

# Marginality, morality, and the nationalist impulse: Papua, the Netherlands and Indonesia: a review article<sup>1</sup>

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This vast, heavily detailed and deeply researched book presents an account of the diplomatic history of the ‘West New Guinea problem’ and thus of the political fate of the people and territory of western New Guinea. In just over 800 pages, Professor Drooglever describes the painful and always vexed history of the incorporation of the peoples of the western segment of the island of New Guinea (an ‘originally very primitive society’, 14) into the modern world. It is a tragic, bitter and frustrating story, one of marginality, powerlessness, and the victory of primordial moral certainty (however misplaced) and cynicism over weakly-grounded good intentions.

Basing himself upon an unrivalled knowledge of the diplomatic sources, and employing a great talent for synthesis and a drily witty and compact style, Drooglever traces the history of the peoples of Papua in fourteen chapters. He tells the story of the cultural distance of most of Papua’s people from the more western peoples of the Indonesian archipelago, the slow and incomplete efforts of Dutch colonialism to lay claim to and then begin to govern the western part of the island (for strategic, not economic, advantage), the growing sense amongst the Dutch (and some Papuans as well) that New Guinea was not quite like the rest of their Netherlands Indies and therefore needed to be treated differently, the multi-purposed, gradually arrived at, but ultimately disastrous decision not to hand over the territory to the newly-created Republic of the United States of Indonesia in 1949, the consequently accelerating tensions between Indonesia and the Netherlands when the former realised that New Guinea would not easily and naturally fall into its grasp and when the Dutch, for their part, began a new colonial project in the region, the bitter, troubling negotiations, partly a product of gathering Dutch doubts about its own capacity and the measure of international support it might receive, which finally placed the territory first under UN, then Indonesian, administration in 1962-1963, and the fateful ‘Act of Free Choice’ which finally delivered the territory unconditionally but by no means unreservedly to Indonesia.

There is much to praise in this huge and complex work. Most obviously, there is the breadth of research and the meticulous scholarship focussed on archival collections in three countries, a number of interviews, and a broad list of ancillary secondary works. There are, further, the skills of synthesis and

<sup>1</sup> P. J. Drooglever, *Een daad van vrije keuze. De Papoea’s van westelijk Nieuw-Guinea en de grenzen van het zelfbeschikkingsrecht* (Amsterdam: Boom, Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2005, 807 blz., €45,-, ISBN 90 8506 178 4).

organisation which bring together this multi-faceted work into a solid, readable, stylish unity. There is, as well, a certain dispassionateness in the prose, an almost unfashionable sense that there is an objective truth to be uncovered, and that the way to uncover it is through a diligent, detached and disinterested reading of the paper record of government actions. Whatever one may think of this mode of analysis, it does leave the reader with the sense that this book is and will remain the definitive work on this subject; no one else will have the patience, skill, deftness and opportunity to perform anything like this piece on investigation again. It sheds new light and new detail on aspects of the story — for example, the complex meshing of factors which gave birth to the Netherlands' New Guinea policy in the immediate post-war period — and does so with an enormous comprehensiveness and totalising quality. There can be no doubt this work will serve as essential primary reading for anyone seriously interested in this subject in the future. Which, of course, raises the question as to why it was published in the Dutch language, something which, notwithstanding the many virtues of that language, must certainly hinder the book's capacity to be read, absorbed and learned from in broader international circles, and notably in Indonesia itself.

Drooglever's account can be read on many levels and in many ways. At one level it is the story of a failed imperial project: the retreat of the Netherlands from the status of imposing imperial power to that of a relatively insignificant little country of western Europe, and the effects that change in status had both upon its leaders and those upon whom they wished to exercise distant power. At another level still, it may be read as a sad parable of powerlessness and marginality, a powerlessness that exhibited itself in profound ways at different times — the powerlessness of the Indonesians, at least those attached to the Republic, both to halt the Dutch federal project and, later, to prevent the Dutch retaining control of New Guinea after the transfer of sovereignty in 1949; the powerlessness of the Dutch, once sovereignty had been transferred, and once the combination of Cold War realism and Third World revulsion at imperialism combined to render their efforts to make something better of New Guinea completely hopeless. Most of all, this is a story of the powerlessness of Papuans themselves: colonised, undeveloped, fought over, bartered with, encouraged, betrayed, and then colonised again. That Papuans are so passive, so victimised and, indeed, that they play so insignificant a part in the overall narrative of the book is instructive and sobering indeed. Third, the book might be read as an unflattering account of diplomatic process: the effusive claims and grandiloquence, the moral grandstandings, the game of bluff and counterbluff (always with people's lives and futures hanging in the balance), of miscalculation, of claims to power where there was no power, of ruthless arrogance, the inconsistencies and illogicalities of policy from time to time, and always the overhanging sense that the problem, made in the first instance by the Dutch, would never be solved by the Dutch.

In reviewing this complex issue over the longer period of twentieth century history, one is tempted to think against the grain and to wonder whether this terrible tale really had to play itself out in this way. In that sense, though on a

much smaller scale, there is a kind of essential insolubility to the problem here that inevitably brings the Middle East to mind. But might anything have been done to make things different, and better? Right from the beginning, things seemed to have been stacked against the Papuans. Apart from the fact that they had the misfortune to be colonised at all, they were colonised by a small and uninfluential European power whose capacity to carve out an Indies empire was essentially a result of the strategic disposition of larger world powers at the time. Second, the Dutch, busy with other parts of the Indies, and by the 1930s economically crippled by the Depression, never attempted to make much of this part of the Indies. New Guinea's major fame — or rather notoriety — came from the fact that it housed the notorious Digul internment camp for Indonesian political dissidents. Third, after 1942, the Dutch, completely overwhelmed by the Japanese, then caught sleeping by the ferocity and reach of the nascent independence movement under Sukarno, were always scrambling to make up time and power in the archipelago, and that weakness in turn prompted them to attempt to demonstrate a capacity they no longer really enjoyed. The result was the crucial, foolish and catastrophic decision, slowly and almost inadvertently come to, to attempt to hold on to New Guinea in the context of the general decolonisation of Indonesia. That, in retrospect was the crucial moment.

Thereafter, though the Dutch triumphed at the time, it was the most empty and, for the people of Papua, the most damaging of victories. Thereafter, the story is one of foolish optimism and inevitable decline for Dutch interests in the face of world opinion which increasingly turned sour, and a determined Indonesian offensive to claim what it considered its own as of right. Had the Dutch handed over the territory with the rest of Indonesia in 1949, the problem would never have arisen (though the fate of Papuans themselves might not necessarily have been any better). On their good intentions, to provide an eventual and meaningful right of self-determination to the Papuan peoples, whatever their confused moral and political bases, was a policy set in train which could never succeed in the reigning context and which inevitably brought sorrow and death to many.

At a fundamental level, the problem of Dutch efforts to preserve New Guinea as its own, and eventually to allow it to pass to its own form of freedom, was based on an almost complete failure to understand the nature and tenacity of Indonesian nationalism. That central failure is captured in this book, but in ways, I suspect, that the author did not intend. Drooglever's noble efforts to deliver the facts on the New Guinea problem fail for precisely the same reason numerous Dutch governments did: an inability to appreciate the depth and frustrating constancy of post-war Indonesian nationalism. That is this book's greatest flaw.

Drooglever's project, as he notes in his foreword, is 'to write a study of the relations between the Netherlands and New Guinea, the conflict with Indonesia which flowed from that, and the series of events in relation to the Act of Free Choice.' (12) He notes the fact that, notwithstanding the best efforts of Dutch authorities, the Indonesian government was unwilling to cooperate in the study. It is partly because of this difficulty that the archival

sources are essentially those of countries which were generally as unsympathetic to the nature and power of Indonesian nationalism as the Dutch themselves. This source basis, together with the original intention with which the work was conceptualised, immediately means that the history we read is written, as it were, over the shoulder of numerous Dutch officials and diplomats. Equally, it means that the Indonesian side of the story is presented in essentially ahistorical and sometimes puzzling terms which inevitably cast the Indonesian actors as stubborn and unyielding belligerents who have no sense of the noble virtues of self-determination and fairness.

It would be foolish not to acknowledge the double-dealing, cynicism and outright intolerance and cruelty which characterised much of the Indonesian diplomatic, military and political effort to claim New Guinea as an integral part of Indonesia. At the same time, however, it does not assist the untutored to appreciate the utter complexity of the situation if the key dimension of the Indonesian nationalist impulse is left unexplained, or cast in terms designed to deny it any kind of moral privilege.

A prominent feature of early post-war Dutch understandings of the Republican upsurge, notably in Java and Sumatra, was that the Republican leadership, notably Sukarno himself, was not truly representative of a broader social movement to achieve freedom. While it was certainly true that the Republican movement was most strongly anchored in Java and Sumatra, and that it found — for reasons to do with Dutch colonial policy, Japanese wartime administrative decisions and the area's early liberation — less fertile ground in parts of eastern Indonesia, Dutch efforts to capitalise on that relative weakness in the form of a federal movement proved a failure when the second police action finally provoked the United Nations — that is, the Americans — to intercede on the part of the Republic. The attitude of the federal states was, if anything, even more aggressively nationalist than that of the Republic in the lead up to and in the course of the Round Table negotiations of 1949. Thereafter, the federal experiment — viewed as a remnant of recalcitrant colonialism by the Republic — quickly collapsed, something that itself stimulated the desire to complete the project of achieving freedom for the whole territory of the Republic of the August 1945 proclamation.

Drooglever goes on to document the detail of the decline in Indonesian-Dutch relations which followed the failure of the Dutch to do what the Indonesians had expected — hand over New Guinea. In his discussion, he pits a relentless and cajoling Indonesia against a Netherlands whose good intentions for what remained of its Indies empire inspire it to develop, materially, spiritually and politically, a new sense of identity. This is, of course, an uneven moral contest, even if in the end the pressure of world opinion (and especially the will of a new American administration determined not to upset the Indonesians too much in an increasingly dangerous Southeast Asia) sees the defeat of the morally upright. Finally overwhelmed, the powerless Netherlands is forced to hand over New Guinea to the United Nations, and then to an Indonesian administration which, we are not surprised to find, employs skulduggery, brutality, and the strategic invocation of alleged Indonesian cultural values to arrange an act of free choice which it can never lose.

Relieved that the problem is over, the United Nations and its members acquiesce in the charade.

There is, of course, a great deal of truth in the story Drooglever presents. And yet, partly for reasons to do with his aims, partly, perhaps, because of his lack of access to Indonesian official sources, but mainly, I think, because of the moral frame in which the book is presented, it is not a wholly accurate and thus misleading account because of its failure adequately to come to grips with the Indonesian drive for national integrity. It is something of a puzzle to those who know little of Indonesian nationalism that Indonesia was prepared to invest so much effort, money, and its good name as well as the blood of its sons to secure a remote part of the former Netherlands East Indies. As Drooglever himself points out, some prominent nationalist leaders, notably Hatta, thought little of marginal New Guinea and were not especially troubled at the prospect of its 'loss'. Even earlier, Syahrir, travelling through eastern Indonesia on his way to exile in Digul early in 1935, was struck by feelings of distance and isolation. In the fashion of a tourist in a new land, he remarked 'how beautiful this eastern part of our country is.'<sup>2</sup> Of eastern Indonesia there was, indeed, a certain disdain; 'from a social point of view this part of Indonesia has almost no meaning.'<sup>3</sup> And yet for most Indonesians this was — and had always been — an integral part their country, even if they knew nothing of it and even if many of them were wont to treat its indigenous inhabitants with patronising contempt. The social will which had been manifested in the August 1945 proclamation was matter of the exercise of leaders acting in the name of the people and thus a matter of right, the reclamation, by force if necessary, of a history and an identity previously lost to European colonialism. It was not something subject to plebiscites or the plaything of locally popular interests, any more than, say, an Australian federal government would countenance the loss of one of its constituent states through a local exercise in the right of self-determination.

Put in this way, it is perhaps easier to understand the depth of Indonesian wrath at the fact that its relative impotence in the 1949 negotiations had resulted in the excision of an integral part of its being. While it is certainly true that this sense of nationalist humiliation was ruthlessly and shamelessly employed, especially after 1954, by Sukarno and other actors in domestic Indonesian politics (notably the army) for their own political advantage, there can be no doubting the fact the very presence of a Dutch occupied New Guinea was a continuing slight to a great many Indonesians, something which gave the political ploys of Sukarno and others their pungency and immediacy. Seen from this vantage point, the unswerving, and gradually heightening demands of the Republic for the restoration of its wholeness takes on a new light, and the efforts of the Dutch to nurture and develop a Papuan elite begin to look less like the well-intentioned desire for the realisation of self-determinations and rather more like the irresponsible sowing of seeds of

<sup>2</sup> S. Sjahrir, *Out of exile*, trans. Charles Wolf Jr. (repr. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969 [1949]), 44 (11 February 1935). See also 46 (21 February 1935).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 48 (21 February 1935).

discord — seeds which were to come to fruition in good time — within the Indonesian nation. This dimension of the analysis is almost wholly lacking in Drooglever's analysis, and represents a crippling deficiency in what is otherwise a superbly crafted piece of work.

How might the deficiency have been made good? Within Drooglever's given moral frame of reference, such would be impossible, since the whole tenor of the book is to represent the fact that good intentions for the sake of a small and weak people is noble, even if it is sometimes misconceived and unthinking, and even if it ultimately results in failure. But Drooglever's failure to attempt to understand the underlying dynamic of the Indonesian nationalist impulse and the consequent tenacity of its eventually victorious diplomacy, presents an unnervingly one-sided account of a complex and many-sided problem. Given that he is so clearly a scholar who seeks to write without preconceptions and who seeks to achieve 'a reasonable measure of objectivity' (15), one wonders whether a more thorough exposure to Indonesians and Indonesia-centric sources (I counted just nine Indonesian-language books in the bibliography, and no reference at all to any Indonesian newspapers) might have caused him to reframe that moral frame, and perhaps to cast what is currently flagged as the humane and well-intended hopes of the Netherlands as silly, misconceived, conceited policy, which itself resulted, in the given context, in unmeasured suffering and a trauma which has not yet run its course.

In an important sense, Drooglever's book adds nothing of great significance to what is now a well-known tale: of Dutch conniving to deprive the Indonesian Republic of the final victory it sought and thought it had achieved, of persistent and unconscionable Indonesian efforts to reverse their 1949 loss, of a Dutch moral crusade which outreached its capacity to achieve its end in the context of a rapidly changing international political and moral order, and of subsequent Indonesian scheming, connivance, and downright terror in the name of the furtherance of its own moral claim. That much we knew already. Drooglever's weighty tome adds depth, personality, nuance and scholarly detail to the outlines of that story, and for this we are much in his debt. Would that the missing dimension of his work had been included. But that might have prevented him reaching the smoothly moral conclusions he eventually does, that the Dutch, despite their many failings and stubbornness, really had their heart in the right place, and that their ultimate failure was a function of their essential weakness in a wider world. That conclusion, I fear, lets Dutch policy off too lightly. In ignoring and thus maligning the strength and the unforgiving nature of the post-war Indonesian nationalist project, Drooglever commits the same fault as did those Dutch policy makers whose efforts to control change in the 1940s and 1950s whilst ignoring or attempting to deflect that national will of the Indonesians, led in the end to the tragically unresolved 'problem' of New Guinea.

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Summary

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Drooglever's large and detailed analysis of the course of 'West New Guinea problem' demonstrates a mastery of sources and of the skills of synthesis, and will certainly become the definitive work on the subject. The book may be read at many levels, as a story of Dutch imperial decline and diplomatic failure, of Indonesian powerlessness, and of Papuan victimhood, as the Dutch refused to concede New Guinea, attempted to develop an indigenous Papuan political capacity, and were finally overwhelmed by a combination of Indonesian determination and the changing circumstances of international politics. The book's greatest weakness, just like the post-war Dutch policy which is its subject, is its failure to appreciate the strength, depth and moral force of Indonesian nationalism, something reflected not only in the one-sided moral tone of the book, but also in its failure to analyse Indonesian sources and attitudes with sufficient seriousness.

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# ‘Geschiedenis is nu eenmaal altijd politiek.’ De studie-Drooglever als symptoom van de moeizame omgang van Nederland met het koloniaal verleden en de complexe relatie met Indonesië

HANS MEIJER

## *Politieke ophef*

Het komt niet vaak voor dat een historische studie in Nederland voorpaginanieuws is, laat staan politieke ophef teweeg brengt. Het op regeringsverzoek door het NIOD geschreven Srebrenica-rapport dat leidde tot de val van het kabinet-Kok-II in april 2002 was in die zin een uitzonderlijk geval. Maar ook een ander, door een lid van datzelfde kabinet-Kok-II ingewilligd parlementair verzoek om geschiedkundig onderzoek te laten doen, bracht een Nederlandse regering (het kabinet-Balkenende-II (mei 2003-juli 2006)) in de problemen, zij het dat dit keer (buitenlandse) politieke averij — met enige moeite — kon worden afgewend.

Wat was het geval? Halverwege november 2005 werden onder grote mediabelangstelling en in aanwezigheid van tal van binnenlandse en buitenlandse mensenrechtenorganisaties de resultaten gepresenteerd van het onderzoek van de bij het Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis (ING) werkzame historicus P. J. Drooglever naar de finale afwikkeling van de zogeheten kwestie-Nieuw-Guinea. Daarbij ging de aandacht speciaal uit naar de verwikkelingen rondom de zogeheten ‘Daad van vrije keuze’ in de zomer van 1969, waarbij Nieuw-Guinea middels een door Jakarta georganiseerde volksraadpleging definitief werd ingelijfd bij Indonesië. Het was een publiek geheim dat dit op een oneerlijke manier was geschied. Ook op het Binnenhof keek men met een zekere gespannenheid naar Drooglevers bevindingen. Immers, het was bekend dat het kabinet er mee in zijn maag zat vanwege de te verwachten ongemakkelijke eindbevindingen die de traditioneel gevoelige bilaterale betrekkingen tussen Nederland en Indonesië leken te zullen gaan compliceren. Sterker nog: dat sinds de aanvang van het onderzoek al deden. Bevreesd als het kabinet was om ook maar op enigerlei wijze naar buiten — zowel naar de Papoea’s toe, maar bovenal richting Jakarta — de indruk te wekken dat het, ondanks herhaalde ontkenningen, aan de studie enige politieke betekenis hechtte, laat staan er gevolgtrekkingen aan zou verbinden, liet minister van Buitenlandse Zaken B. R. Bot (december 2003-februari 2007) verstek gaan op de presentatiebijeenkomst. Hij zag er van af Drooglevers monografie *Een daad van vrije keuze. De Papoea’s van westelijk Nieuw-Guinea en de grenzen van het zelfbeschikkingsrecht* overreikt te krijgen door de auteur. Met zijn afwezigheid getuigde Bot niet alleen van weinig respect en waardering voor de