

# Sokola Rimba

## (Jungle School)

### OFC Requirements

**Film Title:** Sokola Rimba (Jungle School)  
**Director's Name:** Riri Riza  
**Producer's Name:** Mira Lesmana  
**Duration:** 90 minutes  
**Genre:** Drama, biographical  
**Language:** Indonesian with English subtitles

#### Classifiable Elements:

Elements:	Examples that could be included:
Themes	Conservation, civil rights, illegal logging of rainforest areas, education for marginalised groups of society
Violence	Nil
Sex	Nil
Language	No course language
Drug Use	Nil
Nudity	Nil

This film does not exceed any of the classifiable elements corresponding to the **G** classification.

#### Adequate synopsis

This film is based on the book of the same name written by Butet Manurung. Time Magazine's "Hero of Asia, 2004," Butet Manurung went from anthropologist to educator to activist.

Over the years, the indigenous Rimba people of Jambi have isolated themselves in order to avoid conflict with businesses trying to cut away the rain forest the Rimba call home. Surrounded more closely on all sides, they move deeper into the forest.

Butet is an activist working at a conservation organisation in Jambi, teaching literacy and maths to the children of an indigenous tribe in the upstream area of the Makekal River. After being saved by a boy from a community living in the downstream area, Butet wants to expand her jungle school but must contend with opposition. The indigenous tribe believes that learning will cause disasters in their village.

#### Sequence of scenes

A voiceover of Butet speaking, introduces the audience to the situation. *I never doubt Indonesia's wealth - 17000 islands and nearly 110 million hectares of tropical forest from Aceh to Papua. All give life to us, for me. I work for an NGO for the conservation of Bukit Dua Belas National Park, covering 65,000 hectares, in Jambi, in the southern part of Sumatra. The forest is protected by law. Ideally it should be untouched by humans. The law and the work of my organization do a lot of good for the forest. I've been working in this place for two years, yet I still question myself. What does this mean for the people who are born inside it? The jungle people....*

- The opening scene shows Butet on a motorcycle driving along a dirt track past some labourers standing around their trucks. Further into the jungle she stops and hides her bike under some branches, picks up a large backpack and heads off through the jungle. She soon stops for a drink and is approached from behind by some local people asking her if she needs help and if they can carry her things. She responds 'no thanks' and that she just needs to rest a bit.

- Whilst trekking through the jungle, Butet is unaware that she is being followed by a boy from a local tribe. The camera pans around showing some wildlife and a river. Butet stops by the river and drops the heavy backpack to the ground. She is hot and dazed and faints. The boy approaches her.
- The next scene shows Butet waking up under a makeshift shelter. An older lady offers her water saying 'Teacher, drink this remedy'. A young boy standing outside the shelter says, 'Teacher, you nearly died. Luckily, a boy from Makelal River downstream came to tell us about you'. Butet gazes around and asks herself 'who was that boy who saved me? If it's true that he is from downstream then he has walked so far to get here.'
- Butet is teaching the young children of the village how to write the letters of the alphabet. As she jumps from the small platform where her class is being held, to chase a naughty student, she looks out in to the jungle and sees a young boy standing there (it is the boy from down the river who saved her).
- Butet is walking through the jungle behind her students in single file as they are doing mental maths out loud. The young boy at the front stops suddenly and says 'hush'. They stop and listen to the sounds of the jungle. Then the chase is on as they race to spear the young boar.
- Around a campfire at night they are cooking the boar. A young boy offers Butet a piece of the meat.
- The next day in the classroom, sounds of chainsaws can be heard. A couple of young boys ask Butet, 'Teacher, why does that chainsaw keep cutting our trees?' Butet responds, 'maybe because they need wood.' One boy replies that they (the local people) use a machete so they don't take much. The other boy says 'Teacher, when we become educated, we will stop outsiders from taking our trees.' 'Come on, let's study some maths', says Butet.
- Women are down at the river, washing the clothes and gossiping. The young boy who saved Butet is wandering around the jungle when some of Butet's students come across him. They recognize him as the boy who saved their teacher and ask him what tribe he is from. They invite him to join their lessons. Butet arrives with some other students and asks his name and his chief's name. The boy is scared but tells them he is from Makekal River downstream, his chief is Belaman Badai and his name is Bungo. A little boy standing next to Butet whispers to her that diseases from downstream have come here. Bungo runs away.
- The boys are in their makeshift classroom practising maths. There is a light-hearted exchange as they try to teach one of the younger boys how to take away 3 from 10.
- Some time has passed. It's night time and Butet is standing by the campfire thinking to herself that Bungo has now come several times to watch her lessons from afar, but he doesn't come anymore and she wonders why. He seems to want to get close but is clearly suspicious of them. She thinks he must come from a tribe who are still isolated.
- It's a new day and Butet drives her motorcycle back to town, where she lives in Wanaraya, in Bangko, Jambi to visit her boss, Bahar, at the NGO office where she works. She asks him if he remembers the proposal she gave him about teaching at the downstream village. He does, and says that he thought she was already there. She tells him that she only accompanied the medical team there once and hasn't taught there yet. He tells her that they need to be careful with their budget so just focus on the children in the upstream area, as they still need her help. He then shows her a newspaper and says that the coverage they got a couple of weeks ago has got responses in Jakarta. He says that they will include it in the development report and send to their donors. He turns to go and then says, 'O yes, one more thing. Do you remember Dr Astrid Hilde? The Swedish lady that we helped do her research here, and also helped with our report and you edited her translation. She is no longer part of our project, so do not share any more data with her'. She won't be coming back here'. Butet gives him a piercing look as he walks away.
- Butet is at home and watching TV where there is a news coverage of the Indonesian

parliament trying to force President Wahid to step down and Wahid is saying it is very dangerous for the democratization of our country. Butet looks very concerned.

- In the morning, the newspapers all contain articles about the Rimba people and the challenges for them getting an education, as well as an article titled 'Finally, the Rimba people get some attention'. There is also an article on Butet's dedication as a jungle teacher.
- Having coffee at a small kiosk, Butet is joined by her work colleague, Andit, and they discuss what they feel is exaggerated press in the newspapers. Butet tells her friend that she is upset with Bahar, her boss. She feels that the work does not need to be shown off to the public. I'm embarrassed to face the village chief. For the sake of the coverage the children had to pretend to read and write until late at night – there were very sleepy! Her friend reminds her that because of this, the donors will continue the funding for the work.
- As they walk through the streets of town they discuss the situation further. Butet's friend reminds her that they have to ride three hours by motorbike to get to the border of the jungle. Then they need to stay there at least fifteen days. She questions who will pay for their logistics.
- As they walk out of a shop, a car with a European woman in the back drives past. Butet asks, 'Isn't that Dr Astrid?' Andit replies, yes, she had an argument with Bahar, I thought she'd left already.'
- Back at home that night, Butet cannot sleep. Her thoughts go to the jungle boy Bungo. She can't help but be curious about what he wants from her. She looks at a map on her wall which indicates how he travelled such a long way to see where she teaches upstream. She decides that she has to find a way to meet him again.
- In the office the next day she waits until Bahar has to leave on other business and approaches the finance officer Gustav. The next scene shows Gustav counting out money and handing it to Butet.
- Butet is being driven to the market where she purchases coffee and rice. On returning to the car, two of her students, Beindah and Nengkabau insist they know where she is going and want to go with her. She lets them in the car.
- Butet, Beindah and Nengkabau are walking through the jungle, Butet with her large backpack and portable blackboard strapped to her back. The camera pans around the forest and the wildlife as they walk, the boys practising their newly learnt Indonesian skills.
- It is night and Butet and the children are cooking dinner over a campfire.
- They continue their journey through the jungle, the children taking photos as they go. They come across a group of illegal loggers who are just about to chop down a huge tree. The boys take photos and are spotted by the loggers, who turn to shoot at them. They run to safety.
- They stumble across Dr Astrid in a small makeshift camp, tending an ill young man. Butet and Astrid warmly greet each other. They have a conversation about the NGO and how Butet and Astrid are both not liked by Bahar. Astrid complains that the government and NGO seem to look down on the jungle people, considering them stupid and primitive. But she believes that they have more understanding about the environment than anyone else. On many levels, she says, they are more advanced than us. Astrid enquires to Butet why she is here and is not pursuing other things. Butet tells her that after she graduated she was confused and didn't know what she wanted to do. At that time there was a very interesting vacancy at Wanaraya and I thought it would be a really exotic adventure – teaching in the jungle.
- They camp together in the jungle that night and Butet and the two boys set off again through the jungle the next day. Passing through areas of jungle where all the trees have been felled, they finally reach the small village downstream on the Makelal river. As they call out to signal their arrival they are told to wait a short distance away until the chief

returns and he will then see them. Butet's voiceover tells us that a great deal of sensitivity is needed when approaching the Jungle People for the first time. For many of them the outside world is too alarming. Finally the chief of the tribe arrives to see them and Beindah takes their gifts to him. He asks who they are and why they are there. Butet, explains and introduces Beindah and Nengkabau. He tells them to wait there as he takes the gifts and walks away. Again they wait for a long time, in to the night, at which time they set up their tent.

- Butet writes in her journal. I feel so guilty. I've gone on an assignment without official permission...
- In the morning Butet comes out of the tent to find Beindah talking to Bungo and some young children from the tribe, telling them they have walked for five days from upstream. He asks them if they have ever had a teacher. Then tells them they met some illegal loggers on the way.
- Bungo introduces the younger boys to Butet and says 'Teacher, they also want to study A, B, C, D, E, F, G. The chief appears and gives permission for Butet to enter their place.
- As they enter the small village, there are looks of hesitation and curiosity from the village people. Bungo helps Butet remove her heavy backpack and offers to set up Butet's hut for teaching. Butet begins her classes with the children as village life goes on around them. At one point, Bungo's mother says to him, 'I need your help too. Don't stay too long there!'
- Butet hears a conversation between some village women. They are clearly not happy with Butet's presence, as one woman asks why a woman would walk around carrying pencils. Carrying pencils will make children sick. Another woman comments that she doesn't want her son to study because if he studies, one day he will go away and never come back.
- As the days go by, more children come to join Butet's class. One day a group of men come to the village bringing gifts for the chief. Butet recognizes them as the illegal loggers they had come across in their trek to the village.
- The chief explains that the palm plantations used to be far outside their jungle, but they have moved three times already because the plantations keep getting closer to them. It's getting harder for them to survive as the forest becomes National Park. There are regulations which didn't exist in the old days. They are not allowed to hunt, or have too large a field for their crop. The camera pans across destroyed jungle, bare from illegal logging.
- Butet's presence in the village continues to bring unrest as Bungo's mother confronts the chief and demands that he sends Butet away.
- One evening Bungo shows Butet that he can now write and asks to learn more words. Butet spends more time helping him.
- Back at the office in Wanaraya, Bahar calls Gustav to his office and asks why Butet has been away for 20 days. He tells him that she went to the jungle and he thought that she had already reported to Bahar. Gustav informs the boss that all her expenses are recorded and she signed the receipt. The boss is not happy.
- Back in the jungle, the boys are out hunting and Butet is in her hut when the chief approaches her. He tells her that he doesn't know how to explain it to her but that going to school is against the law of their tribe. He explains that Bungo's mother and also the village shaman believe that the pencil brings curse and misfortunes, so Butet must leave. He tells her it is impossible for her to continue to teach in their village when so many in the village disagree. He explains that when they argue amongst each other it is already a sign that studying brings a curse.
- Butet packs up her teaching backpack and leaves the village, accompanied, of course, by Beindah and Nengkabau.

- When Bungo and the boys return from their hunting trip they see the teaching hut deserted. Bungo asks where his teacher is. He yells at the women surrounding him, 'Why did she leave? I want to study with her! I want to be able to read so that I won't keep getting fooled by the outsiders – I don't want to be a fool!' Bungo runs into the jungle as his mother screams at him to come back.
- Through the jungle across the sparse trees felled by the loggers, Bungo sees Butet, Beindah and Nengkabau trekking off in to the distance. He sits and stares....
- The scene is now back in Wanaraya, it's the middle of the night and Butet stumbles from her room, very sick, she takes two pills and collapses on to the kitchen table.
- In the next scene we see Butet's friend Andit standing over her saying, 'Sis, wake up. You need to eat.' Butet has a bad fever and appears very ill. She eats some noodles and Andit gives her some medicine.
- After Butet is well again, she explains her experience at a staff meeting in the office of the NGO in Wanaraya. She explains to them that she finally met the Belaman Badai tribe downstream of the Makelal River. She tells them that *they have moved several times because of the national park zoning and the palm plantation expansion. That she met a boy named Bungo and he showed her a letter that he could not read – none of the people in the tribe can read. The paper contained an agreement for timber exploitation in the tribal territory- and they had agreed – by giving a thumbprint on the letter they could not read. In return, they received several cans of biscuits, sugar and cigarettes. Bungo took that letter of agreement wherever he went. He was eager to show me how much he wanted to be able to read so he could refuse this foul transaction.* Bahar sighs...
- In the office of her boss Bahar, he asks Butet how she is and tells her that he has told Gustav to take care of her medical needs. But next time if she wants to go somewhere farther she has to make a written request or at least come and see him first. He adds, 'oh yeh, did you talk to Astrid?' Butet looks at her boss and squirms in her seat. 'Butet', he says, 'this organisation's priority is to maintain the area covered by the national park – and so far you can say that we have succeeded. Done!' Butet retorts, 'Succeeded? Done? The national park coverage has increased more than thirty percent. And for you, the national park should not be inhabited by humans, right?' They argue and Butet walks out of the office.
- Butet is riding her motorcycle back in to the jungle. Her voiceover explains that *the Makelal River divides Bukit Dua Belas jungle. The national park is surrounded by the palm plantations managed by the Javanese that have migrated to southern Sumatra since the 1980's. Some of them often help our work. I remember one family that came from Central Java and lived on the outskirts of the jungle....*
- Butet arrives at the Pariyan family's simple house. A woman greets her, saying that it has been a long time since they've seen each other. The woman tells Butet that her husband and son have accompanied Dr Astrid in to the jungle and will be back in a day or so. During their conversation Butet finds out that the Belaman Badai group often come to the woman's house to sell resin or rubber and to buy sugar, coffee and instant noodles. Suddenly, Butet has an idea. She asks Mrs Pariyan if she can teach in her house. Mrs Pariyan agrees.
- Butet sees a few of her Rimba students on the edge of the forest and tells them to spread the news that she is now teaching in Mrs Pariyan's house and everyone is welcome. 'Okay!' they shout.
- Butet continues to spread the word throughout the town, telling the young ones from the villages, when they come in to town, of her new 'classroom' at Mrs Pariyan's house. Beindah asks Butet, if she is no longer coming upstream to teach and she says, she won't be but they can all come over to Mrs Pariyan's house.
- Butet packs up her motorcycle with packages and leaves the office in Wanaraya as her boss, Bahar, runs outside yelling her name as she speeds off.

- Nengkabau is reading a book aloud and others are listening to him. Butet is happy with her class in Mrs Pariyan's house.
- It's early in the morning and Mrs Pariyan sees Bungo and his friends heading towards her house and runs in to wake up Butet. This is the opportunity Butet has been waiting for. Standing inside the hut she watches Bungo and his friends selling their resin to Mrs Pariyan. One of the small children with Bungo see Butet and wanders towards her smiling, then turns back to the group.
- One day Bungo appears at the house. Butet invites him to join them in the classroom to study. By this time Butet's work friend Andit is also helping to teach.
- Bungo continues to study hard and along with the other students shows great improvement.
- Back in his village, Bungo's mother watches him disappear in to the forest. He has gone to study again...
- Butet is in the jungle with her 'class', teaching them how to take photos. As they walk deeper in to the jungle Bungo whispers to his teacher, 'over there is where one of our elders has been laid to rest'. They see a very tall tree, much taller than others around it and Bungo asks if Butet has ever seen someone striking pegs in to a Sialang tree. Butet says that she hasn't.
- The camera pans all the way up the tree – high in to the sky. They sit down and Bungo tells Butet: *My dad was a great honey harvester. Every ritual has its own spell and everyone needs to be ready. Their mind must be clear of bad thoughts...* Vision of the ritual is shown as Bungo goes on to explain that *one man (the shaman) hits the pegs into the tree, creating footholds all the way to the top, for other men to climb and harvest the honey. Fire on the wood is used to scare the bees.* The vision is now an animation as Bungo explains, *they keep on climbing to reach the top. It's dark and quiet up there. The wind blows strong. They must have strong legs, for they have to cling on to the tree branches. The man at the top yells to pull the honey tray as he fills them with honey. While they are climbing up, they chant the spell, so that they won't be disturbed by the tree spirit. At the top of the tree, one can see many things, depending on their state of mind. One may see beautiful things, but one may also see horrible things. My father once told me that he saw a glowing fish swimming in a gap of a branch. The beautiful sightings are as dangerous as the horrible ones. If one falls from the top of a Sialang tree there is no need to recover the body, as one will immediately be buried in the ground.* The animation finishes.
- The scene is now in the classroom where Bungo has been telling this story to his classmates. Beindah asks him, 'Bungo, have you ever climbed a Sialang tree? He replies, no. because he is not yet capable, but one day he will.
- The next scene opens on a tall, beautiful Sialang tree. Bungo is walking through the jungle passed a group of men (the loggers). After passing by them he stops and turns towards them, deep in thought.
- Bungo has taken the letter of agreement to Butet's classroom. He begins slowly reading it. Butet begins to cry. That's enough she says... Why don't you read this book instead?
- The children's learning is thriving under Butet's teaching and the children are able to show off their literacy and numeracy skills. Butet's voiceover explains that *Bungo is in the midst of changing times. He wants to uphold the traditions of the Rimba people but is beginning to realize his personal rights as well. Like most jungle children that I have met, Bungo has remarkable intelligence. Now he is fluent in reading and has become my apprentice,* says Butet.
- Young men from the Belaman Badai tribe arrive at the edge of the jungle, to Butet's classroom. They call out to Bungo demanding that he return home with them. They yell that he is hardly ever home anymore and this is troubling to the tribe. His father has sent them to get him and he must come home with them so that they can continue their

traditions. They tell him that his mother is upset and that they all believe in the curse. Butet tries to intervene but is told not to dare. 'This is serious!' they yell, 'the village chief died last night and Bungo has caused this! This is the curse brought by the knowledge you have given!' the young man screams at Butet. He yells at Bungo to come with them as Bungo turns and retreats in to the classroom. Butet follows him and just looks at him.

- Bungo stands up and says, 'Teacher, I have to go home,' and sadly walks out. Butet is devastated and just stares in to space. Bungo is seen running off in the distance, in the middle of a tropical downpour, glancing back as he runs.
- Upon his return to his village Bungo finds that it is deserted. All that is left is a black dog whining for company. The whole tribe have moved on. Bungo runs off through the jungle. Butet's voiceover says, *the chief's death is a turning point for Nyungsang Bungo. He has to go back and carry out the 'melangun' tradition. It is a journey they take until their sorrow subsides. This journey can last for months, even years. This 'melangun' is also a turning point for me. Maybe the curse of knowledge does exist....*
- Back in Wanaraya, Gustav knocks on Butet's door and tells her that Bahar wants her in the office. She heads there on her motorbike. As she enters the office she finds Bahar is in a meeting with many people. He sees her and jumps to his feet saying, 'Ahh, here she is, the education hero of the Jungle People, Butet Manurung'. He turns to Butet and tells her that the people are all journalists from Medan and Palembang, saying that they want to cover a story of her teaching the jungle children. Bahar informs her that he has had Gustav prepare the means by which they can get in to the jungle. Butet says to Bahar, 'so you want me to put on another show just like the one before?' Bahar takes Butet's arm and leads her away firmly saying, 'Butet, what is so difficult? Just take them upstream and show them how you teach, they'll cover the story and that's it!'
- Butet turns to the journalists, telling them that all the work she has done is only a cover up to show the public and donors that we care so much for the Jungle People'. She then walks out. He follows her out the door screaming, 'Butet, if you can't accept the way we work then you don't belong here! He apologises to the journalists who appear stunned.
- Butet goes to the local store and buys a soccer ball, badminton set and books. She hands them to Andit saying 'please give these to the children'.
- Butet is at home packing her belongings up as footage of the children playing with her gifts is seen on the screen. The children ask where Teacher Butet is...
- Butet says goodbye to Andit and hops on the bus out of town. As the bus slowly pulls away, a group of her children from the jungle school run towards Andit, as she shouts to them, 'your teacher is on that bus – she is leaving'. They run after the bus, as Butet looks at them out the window. As the bus speeds up the children are left far behind. Butet cradles her face in her hands, crying.
- Back in Jakarta, Butet is being cared for by her mother. Butet asks her mum, 'how can I go back there?' Her mother encourages her saying that she has all the means by which to go back there, and she has great love for them. Butet stares at her camera, roll of film and wallet on the table.
- Later on at the print shop, Butet picks up her photos, taken during her time with the students in the jungle. She gazes longingly at them all.
- Butet is presenting a lecture to a packed university lecture theatre. She presents the situation of the jungle people. With her photos on the big screen behind her she tells the university students that, *in reality the Jungle People don't really need us. They don't need anything from the outside world. But they are under pressure, forced to drift along with modernization. Villages are getting closer, making them a target market for consumerism. It brings changes to their lives. It even brings new diseases.* She continues, saying, *the Jungle People are facing a new reality with more and more of them now tempted to get out of the jungle.*
- Dr Astrid is walking in to an interview with Butet. Butet presents her case to a panel of

people (seemingly an NGO) while Dr Astrid looks on proudly. Butet explains; *I want to go back there. I want to keep teaching the children. Not only giving them the opportunity to learn how to read, write or count, but also on how to face challenges in life – a school of survival that also introduces advocacy strategies for their civil rights. We want to build our own school or SOKOLA in the language of the Jungle People. We want to build it for them and also other marginal communities in Indonesia. Because the kind of education that they need, is the kind that teaches them how to survive in this changing world.*

Several months later...

- Butet arrives back in Wanaraya and steps off the bus with her now familiar, very large backpack. Gustav welcomes her as she steps off the bus, saying, 'our friends are waiting over there.' This is much unexpected for Butet. Her best friend Andit, and other friends are supporting her in her new venture.
- They get on the motorbikes and head off to the jungle. At the small village, government representatives are gathered together under friendly terms with the tribe. The representative is making a speech saying, 'we respect the Chief, but we need to expand our land. That is the border, we have marked it. It just needs a thumbprint from the tribe chief.' Bungo responds, 'please wait a moment, we want to read it again.'
- At this point, Butet and some of her colleagues are arriving at the meeting. Bungo, representing his tribe, continues, 'we disagree with Chapters three and five here. According to this, people from the plantation company have the right to enter past the border. Let me read it first. Bungo stands up and fluently reads the passage from the agreement. Butet is watching proudly as her voiceover says; *Bungo doesn't want to leave his community, yet he has the urge to understand what the outsiders want from them. Bungo reminds me of the right mentality to face changes... To use knowledge as a tool to adapt*
- Butet and her colleagues are laughing and playing with the people of the tribe.
- In the final scenes, the new school hut is built with the children making a sign with the word SOKOLA. Butet's voiceover says: *I teach here, but the truth is I have learned a lot from this place...*