Leontine Visser (ed.)


Indonesian officials gave an essential contribution to the creation of the modern colonial state in Indonesia. The reports that came in at the headquarters in Batavia and The Hague do reflect much of their work. Yet more often than not they remain silent on the way they performed their task and, even more important so, what they thought of it. The final reports were written by their European superiors. According to the rules of any formal administration, they were inclined to do what they were asked for and not to criticize their masters. If such a thing happened, it was the (hardly tolerated) prerogative of educated persons outside or on the fringes of the administration such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, and journalists. So, for the modes of living and thinking of the many thousands of Indonesian officials at the service of the Dutch, historians have to consult the local and private archives, papers, journals, and other literature. Among the latter category are the memoirs of Dutch and some Indonesians officials. Fiction of good quality may offer additional information on the complexities of the multidimensional life in the colony.

Much of the same is true for former Dutch New Guinea, now West Papua. Here too we find an administration divided along clearcut ethnic lines, even more so than in Indonesia. Most of the people that staffed it had a background in Indonesia. From the early days of their presence in Indonesia, Dutch pretensions on sovereignty over the Papuan Islands had rested on rather hypothetical claims of their vassal, the sultan of Tidore. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that a start had been made with the building of a modern colonial administration here, which was far from completed at the time of their retreat from Indonesia in 1950. For these and other reasons of expedience and conviction, it was kept apart by the Dutch from the transfer of power. It was the starting point for a prolonged dispute with the newly independent Indonesia, and for the speeding up of development programs for the Papuans. In numbers of people concerned it was a relatively small-scale operation, with only less than a million Papuans and a few hundred Dutch involved at the beginning. Yet by then the development programs were carried out with more vigour than had been the case during the past decades. Now the Dutch presence deliberately was seen as a temporary operation only, to come to an end, either with a transfer to Indonesia or with the setting up of an independent Papua state according to the wishes of the population. Actually, the experiment ended much before
the time anticipated by Dutch and Papuans alike with a transfer to Indonesia under duress of the United Nations in 1963, to be followed by an arrangement for some sort of a plebiscite in 1969, called the Act of Free Choice, in which the Indonesians had negotiated a free hand in making the final arrangements. Thus, it ended up with a 100% vote in favour of Indonesia. For the Papuans it meant the continuation of a hardhanded and rather ineffective Indonesian rule that lasts till today.

The initiative for writing the present book was taken in 1998, the year that saw the demise of the administration of president Suharto and rising expectations for more democracy and political reform throughout the archipelago. It spread out to the Eastern flanks, where Papuans were pleading for reform as well, even to the point of asking for a rehearsal of the Act of Free Choice or outright independence at once. In the outside world, these events came as a surprise and in the Netherlands, where the memories of the unsuccessful New Guinea experiment had been fading away by the years, new interest arose. As it happened, not long before these events took place, at the kitlv a bundle of reminiscences of Dutch civil servants on their years of service in New Guinea had been published, and on the sidelines of a meeting in Leiden in May 1998 the idea was born to do the same for their erstwhile Papuan colleagues. They too had a right to have their voices heard, and Jos Marey and Leontine Visser took the lead. They had different competencies: Jos as a former Papuan civil servant and Leontine as an anthropologist with a broad knowledge of the Eastern parts of Indonesia. Yet they fit well together. Both had the knowledge as well as the contacts that made the project feasible. It could start immediately and the interviews were carried out in 1999 and 2000. There was much advantage in that early start. The year of the interviews was full of political change in Indonesia and high expectations in New Guinea, with more opportunity for contact and freedom of speech than in the preceding decades, and the book has profited from it. The working out of the rough drafts took more time. The Indonesian edition was published in Jakarta by Kompas in 2007, to be followed by the present English translation five years afterwards. Late, maybe, but the work was mainly carried out in the spare hours of the participants and we can be glad with the result. It is a worthwhile publication that contains ample information on the spirit of the Dutch and Indonesian administrations and the way the Papua civil servants saw it. It reflects the disturbing experiences of a small people in a world where brave words of freedom and democracy were ‘en vogue’, but in the end their wishes and interests played no role at all.

The book is divided in seventeen chapters, each containing the result of one of the interviews. These are not reproduced exactly as they were taken, but