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Modern Papuan activists


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These two books are indispensable contributions to what has been published about the political struggles of Papuans. They provide quite different perspectives, but, most importantly, they present the words of Papuans themselves. *De getuigenissen* contains twelve self-accounts by Papuans. In his introduction to the book, Farhadian describes them as an unsorted mix of autobiography, political analysis, and declarations of Christian belief. He elicited and published them to draw international attention to the plight of the Papuans, who are subjected to continuing repression by the Indonesian government (p. 7). The amount of editing is said to be light, but Farhadian’s contributions to the discussions are edited out. The book has two other introductions, one by Benny Giay, one of the witnesses, a Protestant, and one by Neles Tebay, a Catholic, the auxiliary bishop of Jayapura. Farhadian is an interdisciplinary scholar, with training in anthropology, comparative theology, and missiology, who did postgraduate field work among urban Western Dani in 1998-9. The book is the Dutch translation of *Testimony project Papua: A collection of personal histories in West Papua*, published in 2007. Footnotes, written by At Ipenburg, describe the changes that have occurred since then. Most notably, after an exile of 47 years, Nikolaas Jouwe returned to Papua in 2009 to live there.

The twelve witnesses form a selective group. They are highly educated, almost all at tertiary levels. Eight studied at institutions elsewhere in Indonesia. Six are priests or theologians. Several have prominent positions in educational institutions and/or representative bodies such as the Papua Council. Tebay comments that men, Protestants, and coastal Papuans are
over-represented, while there are no Muslims among the twelve (pp. 21-2).

Two witnesses, Nicolaas Jouwe and Octavianus Mote, were in exile at the

time of the interviews. Others relate how they suffered political intimidation,
arrests, and jail from the side of the Indonesian authorities. In Giay’s words:

Papuans have to live in ‘a culture of trauma and violence’ (p. 15). Giay express-
es his gratitude to Farhadian for recording the accounts. For him they are har-
bingers of a new Papuan Christian theology, a theology from the bottom up.

Many witnesses testify to the presence of God in their life and in the

history of the Papuans. They identify the freedom that they aspire to with

the land that God promised, and eventually gave, to the Israelites, while

subjected to the Egyptians (pp. 16, 139). Helena Matuan describes visions of

Christ, as experienced by groups of people (pp. 139-40). Witnesses experience
direct interventions by God in human affairs. For Giay, God speaks to people
via the testimonies (p. 17). Thus, he appears to regard the twelve witnesses as
present-day apostles. Witnesses imagine God to be vengeful. Herman Awom,
a church minister, rejoiced when, supposedly in answer to his prayer, two
aircraft with Indonesian officials crashed (p. 208).

In contrast, Victor Kaisiëpo describes his struggle to improve the lot of

the Papuans without referring to religion, although he affirms that he is a

Christian (p. 261). Kaisiëpo was the son of Markus Wonggor Kaisiëpo, a
prominent Papuan politician during Dutch colonial rule. He was in exile in
the Netherlands from 1962 to his death in 2000. For many years he led a faction
of the discordant group of Papuans living in the Netherlands. Victor Kaisiëpo
was fourteen when the Dutch government made his mother and her children
leave Papua for the Netherlands. He was diagnosed with cancer in 2009 and
approached Willem Campschreur to assist him in getting his story written up.
In an afterword, Campschreur explains the procedure he followed. He and
Kaisiëpo held a number of recording sessions, but Kaisiëpo died before these
records had been fashioned into a manuscript. Campschreur edited them
with the help of Kaisiëpo’s widow, Evelien van den Broek, and also of Dirk
Vlasblom and Pieter Drooglever.

The book forms a sequel, and a counterpart, to Nonie Sharp’s 1994 The
Morning Star in Papua Barat, based largely on a series of interviews she had

with Markus Wonggor Kaisiëpo, in 1991. I reviewed Sharp’s book for this
journal (Ploeg 1995). Victor Kaisiëpo appears to have been an indefatigable
advocate for Papuans. In the course of his life he widened his approach
considerably. He relates how his father became trapped in one of the small,

orthodox Protestant political parties, because that party supported self-
determination by the Papuans. Victor Kaisiëpo came to see this association
as a straightjacket. His membership with the ‘Indonesia Committee’, a Dutch
action group that took issue with Indonesian politics, made him realize that
Papuans were not the only victims of the Indonesian regime. However,
participation in the fourth Russell tribunal, in 1980, was decisive. There he came to regard the Pauans as an Indigenous People and apparently got his view accepted. As he states, that recognition enabled him to develop a large, worldwide network.

It allowed him access to meetings in the UN headquarters, and to the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva, to mention just two organizations. And when the Soeharto rule ended, he was able to return to Papua, which he did for the first time in 2000, and 15 times more in the following decade. He was critical of many of the Papuan militants, both in Papua and in the Netherlands. In his view, it should have been clear to the guerrilla fighters of the OPM, the Organisasi Papua Merdeka, that armed resistance to the Indonesian government was fruitless given the enormous disparity in power. And he critiqued many Papuan politicians due to their unreflective commitment to ‘independence’, while it remained unclear how Papua was to be governed once independence was realized. For instance, when Muridhan Widjojo attempted to explain the ideas set forth in his Papuan road map (2010), a Papuan woman interrupted him, reportedly saying: ‘[Y]ou should leave us alone, we want independence’. The comment irritated him, since he himself had opted for gradualism, for a long process of negotiations in as many fora as feasible. He did not think that the ideal of independence should be relinquished, but it should not be demanded a priori either (pp. 244, 250). Such an approach made him a contested figure among politically active Papuans.

The Kaisiëpo family hails from Biak-Numfor in Cenderawasih Bay. During his conversations with Nonie Sharp, Markus described himself as a ‘Koreri man’ (Sharp 1994:5, 77). Koreri is a central concept in Biak-Numfor culture and stands for the transformation towards a radically better world, and for the promise of it. Applied to the struggle with the Indonesian regime, it stands for liberation, freedom. Its visual symbol is the morning star, the white star on the Papuan flag, the flag of freedom. For Victor also, his Biak-Numfor ancestry mattered. He stated that Koreri was alive in him, that he ‘drew strength from it’ (p. 261). And the acronym ‘Msn’ following his family name is an abbreviation of ‘Manseren’, the Biak word for clan leader (p. 16).

Campschreur comments that Viktor Kaisiëpo stage managed their conversations, like an eloquent, flamboyant Melanesian orator would have done. Sharp gives that impression of Markus Kaisiëpo, as well. And Viktor’s account makes it clear that he took a similar role during demonstrations: singing, making music, dancing. On one occasion he demanded, and got, access to the office of a Dutch broadcasting organization wearing a penis gourd, and apparently very little else (pp. 147-8); his way of protesting against a programme that depicted Pauans as primitives. He commented that street actions have been largely replaced by the internet. He must have regretted this, but he did realize that this new medium mobilized people effectively (p. 136).
The books are fittingly designed. The cover of *De getuigenissen* is in a sombre black and white, with the black predominating. The book has a section with pictures, by Stephan Babuljak, showing scenes of contemporary life in Papua. These pictures also are printed in black and white, on black paper. Again in contrast, Kaisiëpo’s book shows him both in a European style suit and in a neo-traditional Papuan dress, the main garment of which is the Morning Star flag, with the white star in front. The cover is in blue, red, and white, the flag’s colours. The book contains a wealth of pictures, many in colour, and many from family archives.

References

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