CHAPTER THREE

A RESEARCHER'S NOTES

Don't write this, but I was forced to witness five mass executions. It was horrifying. I will never forget it.

(Interview in Kupang, 2009)

In the dim coolness of his lounge room he had talked animatedly about many interesting topics in Kupang's modern history – Chinese shops in the 1950s, schools, newspapers, social rankings in town, civil servants, the Japanese occupation. As I stood up to leave and put away my notebook, the conversation suddenly turned to death. He started speaking of what he had seen in 1966 and 1967, as the military suppression of the Indonesian Communist Party, PKI, reached its height all over Indonesia. 'Don't write this,' he said. Then he told me: ‘I was forced to witness five mass executions. PKI members and activists were taken out of town at night. Each time, tens of people were shot, each time with the proclamation: “Now you can see what happens to members of the PKI.” It was horrifying. I will never forget it.’ It was one of my first interviews in Kupang, and already I had a dilemma. How could I write history and not ‘write this’?

This chapter seeks to reconstruct the biographies of some key actors in Kupang, people who will keep recurring throughout the book. A biographical approach is not only more interesting than a strictly institutional one, but it will also help uncover the formal and (especially) the informal connections by which power is generated in a provincial town. The growth of nationalism in a ‘peripheral’ area, whose analysis is the burden of this book, is a contentious political process aimed at seizing the state (Breuilly 1982). So, unlike those studies of it that begin with notions of identity or psychological needs, the focus here is on actors, organizations, and the mobilizational techniques they deploy to cross social and geographical distances. In the next chapter the actors introduced in this one will begin their work, but before we go there it is worthwhile to pause at the researcher's process of reconstruction itself.

It did not take me long to discover that critical historical research in a postcolonial provincial town confronts the researcher with daunting...
challenges. The painful interview quoted above exposed just part of the problem. Written sources, never abundant in such a town, are scarcer for the tumultuous 1950s and ‘60s than they are for the 1930s. Those written and oral sources that do exist tend to be privately controlled by a small number of intellectual gatekeepers, who represent the town's historical establishment. These people are survivors and often collaborators of multiple and violent regime changes. They share a strong commitment to a sanitized version of the town's history that covers agonizing events with silence. Some will talk about these events, but only on the understanding that they remain unwritten. The historian must become a kind of guerrilla, interrogating sources against the grain, and occasionally forced to dissemble. This chapter describes one historian's guerrilla campaign, in the face of such obstacles, to reconstruct the lives of four provincial elite actors, two winners and two losers in the social struggles of the time.

Biographers frequently perceive their task in a different light than do the gatekeepers of sources upon which they must rely. The gatekeeper has in mind a pleasing portrait, the biographer looks for possibly unflattering social and psychological processes. One feels responsibility to the subject; the other considers mainly the subject's responsibility to the world. The gap becomes a dilemma if the gatekeeper holds nearly all the available information on the subject, which is often the case in the Indonesian provinces of the 1950s. The dilemma grows if the gatekeeper invests this knowledge with the honour of their family, their town, their class, or perhaps their entire nation. If the biographer comes from the old colonial country the problem only gets bigger. Happy are those who reach an agreement to satisfy scholarship. In my case, although those who spoke to me knew the outline of my project, there was no explicit agreement about how their information would be used. They may be surprised by what they finally read.¹

Over three northern summers between 2009 and 2011 I spent a total of three months in and around Kupang. I wanted to learn about the rise of an indigenous provincial middle class outside the central island of Java. I expected to see its members helping to hold the country together by their participation in complex mediation processes. If the birth of this

1 I have done my best to deal ethically with what they told me by (a) not repeating information given in confidence if it can be traced to a particular person; (b) quoting the same information from a public source even if I first heard it confidentially; (c) anonymizing information given in confidence if it illustrates a broader trend already identified from publicly identifiable sources; but (d) always prioritizing my responsibility to a broad readership, even if my informants have become friends.
new middle class took place in the 1930s, when Kupang was a sleepy town of 7,000, and it reached adulthood at the height of the developmentalist New Order in the 1980s (population 91,000 – Leirissa et al 1984:53), then its formative childhood years were the 1950s and ‘60s. I decided to focus on the lives of several individuals that, to my social science mind, more or less reflected the most important social struggles in Kupang in the 1950s and ‘60s.

Preliminary reading led me to think of several social struggles in this town over the period between 1930 and 1975. Similar struggles were won and lost in many other provincial towns at about this time (Reid 1974, Ricklefs 2008:181–343, Sutherland 1979). I decided to highlight two groups who had done well in these struggles, and two who came out poorly. One group of winners were Indonesian republicans (mostly commoner bureaucrats). They rose at the expense of traditional aristocrats. Left-wing organizers looked for a while like winners, but they turned into losers when they were wiped out by yet another group, namely the military. The struggles of republicans, aristocrats, communists, and soldiers were linked to each other, and their overall context was multi-dimensional. Important contextual elements are discussed at greater length elsewhere but they include increased connectedness due to cheaper sea and air transport. The freer flow of people, movies and magazines reduced distances and stimulated everything from political centralization to new gender roles, from new church dress codes to new dances and buzz words. The absence of a national revolution in the eastern archipelago, and the surrounding subsistence agriculture, made it easier to maintain elitist and technocratic styles of government.

Who would become my subjects? History belongs to the victors, so identifying representatives of the rising forces was fairly easy. I.H. Doko (1913–1985) was in 2006 proclaimed the province’s second National Hero (pahlawan nasional). The perfect republican. Moreover this educator and politician wrote prolifically, also about himself. As for the military, who so thoroughly dominated government throughout the New Order (1966–1998), no one could represent them as well as the flamboyant Elyas (‘El’) Tari (1926–1978), provincial governor for 12 years from 1966. The losers were more difficult to bring to light, as they had largely disappeared from the public record. I chose Alfons Nisnoni (1907–1987), the last king of Kupang, as my declining aristocrat. Michael Marcus (1906–1966), a Kupang politician who from 1960 headed up a successful district branch of the communist-affiliated Indonesian Farmers Union (Barisan Tani Indonesia, BTI), became my representative leftist.
Where could I learn more about these four individuals? None were nationally significant, so they are practically absent from standard history books and national Who’s Who collections, such as Roeder (1971). Indeed, little of national moment ever happened in this town. Perusing the national daily Merdeka from 1946–1959, my research assistant Basilius Triharyanto found only a single reference to Kupang, namely when President Sukarno visited in May 1954. Like those Dutch officials who filled the colonial archives with their own anxieties tied to the metropolis (Stoler 2009), the Indonesian authors of most of the small number of books we have about the provinces treat them purely as supporting acts for dramas at the centre. If they gave the centre no trouble, as apparently Kupang did not, then it was not worth writing about them. Many locals today share the blank feeling. Hearing about my interest, one Kupang student responded with a puzzled look: ‘Does Kupang have a history?’ The mere fact that the town exists, evidently without controversy that would make it special among the hundreds of other towns, makes it an excellent case study site for Middle Indonesia.

Nevertheless, Kupang is a literate society, and it has plenty of written local history. The provincial office of the Education Department has produced a stack of history textbooks for use in schools in East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTT). These are available at the downtown state library, which I found always full of students writing their assignments. Prominents such as Doko wrote memoirs late in life. Many of the city’s streets are graced with the names of local luminaries like Tom Pello, E.R. Herewila, Herman Johannes and of course El Tari and Doko. There are a startling number of statues. An enterprising journalist compiled a 300-page biographical encyclopaedia of NTT personalities with about 1000 entries (Passar 2005). Passar’s encyclopaedia is by far the most comprehensive Who’s Who, but several other NTT collections also contain biographical sketches or interviews (Adam et al 1997, Leirissa et al 1984, Liliweri et al 1984, Widiyatmika 1983). In short, Kupang’s middle class love writing and reading about their own prominents. However, this knowledge circulates in rather personalized ways. Passar’s extremely useful encyclopaedia can only be bought at the author’s home in a dusty back-street, after office hours, over tea. The memoirs, too, disappear off the shelves of the town’s only decent bookstore, Gramedia, within six months of publication. The reader is advised to visit the author at home to obtain a copy.

---

Needless to say, my ‘social forces’ and ‘political struggles’ interest these local historians little if at all. Their template is still the national hero, who resists the colonial Dutch, brings Kupang into the Indonesian nation, and helps build religion and the economy. After noting in his preface the ‘colossal and monumental’ scope of his magnum opus, Passar wrote that he and his committee chose as their subjects all those who ‘had spread the sweet aroma of the greatness, the nobility as well as the success and the esteem of Nusa Tenggara Timur as a part of Indonesia’s civilized future’ (p. ii). In his foreword, Professor Alo Liliweri praised the compilers’ creativity, and only feared some readers might find cause to ask: ‘Is this person important, is this person a prominent, is this person a leader, did this person make a positive contribution, is this person a successful human being, etc’ (p. v).

A massive bust of Doko stands in the vast grounds of the provincial Education Department, which he founded in 1959. It was raised by contributions from the thousands of teachers whose careers he made possible. His political achievements on behalf of the Republic are told in one of his own books (Doko 1975, new edition Doko 1981b). As Governor El Tari wrote in a foreword, the book proved ‘that Nusa Tenggara Timur has never been absent in the struggle for national RIGHTS’ [emphasis in the original] – a veiled rejection of the feeling in Jakarta that poor, peripheral, Christian NTT had only been dragged into the republic by forces beyond its passive, not to say backward, self. Doko belonged to a small Kupang elite, most educated in Java, that rose to prominence under the Japanese (1942–45). Afterwards, Indonesian republicans in Java proclaimed an independent republic, but at first it controlled only most of Java and parts of Sumatra (it was also active in South Sulawesi and parts of Kalimantan). By contrast with the sustained fighting in Java, the Dutch had much less trouble reasserting control outside Java. They sought to satisfy moderate nationalists by creating a number of autonomous states within a federation that in turn was federatively associated with the Netherlands (the idea was inspired by French Indochina). Timor belonged to the most successful and most democratic of these federal states, the State of Eastern Indonesia (Negara Indonesia Timur, NIT), whose capital was Makassar. Trained before the war as a school teacher, Doko belonged to a nationalist faction. His bright personality and speaking talents led him to be appointed first Assistant Minister for Information in 1947, then full Information Minister two years later, and finally Education Minister in 1950 (Figure 3). Doko himself figures prominently in his well-told story of the decolonization of this part of the archipelago. His narrative is
The Tirosa Statue stands on the ‘PLN’ roundabout. The acronym Tirosa stands for the three main islands in the colonial afdeeling of Timor and Islands – Timor, Rote, and Sabu. These gave rise to today’s three main rival ethnic groups in Kupang’s local politics. Timor is represented by Raja H.A. Koror, Rote by Prof. Herman Johannes, and Sabu by Maj.-Gen. El Tari.

punctuated by mobilizational rallies in Kupang, whose frequency belied the town’s passivity, alternating with elite conferences in Sulawesi and Java. The nationalist cause travels with Doko, backwards and forwards between the centre and the islands. Thanks to a multitude of such efforts by the young nation’s educated elite, republicanism had triumphed over colonialism even in the remotest islands by 1950. His version of history has since then become unassailable. It is retold with little variation in all the provincial history textbooks (e.g. Djeki 1980, Koehuan et al 1982, Soh and Indrayana 2008, Widiyatmika 2007). Doko’s books also remain a major source for western-trained historians (Ardhana 2000, Farram 2004).

If Kupang’s teachers are proud of their Doko statue, the town boasts no less than three of former NTT governor, Brigadier-General (posthumously promoted to Major-General) El Tari. All are in good repair. He is one of a gigantic threesome on a roundabout at the eastern end of El Tari Road.³

³ The Tirosa Statue stands on the ‘PLN’ roundabout. The acronym Tirosa stands for the three main islands in the colonial afdeeling of Timor and Islands – Timor, Rote, and Sabu. These gave rise to today’s three main rival ethnic groups in Kupang’s local politics. Timor is represented by Raja H.A. Koror, Rote by Prof. Herman Johannes, and Sabu by Maj.-Gen. El Tari.
Another one decorates the driveway into El Tari Airport outside Kupang. And he stands two metres tall in front of the Agriculture Department office, arm outstretched in a commanding posture, instructing the peasants to ‘plant, plant, plant, and plant again’ (*tanam, tanam, tanam, sekali lagi tanam* – Passar 2005:272).\(^4\) (I discovered afterwards that this tree-planting scheme to combat soil erosion failed completely, Liliweri et al. 1984:112–3). His successor as governor, the soldier and medical doctor Ben Mboi, now retired but still energetic, frequently urges student audiences to become ‘young El Taris’ (Mboi 2009:84). The man’s paternalistic good humour and frequent tours to inspire the poor to better their lot are still held to be exemplary.

\(^4\) An even larger statue of him, in a similar pose, stands in the up-country town of Soë.
Thus Kupang honours its emancipators. What did surprise me was that even these heroes are so little understood. The rather detailed entry on Doko in Passar’s encyclopaedia is mis-filed under his middle name ‘Huru,’ so I did not discover it till much later. It does not report his death date, 20 years before publication. To learn more, I had to go to the home of the Kupang historian who wrote the bio of him that accompanied the National Hero application. Indonesia now has 156 official national heroes, and the bureaucratic procedure that produces them is complex but well-oiled. As often happens, Doko’s process was initiated and financed by his son. Paultje Doko is a retired banker in Jakarta. He asked the Kupang academic Munandjar Widiyatmika to do the research. Later he paid a well-known national author to write a full-scale biography, with the intention of distributing it free of charge at a special provincial ceremony (Manafe 2009). The book was not in the Kupang bookshop; Paul Doko gave me a copy when I met him in his father’s house in Kupang. Until then I had relied on a biographical sketch in the newspaper clipping on Doko’s hero-hood from 2006 (Malehere and Krenak 2006), and on a rather confusing little biography written years earlier by an Education Department staff member (Boenga et al 1996). Finding the latter again entailed a visit to the author, who still worked at the department, to borrow his last copy for photocopying. My visit was enlivened by half an hour’s banter with all the other office workers, for whom I was welcome relief from boredom in the stifling heat.

El Tari may have been the province’s most adulated governor, but he turned out to be even more difficult to pin down on paper than Doko. Orphaned as a child, he has no surviving relatives literate enough to ensure immortality by ordering a biography. Only one obscure source mentions a birth date: 18 April 1926 (Nahak et al 2009). The one apparently fact-laden paragraph in the long El Tari entry in Passar’s encyclopaedia, containing a list of his military appointments from 1945 until his death in 1978, is unsourced and full of outdated military acronyms that the editor had not understood. I later discovered that the source for this paragraph was the official obituary distributed at his funeral (Setwilda 1978). Unfortunately this document, too, was marred by errors and omissions. Military acronyms common in 1978 were backdated anachronistically to

---

5 ‘Pahlawan nasional,’ id.wikipedia.org (accessed 20 January 2010). Doko was the second from NTT. First was Dr W.Z. Johannes in 1968. Doko was followed in 2009 by Prof. Dr. Ir. Herman Johannes, cousin to W.Z. Johannes. A number of others, such as E.R. Herewila and J.W. Amalo, have the lesser status of Pioneer of Independence (perintis kemerdekaan).
the 1950s, or misspelled unrecognizably. Informal revolutionary militias of the late 1940s are presented as full-scale regiments, which are then puzzlingly absent when I go to cross-check them in the national registers. Military campaigns in which he had taken part were omitted. I recovered them laboriously from the list of his medals (themselves in military shorthand) appended to the obituary.

If this is how it is with victors, how much deeper is the ignorance surrounding losers. At least Alfons Nisnoni, the last raja of Kupang, has an entry in Passar’s encyclopaedia. It details his civil service career, but not the role rajas played under Dutch colonialism to control the peasant population, nor the republican challenge that led to their decline in the 1950s. Michael Marcus, the communist BTI leader in Soë, 110 km from Kupang, does not occur in the encyclopaedia at all, nor do most other leftists (an exception is the inimitable Christian Pandie of the 1920s). Aristocrats in decline, and activists championing losing causes, are clearly not ‘successful human beings.’ For more information on both I had to resort to guerrilla tactics – fragments in obscure books, newspaper clippings, personal archives, and especially oral history.

Sources

This is when I learned what a wasteland the Indonesian provinces of the 1950s and ‘60s are for the historian. It is easier to write about a medieval European town than Kupang in the 1950s. Up to 1942 the situation is not too bad. Kupang’s long colonial history can be deciphered from archives preserved in the Netherlands and Jakarta (Ardhana 2000, Farram 2004, Fox 1977, Hägerdal 2012, Leirissa et al 1984). Two centuries after small VOC beginnings in the early seventeenth century, the township grew into a significant imperial outpost by the nineteenth, acquiring municipal boundaries in 1886. By the 1930s the town had no fewer than nine regular (if slim) newspapers, some mailed out to Kupang folk scattered throughout the archipelago’s colonial civil service. Submarines and aircraft paused at Kupang on their way to Australia. World events punished Kupang harshly after 1942. Allied bombing during World War II left the town in ruins. The Chinese shops by the harbour, the imposing official home of the Resident, the sociedadeit overlooking Fort Concordia where elite Dutch and the Europeanized aristocracy had played bridge and billiards – all were gone.

Fire, impoverishment, bureaucratic inertia, and especially repeated and violent regime change played havoc with historical records after 1942.
Today there are only three towns outside Java that have a continuous newspaper record for the 1950s, and none have any for the crisis-ridden 1960s. Just when Kupang had been rebuilt, increasingly shrill politics in Jakarta caused the economic and institutional fabric to fray around the country. Only four short-lived newspapers appeared in Kupang during the half-century between 1942 and 1992, and of these only one, the wartime broadsheet *Timoer-Sjoeho*, survives in a Dutch library, where it is searchable online. The colonial discipline that once required every provincial newspaper to submit an archival copy of each edition to the state secretariat apparently broke down after 1942. Politics have been more brutal than bombs. To my knowledge, no one in Kupang dared to keep their copies of the communist broadsheet *Pelopor* after the government banned it in October 1965. A photo (Figure 5) in the post-1965 Catholic magazine *Dian* (published in Ende) shows how the new regime regarded the past. A man is burning communist papers, over the caption: ‘...so they will not be read by those who don’t have the right.’ Just before *Pos Kupang* finally restarted on a sound footing in 1992, NTT was one of only six provinces (out of 28) without its own daily. The only regional news journal that occasionally covered Kupang in the 1950s was the Catholic fortnightly *Bentara*, published in Ende. Significant parts survive in Catholic libraries in Ende and Maumere, but apparently nowhere else.

Disasters have done their share of damage. The town’s archives, once containing material going back to VOC times, were lost when the temporary wooden building in which they were housed burned down in 1964 (arson is alleged, part of the political tensions in town at the time). What was left was flooded, then apparently burned again in 1982. Today Kupang, in keeping with its regional status, has a state library and no less than three official archives – provincial, district, and municipal. They contain abundant government publications (‘grey matter’) starting from the 1980s, but nothing from the 1950s and ’60s. Yet few of the generous staff resources at these institutions are devoted to recovering those years. A relaxed atmosphere of chatting and newspaper-reading prevails in them. One is directed by a former harbour official who claimed to ‘know nothing’ as he had ‘only been here eighteen months.’ Another only allows non-official

---

6 Medan, Padang and Ende have papers for the full 1950s. Makassar, Banjarmasin, and Palembang have papers for the early 1950s. Data from Santoso 1984.
visitors to peruse documents after they have been personally approved in an interview with the busy director. A dedicated young archivist at another, and an enormously helpful librarian at the State Library, by their contrast with the norm, merely underscored the tremendous theft of public resources that occurs in most provincial government offices.

Scarcity makes knowledge a valuable resource and its gatekeepers all the more powerful. Beyond the flimsy official texts and the statues, knowledge of the past is not public property, but a private hobby for the town’s elite. Personal archives have a higher standing among those in the know than state collections. A visiting researcher soon learns that former governor Ben Mboi, for example, possesses the best library in town, although I also learned, after a good dinner that included imported red wine at the table of this gigantic man, that his library does not cover my period. Leo Nisnoni, son of Alfons Nisnoni, a retired civil servant who now makes a modest living as a tennis coach, keeps a large and well-indexed collection in his bedroom. He will dig into this with unfailing generosity for anyone interested, producing photographs, clippings, books and papers. But some
personal collections too have suffered from fire: Doko’s considerable personal library had been preserved by his son Paultje, but the house burned down in 2002. The neighbour’s house burned down as well, containing a reportedly excellent photographic collection made by a Mr. Lobo. Some personal archives are still waiting to be re-discovered. My biggest find in Kupang was the personal library of El Tari – 26 meters of books and official reports, still sitting on their original shelves in his house three decades after his death. The house was occupied by two sons of a man whom El Tari (whose marriage was childless) had ‘adopted’ as his younger brother. Both are private security guards and seemed practically illiterate, but they were determined to preserve the library in memory of the great man. They had refused to surrender it to the State Library, as the law requires of its retiring top officials. El Tari’s Mercedes still stood in the garage, deliberately looking neglected so rivals in the family (which seemed seriously divided against itself) would not come to claim this expensive vehicle. The good-natured men let me spend hours perusing the library. Beyond that, leads to several old people in and around Kupang who were said to possess enormous archives turned up little. ‘People borrow things and do not return them,’ was the usual stoic explanation.

Establishment

After thus circulating around Kupang on my little rented motorcycle for some weeks, calling often on acquaintances who possessed books and memories, my next discovery was that I had passed from free-floating researcher to a friend of the town’s historical establishment. Every provincial town has such a loose network, just a handful of people, whose knowledge is widely recognized as authoritative. The privatized nature of the best archives makes them real intellectual gatekeepers. In Kupang in 2009 it certainly included Leo Nisnoni, Munandjar Widiyatmika, and Hendrik Ataufah, the latter a retired professor at Nusa Cendana University. They do not agree on everything, but lives lived as government advisers, speakers, and columnists have given them all a sense of decorum. I have not yet met a truly knowledgeable historical dissident in the provinces; the town would not tolerate them. When the rare foreign researcher comes to Kupang, these local historians feel a responsibility to be helpful but also to ensure that no dangerous impressions arise that might discredit the town. Every researcher is familiar with the generous but stifling host who offers to arrange all contacts. The answer is to diversify sources. Once it becomes
clear that one has a broad range of contacts, pressure eases and respect grows.

The history of Kupang for my period, such as it is, was written by this little establishment. Most of its members are survivors of (and in some measure collaborators with) the anti-communist purges of 1965–1966. Beginning in 1966 and lasting well into the 1970s, the rector of Nusa Cendana University, Mr. Muhammad Syah (whose family came from West Sumatra), hosted a weekly gathering at his home open to all interested in the history of NTT. Alfons Nisnoni was there, so were Munandjar Widiyatmika as a young lecturer new to Kupang, the anthropologist Hendrik Ataupah, not long back from a Master’s in the US, the bookish retired civil servant J.J. Detaq, two priests interested in physical anthropology and prehistory – Verschuren and Darius Ngawa, the young female historian Mia Patty Noach, just back from studies in Central Java, and two people about whom I know nothing more – I. Toto and Teddens. Like a benign shadow over the group, but too busy to attend, was I.H. Doko, who had started the history department at the university not long before that. Several of these people later wrote historical books about Kupang. Mia Noach told me they talked about uncontroversial topics. She remembers the legends of the rajas, the graves of Dutch missionaries, colonial regulations, and the books on Timor by H.G. Schulte Nordholt (1971) and Ormeling (1956). The meeting did not debate, but ‘exchanged information.’

Politeness on some topics was matched by silence on others. No one was interested in the 1950s (‘there was nothing here then’) or even in World War II. Also never verbalized, though so recently seared into everyone’s consciousness, was the anti-communist bloodbath of 1965–1966, in which thousands died in NTT. Munandjar Widiyatmika recalled to me, with some self-accusing agitation, that they did not even discuss the destruction of tradition that occurred as droves of communist peasants flocked into the church for fear of being labelled ‘atheists,’ surely a topic of great interest to this predominantly anthropological seminar. Thus the most terrible event ever to have happened in Kupang, the purges against communists following the military takeover in Jakarta, was left unspoken, a gaping hole from which one looks away. These things ‘had never existed,’ as Gabriel Garcia Marquez put it in A Hundred Years of Solitude.9 The few

9 “Those fickle tricks of memory were even more critical when the killing of the workers was brought up. Every time that Aureliano mentioned the matter, not only the proprietress but some people older than she would repudiate the myth of the workers hemmed in at the station and the train with two hundred cars loaded with dead people, and they would even insist that, after all, everything had been set forth in judicial documents and in
foreign scholars who have tried to write about these events ended confessing they were hardly able to penetrate the prevailing silence wrapped in blatant falsehoods (Farram 2002, Webb 1986).

**Don’t Write This**

Then I learned another lesson. The theatricality of public historical discourse in Kupang has limits. Out of the public view, beyond the cardboard cut-out heroes without birth dates, other biographies circulated in private. Here, losers condemned to obliteration by the town’s establishment once more stirred to life, and even winners were seen to be human after all. Here, lives did not run predictably along tracks laid down by the invincible force of nationalism, but zigzagged hazardously among the contingent shoals of regime changes and personal rivalries.

Leo Nisnoni told me how his father, a tall heavy-set and kindly-looking man, realized in the 1950s that the ‘good old times’ at the *societeit* were over (Figure 6). The ‘clerks’ who had stood only just above peasants on the colonial social ladder now ran the show. Like the Balinese princes in Clifford Geertz’s *Peddlers and Princes* (1963c), Nisnoni went into business with some wealthy Chinese he knew. Taking advantage of government assistance, he oversaw the construction of the town’s first factory. It was a small meat-canning plant, built on his royal lands on the edge of town. It drew on the cattle that are Timor’s only significant export. He told his children to be thrifty, ‘like the Chinese.’ But the family never had to go hungry. Republicanism in Timor did not extend to seizing aristocratic land (though there were some half-hearted attempts in that direction). There was enough money for this son to play basketball with the rich kids in town, and to be in Holland for high school throughout the 1950s. Leo and I spoke Dutch together; he learned Indonesian only in 1963. He remembered how his mother loved the silks at Toko Baru, the best Chinese store in Kupang. Less playful stories emerged too. He remembers how his father made fateful choices in uncertain times. When national politics polarized in the early 1960s, and the PKI stepped up its ‘anti-feudal’ rhetoric, Alfons Nisnoni joined the military-backed party IPKI.10 ‘It was for protection; a good strategy,’ the son told me;

---

10 Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia (IPKI) – League of Supporters of Indonesian Independence.
'otherwise our life could have been very different after 1965.' We had reached the dark heart of Kupang's history.

A Protestant reverend in Kupang, whose own father had been detained briefly in 1965, drew me further into this dark history. He put me in touch with a parishioner who was the daughter of Michael Marcus, the BTI leader. She agreed to talk about her father, at first reluctantly because she had never before talked of this man whom the civil servant in her regarded as a sinner, then in a flood of tears as the daughter in her remembered the father she had last seen through the bars of Kupang’s old colonial jail early in 1966. She showed me photographs of a family man standing next to his neatly dressed wife named Loisa Nenobais. He had met her at the home of a Dutch missionary in Camplong, near Soë, married her in 1929, and they had ten children. Other photos showed an active churchgoer posing with the congregational council after worship; a white-shirted 1950s politician in a delegation lined up before a banner during a visit to Jakarta. Like Doko, Michael Marcus was the son of a farmer on another island, Rote (Figure 7). Like him, he trained as a teacher, probably at the church-run teacher’s college in Rote. He taught in rural church primary schools around Timor for years. When the Japanese came and the schools closed down, he appears to have fed his family with a small business that later
involved a truck. Real upward mobility came with independence. Like so many teachers, he was asked to fill a political position in Kupang – first as member of the assembly for Timor and its nearby islands. This was a highly prestigious moment, but also a risky one.

In the Timor assembly he was close to the assembly speaker, E.R. Herewila, the same age as Michael Marcus and also a strong modernizer with a distaste for the rajas. Herewila introduced him to the secular nationalist party, the Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, PNI) ahead of the 1955 elections. PNI was strong among bureaucrats in Java, but in Timor it was badly outpolled by the Protestant

Figure 7. Michael Marcus, 1961 (photo courtesy Dra. Ruth Heny A. Nitbani Markus).
and Catholic parties. Recriminations flew. Michael's truck was supposed to have been used for smuggling to Portuguese Timor (quite possible), and he spent three months in detention before Herewila negotiated his release. From then on he worked in various executive positions in local government in Kupang (education, health) and, at some time in the late 1950s, in Soë, a few hours' drive from Kupang in good weather (the district finance department). His wife's family, the Nenobais, were influential in the district of South Central Timor of which Soë was the central town. Some of them were interested in leftist ideas, others in religious ones. In the late 1950s the communist party PKI launched a major drive to increase its presence and legitimacy in the provinces. It aimed not at revolution but, like the Italian communists, at a gradual shift in the balance of forces. The president gave it the support of his magnificent oratory. The farmers union BTI was its most impressive achievement (Pauker 1964). The organization was effective at recruiting local talent. Michael Marcus became a part-time but committed BTI organizer in Soë in July 1960. Mainly because of abuses by the local raja, who remained powerful, more farmers joined BTI here than in any other district of NTT. Soon Marcus had become a

Figure 8. Michael Marcus and family, 1952 (photo courtesy Dra. Ruth Heny A. Nitbani-Markus).
competent public speaker on land issues. His daughter remembers him engaged in serious conversation with a lawyer friend about legal technicalities, and at other times with peasants on his veranda talking in the local dialect Dawan, which he had learned. The peasants spat blood-red betel nut juice on the ground, but he was too middle class to chew.

Then the fates intervened again. Some months after the dramatic events in Jakarta on 1 October 1965, of which Marcus knew nothing, the military organized a bloody purge of communists throughout the country. Officers arrested him at his home, took him to Kupang’s overcrowded little colonial jail, where he languished for weeks. One night, some time after mid-February 1966, they took him away and he was never seen again. The daughter has no idea where he is buried. He was 60 years old. She lost her oldest brother the same way. An older sister had joined the left-wing women’s movement Gerwani, but she survived with a jail sentence. All this was told me through a veil of tears. Others in the family prefer to remain silent. The sister, who was still alive in 2009 and knew more, sent word she refused to speak with me, adding ‘I have forgiven everyone.’ Another brother, now passed away, had been an activist with the Protestant political party Parkindo in 1965. He had strongly opposed his father’s communist links, and did not dare visit him in jail in 1966, not even after his father sent him his own watch as a keepsake via his sister.

Others told me similar stories of disaster striking unsuspecting families – of uncle so-and-so whom no one ever mentioned again after his death in 1966; of grandfather, a policeman who had felt quietly guilty his entire life because he was forced to execute a pious neighbour; of motorists who still today honk their horns when passing a mass burial site to ask the spirits not to disable their engines. Near Ende, in Flores, I found the site at which a prominent local communist named John Timu had been burned alive in a public execution. It was still marked with a cairn of stones laid by the village community. Even young locals could tell me how he had died, holding out his arms in the flames ‘like Jesus.’ Older people told me their memories of having heard military trucks pass by at night that they presumed were carrying prisoners to their executions (from a student in a dormitory at the time); of having been forced to dig a mass grave (from a farmer in a village, who was afterwards sleepless with horror for weeks); of having repeatedly witnessed mass executions (from a party activist at the time, who appeared quite cool about it now – the communists had been ‘neatly cleaned up’). Near the village of Buraen, southeast of Kupang, a Christian teacher took me to see an overgrown mass grave in a forest, suggested a moment’s silence, then prayed simply: ‘Dear God, we
are visiting this place to learn about man's inhumanity to man. Help us to find the truth of this incident.'

These older people often told me their stories in a changed voice, whispering so I had to crane forward to catch them. The discordant fragments would pop out at the close of a conversation about other things, just as the notebook had been put away. 'People were taken away at night, stabbed to death and cut to pieces, and the parts thrown into the dry riverbed. It was terrifying. People were not supposed to know and must never mention it, yet everyone knew it was the military,' one aged man in Atambua told me. Else the person would say, ‘Don't write this,’ and proceed to tell me a horror story that was never supposed to see the light of day. Where the source of their stories is easily identifiable, and cannot be quoted from any publicly available source, I have felt obliged to keep them secret. The alternative would be ethical betrayal. Thus I too became complicit in the silence.

Once alerted to these jarring slivers of an alternative history, other little facts, hidden among the surviving paperwork, yielded fresh significance. For all their autocracy, NTT governments in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s were diligent in their reporting. When tracked down to the unlikely crevices where the tides of history had deposited them, I found in them detailed lists. Some were of government property, even including the chairs and typewriters. Others reproduced all the public committees (political party organizers, government information campaign members, etc.) down to the district level, for multiple years. From these one could reconstruct an alternative history of a provincial political class at work. The PKI had a strikingly routine presence in these lists. New Order ideology portrays the party in demonic terms, as atheists who sowed dissatisfaction among the ignorant while undermining legitimate government by intrigue and assassination. Even today, the plots that the PKI was said to have hatched to murder Christians, ‘revealed’ by the military late in 1965 to terrorize the elite into collaborating with the anti-communist pogroms, are still recounted as fact. Yet in these pre-1965 lists, PKI representatives sit on the same parliamentary committees, party advisory boards, land reform committees, and bureaucratic reform commissions as the other political party representatives in those democratic years. The BTI was doing ‘truly constructive’ modernizing work among peasants, the governor noted in a 1957 report (Reksodihardjo 1960 [1957]:37). Michael Marcus crops up repeatedly in these lists, moving from one official appointment to another, like every other busy member of the rising bureaucratic petit bourgeoisie of that time. By 1965 he was nearing retirement.
Such buried lists sometimes also revealed more about the victors than today’s establishment discourse cares to admit. The list of medals attached to El Tari’s obituary (omitted from the Passar encyclopaedia, and preserved only in the library of Leo Nisnoni because he used to work at the state printer that produced it) made it clear that this jovial man’s life before becoming NTT governor in 1966 had been filled with fighting against fellow Indonesians. The adopted son of a well-to-do tradesman in Kupang, Elyas Tari was sent to Java for a Dutch-language primary schooling before the war. He was at a trade school for sailors when the Japanese invaded. After the Pacific War, in his early twenties, he found himself with the revolutionary republican army, fighting the colonial forces. A mortar wound left him with a scar on his jaw (he later met and punched up the ethnic Indonesian soldier who had fired this mortar…). After that the army was engaged continually in putting down insurrections. Tari received medals for being part of republican battles against the following internal foes: communist rebels in republican Madiun, East Java, in 1948; a military insurrection (Perang Ratu Adil) in republican West Java stimulated by the Dutch intelligence officer Westerling in 1950; a revolt by Ambonese ex-colonial soldiers (RMS) in the early 1950s; the Islamic rebel movement Darul Islam in South Sulawesi in the mid-1950s; and the North Sulawesi-based rebel movement Permesta in the late 1950s (Setwilda 1978).

In 1962 the battle-hardened 36-year old major was assigned to territorial duties in his home town of Kupang. To face the growing power of the communist party at this time, the military began cultivating anti-communist political forces. The civilian governor, W.J. Lalamentik, was too much the bureaucrat to engage in politics, so to help stem the growing left-wing tide within the civil service the increasingly militarized central government appointed their man El Tari deputy governor in May 1965. Tari also controlled the militarized civil defence force (pertahanan sipil, hansip). In July 1966, after the territorial command had completed its grisly programme of murder and arbitrary arrest, Tari rose to provincial governor. His first task was to cleanse the civil service of communist sympathizers, and to reward with official appointments those civilians who had collaborated in the suppression. This last crumb of information I found, after the usual circuitous expeditions to locate a copy, in the detailed report Governor El Tari’s staff produced under his name at the end of his first term of office (Tari 1972). An obituary in a Catholic magazine in Flores, which the ravages had overlooked because it was hidden in a monastery, even restored some appealing signs of human frailty to the victorious El Tari. Flores had never quite forgiven Protestant Timor for
running away with the new province in 1958. The paper’s editorial upon the governor’s death expressed its disappointment at his legacy: so many of the roads and schools had been badly built, put up willy-nilly and without public consultation, by workers who had been forced to neglect their farming to build them.\textsuperscript{11}

Even my own institute the KITLV turned up a little gem. In the archive belonging to a colonial official I found his lengthy interrogation of Doko immediately after the Japanese occupation. He had been the Timorese face of the Japanese regime, running education, propaganda, and labour recruitment projects on their behalf. Here he explained in detail what he had done to help the Japanese, who, he wrote, were too ignorant and often too drunk to do without local help. But he had committed no war crime, and was not prosecuted by the Netherlands Indies ‘temporary court

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Brigadier-General El Tari, as Governor of East Nusa Tenggara province, meeting unknown Indonesian military officers (photo courtesy of the El Tari family, Kupang).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Sejempat harapan untuk gubernur baru,’ \textit{Dian}, 10 July 1978, p3. The next edition, a special on El Tari’s death, contained a photograph showing a medal being pinned posthumously on the chest of the dead soldier (\textit{Dian}, 24 July 1978 p8).
martial’ in Kupang (Locher 1945). According to historian James Fox, fears that their collaborationist past might haunt them under the Dutch was one reason for the Timorese elite to choose the republican cause after 1945 (Fox 1977:180).

Mobility at a Price

Thus, slowly, the outline of a set of biographies began to emerge. They contained almost no psychological insight, for lack of sources. But at least they gave some social insight into a dynamic provincial society, full of struggles won and lost. Contrary to the situation in Java before World War II (Sutherland 1979), the new middle class in Kupang were not the fortunate children of traditional aristocrats but of underprivileged subsistence peasants (Doko, Marcus) or of urban tradesmen (Tari). History offered them mobility beyond their wildest dreams, but at a price. As the town grew, it became increasingly estranged from the rural environs that had nurtured it. Its newly privileged middle class looked more readily for its livelihood to dispensations from far-away powers. These were engaged in their own distant struggles, which favoured now one set of clients and now another. After Timor had joined in Indonesia’s independence in late 1949, republicanism began to spread, and the aristocrat whose lineage was rooted in the soil became dispensable. As militarism spread in the mid-1960s, the same fate met the communist organizer who had promised to bring modern emancipation also to the peasants. Their place was taken by the urban bureaucrat and by the soldier, both lowly born, both on the rise thanks to their far-away patrons. Gratefully blotting out their own impoverished past, both drew their strength from the modern state’s impressive capacity to generate money, coordination, and violence.

Again unlike Java (Anderson 1972), the non-aristocrats among these prominent did not win their spurs by their own deeds of revolutionary heroism, but by adroit, pragmatic demonstrations of loyalty to greater powers elsewhere. In the 1930s the higher powers had been the Dutch; during World War II they were the Japanese; afterwards, the Allies and then the Dutch again; later again, they were political party bosses,

---

12 Twenty-four defendants were tried for war crimes in Kupang. Over a thousand individuals were tried at twelve such tribunals held by the Netherlands Indies. A quarter were sentenced to death and only 5% acquitted. Australia held some tribunals of its own in Indonesian territory as well but not in Kupang (Post et al 2010:407–21).
bureaucratic chiefs, and military commanders in Java who were themselves often at loggerheads with each other. Contingent events marked provincial elite lives to an extraordinary degree. As one regime violently succeeded another, first in 1942, then again in 1945, in 1950, and in 1965, their survival often depended more on others than on themselves.

This combination of thrusting upward mobility and extreme contingency inevitably brought with it moral compromises. The process deposited numerous skeletons in the cupboards of the survivors, and unending pain in the hearts of those losers who got off with their lives, to say nothing of the dead. The loss of innocence that struck them all helps explain why establishment accounts of the past are so shallow, so full of taboos. It explains the gap that yawns between the schematized, historicist public accounts of lives as they are written, on the one hand, and the dramatic contingency of the private accounts that the biographer ‘must not write,’ on the other.

The biographer who decides to incorporate the forbidden accounts into a wider story anyway might be taking a gamble on relationships with his or her friends. I trust I have not betrayed confidences. But even a strict adherence to ethical principles cannot completely prevent a feeling of discomfort, which is practically inherent in the procedure I had to adopt. Since there are almost no written documents about what I considered to be the dark heart of Kupang’s political history, and since so few leftists or even their relatives survive who are able and willing to tell their side of the story, I was forced to amplify the whispered stories of those who were on the militarist side of the political spectrum. These are people who have something to lose by telling them openly. I suspect that the problem I have described applies to writing the history of any Indonesian provincial town for this fraught period, and it is not wholly open to resolution. Of course, I am not writing only for my friends in Kupang but for any world citizen interested in the lives of townsfolk in a developing country. As for my friends, the best that can happen is that what they read might help loosen the bonds of a tyrannous past and open up the possibility of redemption through compassionate knowing.13

---

13 I never told them – it would have been impossible anyway – what I considered the most beautiful expression of this Schopenhauerian thought. It is Amfortas’ line in Parsifal: ‘Durch Mitteid wissend, der reine Thor’ (Through compassion, knowing – the pure fool). Schopenhauer drew his inspiration from Asia, and I dare to think the thought itself is not strange to my Asian friends.