The everyday life of Papuan civil servants 1950-1990

Leontine Visser

This book started as an oral history of the governance of Netherlands New Guinea from about 1950 to 1962, as lived and experienced by the indigenous Papuan civil servants at the time. It is based on a series of interview sessions held during 1999 and 2000 in Jayapura and Biak. Yet, the book is more than a series of personal accounts of a unique period in the social-cultural, economic, and political history of the geographical space that today forms the two Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua. Particularly the second round of interviews took place in a highly politicized environment\(^1\) which stimulated the former civil servants to reflect on their lives and actions as members of the ruling elite of a developing nation. This unplanned contextualization of their accounts added the important extra dimension of subjective comparison of their functioning in the Dutch development administration of the 1950’s until 1962 and the Indonesian government administration of Soeharto’s New Order. The Papuan civil servants\(^2\) were still in their late teens when they took up major responsibilities in the development of New Guinea, first under supervision of the Dutch, but by the end of the decade, often also as their colleagues. After 1962, they continued to serve their people as

\(^1\) The year 2000 was particularly tense in Papua. After a meeting with President Habibie, Papuans started gathering in a mass movement. During two grand meetings an organization was added to the movement. The first of these meetings was held in Sentani, the Great Conference (Musyawarah Besar) in February 2000. The second was held in Jayapura, namely the 2nd Papuan Peoples’ Congress (Kongres Papua) in May 2000, calling for a rectification of the history of the struggle of West Irian (meluruskan sejarah perjuangan Irian Barat) (see also Chauvel 2008). Reactions from Jakarta were violent; bloody incidents happened, culminating in the killing of Theys Eluay in November 2001.

\(^2\) For two reasons we prefer to speak of civil servants, rather than of government officials, let alone colonial officials (Chauvel 2008). Firstly, the interviewees themselves stressed their position as a ‘servant of the people’ (hamba rakyat) which of course is a true translation of the Dutch moral code of a dienaar des volks. They believed in their mission to contribute to the human development of the people of Papua. Secondly, because they did not regard Dutch administration after World War II as a colonial endeavour.
part of the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) and of the Indonesian government organization, until they retired from active service in the 1990s.

Methodologically, the individual interviews were organized in such a way that specific subjects were discussed with all interviewees (see below) while the book as a whole allows, through the temporal and spatial variation and differentiation of the individual contributions, to construct a broader and more inclusive picture of the everyday practices of the governing of New Guinea during a period of forty years. Particular attention is given to the period between 1961 and 1969. It stands out in the personal memory of all civil servants interviewed almost as one continuous period of destitution, political insecurity, and anger. This runs together because of the frustration over the departure of their Dutch superiors or colleagues in 1961, the ensuing insecurity and uncertainty of the short transition period under United Nations’ surveillance, and especially because of the economic misery and political tensions after the inclusion as a province of the nation-state of Indonesia, culminating in the political danger and transgression of civil rights during the months before and after the implementation of the so-called Act of Free Choice in 1969.

ABOUT THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

The art of governing is rational, on the condition that it observes the nature of what is governed (Foucault 1988:149, cited in Agrawal 2005:223). Particularly in a geographically, physically, and socially little explored land like New-Guinea in the mid-twentieth century, this observation

---

3 The formal title of the territory was frequently changed during these four decades. From Netherlands New Guinea, it became West New-Guinea after World War II. Soekarno named it the Indonesian province of Irian Barat in December 1961, or West Irian during the short period of UN governance (1960-1962) and in international writings. In 1973 Soeharto renamed the province Irian Jaya. After the demise of President Soeharto, the name Papua came back when the new National University of Papua (UNIPA) was established in Manokwari in 2000, and A. Wahid acknowledged the name Papua in that same year, which was accepted by the Indonesian Parliament on January 7, 2002 (Kivimäki and Thorning 2002). Finally, in the political struggle with Jakarta over Special Autonomy for the province, the central government decreed in January 2003 the split into two provinces (euphemistically called pemakaran): West Papua and of Papua (Timmer 2006). Although we fully recognize that it is a historically incorrect simplification, we follow general academic practice in using the word Papua throughout the book. This is also converges with the language and the self-identification of the interviewees who spoke of Papua to indicate the country, whatever its formal political title through history.