CHAPTER FIVE

ELITE BROKERS (1934–1950)

I was the translator, the advisor, the spokesperson, the people’s leader, the lottery drawer, the announcer, the teacher of Malay and Japanese language, the organizer, the leader of Seinendan, the letter composer, etc. etc.

(I.H. Doko explaining his role under the Japanese to Dutch officials after WWII, Locher 1945:4).

Indonesia’s grand myth of national becoming is that the Revolution of 1945 welded together a disparate colonial patchwork. The actual history of national integration across space was much more uneven. Chapter 1 introduced two Indonesias: a central Indonesian heartland – Java, parts of Sumatra and southern Sulawesi – that owned the revolution and much other mobilizational activity before and since, and many islands in a large periphery that heard about these things from afar and were otherwise preoccupied with their own affairs. Yet Indonesia is united. How did this happen? The same chapter also began to explore the idea of mediation, and in particular of brokerage, that might lead to an answer. This chapter takes up those ideas and applies them to one particular site. The brokers who brought eastern Indonesia into the new nation came from small towns in the region. The chapter traces the biography of one of the main nationalist organizers in one small provincial town in eastern Indonesia at the time when the nation was born. He and his fellows opened doors for people wanting to pass in both directions – central government officials needing access to the region, and fellow locals wanting jobs with the new government. But rather than becoming midwives to popular democracy, they remained a small group of local elites. The politics they bequeathed to the town were factional and bureaucratic, little troubled by demands from any broader civil society.

The national myth is that the 1945 revolution worked its exhilarating magic equally everywhere. Foreigners who have read only Benedict Anderson’s famous book on this episode (1972) tend to forget that he was explicitly writing only about Java. However, others have grappled with spatial heterogeneities. Audrey Kahin (1985) edited a volume exploring the differences in local leadership in towns all over the archipelago during
the national revolution. Local variation in the history of colonial governance was among the most important explanatory factors, she concluded. More recently, Rudolf Mrázek (2010) has recorded the highly evocative words of aging urban intellectuals in Jakarta. All of them had been engaged with the revolution when they were young, but they spoke to Mrázek mainly about the intimate spaces of their youth. This chapter, too, wishes to contribute to widening the historical terrains and challenging the assumptions of a Java-centric historiography.

In 1949 Kupang’s population was just 11,000. Like many towns in this region, Kupang’s economy revolved around trade and state investment. Beyond the town lay a subsistence agricultural economy. A passing car was a rarity – most people walked, a few had bicycles, and there was the occasional truck-bus heading out of town. Lower-middle class readers of the Chinese-supported broadsheets read about local incidents, agricultural statistics from neighbouring islands, and world news. Yet when the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia in Jakarta on 17 August 1945 triggered armed youth insurrections in Java’s major cities of Surabaya and Bandung, it went unremarked in Kupang. There were immediate historical reasons for this disconnect – war disasters had stunned Kupang, and Australian Allied troops took control more quickly than in Java1 – but it also had deeper roots. Kupang was part of a different Indonesia.

The indigenous local leaders who emerged in the tumultuous years spanning World War II were typically educated individuals with some organization behind them. Like the ‘marginals’ described by Eric Wolf (1956) in Mexico, who rose to become the ideal ‘brokers’ between their rural communities and the Revolutionary government via new political organizations, they learned to operate in the manipulative environment of short-term friendships and the shifting opportunities of the early independent state. The resources that they were able to deploy varied with the character of their ‘home’ milieu. In central Indonesia, they tended to be professional political mobilizers. Sukarno was the supreme example. In eastern Indonesia, by contrast, they came from within the colonial state, where they worked as civil servants or teachers at state schools. Popular movements occasionally emerged in eastern Indonesia too, but colonial authorities quickly suppressed them, leaving room only for local elites

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1 They accepted the Japanese surrender in Timor on a warship in Kupang Bay on 11 September 1945, and afterwards faced no military problems to assuming total control. Civilian authority was in the hands of the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) from the start. Australian soldiers were ordered to have no contact with the indigenous population, and were withdrawn on 18 March 1946 (Farram 2004:216–22).