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

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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.