

What is in three names?

At least three names are in use for the territory in question, each with its own loaded political value.

The name **New Guinea** has its origin in the 1545 sighting by Spanish explorer Ortiz de Retes, who was struck by the similarity of its coastline and its inhabitants with West Africa.¹ **Papua**, which is thought to have derived from a Malay word meaning “frizzy-haired,” was adopted in 1526 by Portuguese explorer Jorge de Meneses, who noticed the natives’ resemblance to Africans.² It has also been translated as “no father,” a reference to the lack of strong leaders to protect locals from slave traders. In 1660, the Dutch East India Company declared itself “lord of the Papuans” by treaty with the Sultan of Tidore, in the process lending weight to Tidore’s claims to overlordship.³ Dutch claims were not formalized until the late nineteenth century, when the Netherlands moved to forestall German or British control by declaring a claim to the western half of the island, and it was not until this point that any Dutch presence was established.

The island was divided into Netherlands New Guinea, German New Guinea and Papua, a British protectorate administered by Australia. After the First World War, the German colony passed to an Australian mandate, and Australia began administering the eastern half of the island as the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. The western half was officially known as Netherlands New Guinea (Nederlands Nieuw-Guinea) but more often referred to as West New Guinea in international circles.

At a Dutch-sponsored gathering in 1946 to discuss the future of Indonesia, composed of delegates from Dutch-controlled parts of Indonesia, Papuan delegate Franz Kaisiepo proposed a new, non-colonial name: **Iryan (or Irian)**. The word was drawn from the language of Biak, Kaisiepo’s offshore island home, and referred to the New Guinea mainland. Its meaning was the heat that burns away the haze, giving the mainland the appearance of a “hot, shimmering land, rising from the sea.”⁴ The word Irian was used in the legend of Koreri, so had ancient provenance.⁵ Irian apparently had different meanings throughout the territory, including “people and high places,” “our land,” “virgin nature,” “hot land,” and “band of slaves.”⁶ Both Franz and his cousin Markus Kaisiepo saw it as a nationalist replacement for Papua, which they saw as derogatory.⁷ It was also preferred by pro-Indonesian groups as shown in the name *Partai Kemerdekaan Irian Indonesia*.

Although Indonesians were still speaking of “Papua” in 1945, Sukarno would later transform the name into **IRIAN**, a slogan for *Ikut Republik Indonesia Anti-Nederland*, Follow the Republic of Indonesia Against the Netherlands. To distinguish it from the other half of the island, it was officially called **Irian Barat**, West Irian. “Irian” and “West Irian” were generally used interchangeably, since “East Irian” was not used for the Australian possession (eventually independent as Papua New Guinea, or in its nationalist pidgin spelling, Papua Niugini). Irian

¹ John Daidemo Waiko, *A Short History of Papua New Guinea* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 17; *The Truth About West Irian*, p. 9.

² Brackman, p. 93; Waiko, p. 17.

³ Bruno Lasker, “Western New Guinea, Past and Present,” *Far Eastern Survey* 21 (1952): 54.

⁴ Osborne, p. 14; Makkateru Syamsuddin, *Asal Mula Nama Irian* (Jakarta: Kita Utama Murni, 1975); Rex Rumakiek, “West Papua Nationalism,” *West Papua Bulletin* 5 (1995): 16.

⁵ Syamsuddin; “The Origins of the Name Irian,” article posted on IRJA.org home page.

⁶ *West Irian and the World*, p. 1; Justus van der Kroef, “Towards ‘Papua Barat,’” *Australian Quarterly* 34 #1 (March 1962), p. 21fn; Herlina, p. 5.

⁷ van der Veur, “Political,” p. 58; Ajala, “Inside West Irian,” *ROI* June-July ‘62: 13-4.

Barat became the official name after the Indonesian take-over. The province was renamed **Irian Jaya**, Victorious Irian, by President Suharto to mark the inauguration of the Freeport mine in 1973. In 1999 it was announced that Irian Jaya would be divided into three provinces, East, Central and West Irian.

Partly because Irian was the preferred Indonesian term, the Papuan National Congress in 1961 decided that their independent country would be known as **Papua Barat**, West Papua. This name had been used by the Koreri movement, whose traditions the new nationalists were deliberately building upon in their nation-building project.⁸ In fact, it is possible that "Papua Barat" was also first suggested at that time by Markus Kaisiepo, a devout Koreri follower.⁹ The Dutch administration accepted the name West Papua but it was rejected in Indonesia, except when a delegation of the New Guinea Council (renamed West Papua Council) toured Indonesia in late 1962. West Papua remains the preferred nationalist term, especially by the *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM), Free Papua Movement.

West Papua was also referred to (in English) as **West Melanesia**, to go alongside Middle Melanesia (PNG) and East Melanesia (the Solomon Islands) in the prospective Melanesian Federation. This name was Nicolaas Jouwe's first choice.¹⁰ The term Melanesia was first coined by French explorer Dumont D'Urville in 1832 from the Greek Mela (black), and looked like a valid political counterpart to Indonesia (islands of India).¹¹ West Melanesia is still used occasionally, as is West Papua Niugini.

To add confusion, the capital has been consecutively named Port Numbay, Hollandia, Kota Baru (New Town), Sukarnopura, and Jayapura (Victory Town).

Part of the international struggle was an attempt by all sides to have their preferred name used. When John Foster Dulles referred to "West Irian" in a *Foreign Affairs* article, Dutch foreign minister Luns took the time in their next meeting to object to the name as "Malayan" rather than "native Papuan." (Dulles apologized, saying he had thought Irian was simply a newer name, like Taiwan for Formosa.)¹²

Indonesians were equally adamant. "The name 'Papuan' is not popular, it is even insulting," Ambassador Wiryopranoto said in the UN. "What does Papuan mean? Papuan means a people without civilization."¹³

⁸ Osborne 11; Ian Bell, Herb Feith & Ron Hatley, "The West Papuan Challenge to Indonesian Authority in Irian Jaya: Old Problems, New Possibilities," *Asian Survey* 26 #5 (May 1986), p. 544.

⁹ Nonie Sharp, *The Morning Star in Papua Barat* (North Carlton, Australia: Arena Publications, 1994), p. 59.

¹⁰ Verrier, p. 223.

¹¹ Osborne, p. 1.

¹² Memorandum of conversation, Sept. 24, 1957, FRUS 1955-7, 12: 453.

¹³ Speech to UNGA, 8 Nov. 1961, OR, A/PV.1049, p. 599.