the highlands to establish a new mission station at Denglagu.

1942 As World War Two spreads to the Pacific, missionaries are evacuated from the highlands. Fr Nilles is interned for a short time in Australia along with other ‘enemy aliens’.

1943 Fr Nilles begins his anthropology degree at the University of Sydney, which he completes in 1950 with a thesis titled ‘The Kuman of Chimbu’.

1947 Fr Nilles returns to the highlands.

1951 After 17 years of missionary work, Fr Nilles returns to his home village of Hemmersdorf in Germany for a year.

1970 Fr Nilles is voted into parliament as a representative of the Chimbu district in the House of Assembly, where he serves for two years.

1971 Papua and New Guinea is renamed Papua New Guinea (PNG).

1973 PNG becomes self-governing.

1975 PNG achieves full independence.

1978 The Siambugla people honour Fr Nilles with the name of their greatest leader, Kawagle.

1984 Fr Nilles receives an Order of the British Empire medal (OBE).

1987 Fr Nilles’ history of the Catholic mission in the highlands, *They Went Out to Sow*, is published.

1990 Fr Nilles returns to Germany, suffering ill health.

1993 Fr Nilles dies in Germany at the age of 88.
CREDITS

In Memory of
Father John Nilles Kawagle
(1905-1993)

Thanks to all the Chimbu people
who have shared their stories.

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VERENA THOMAS

Co-Producer
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“Unterm Doppeladler”
Composed by Joseph Franz Wagner
performed by Musikverein Hemmersdorf

Sources
Footage supplied by
Film Australia
Saarländischer Rundfunk

“Yumi Yet”
(Dennis O’Rourke, 1976)
Footage supplied by Camerawork Pty Ltd

“First Contact”
(Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, 1983)
Footage supplied by Arundel Productions

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Collection of John Nilles

National Archives of Australia SP11/2,
GERMAN/NILLES J
From the Collection of the National Archives of Australia

Private Archives
Margareta Nilles
Thekla Grueneisen
Theresa Thomas
Hermann and Cecilia Simon
Helga Uhrig, Marion Uhrig
Otto Wagner
Father George
Brother Prass

Music recorded at
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Mingende Church
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Music

“Regiments Kinder”
Composed by Julius Fucik
performed by Musikverein Hemmersdorf

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