

# Locating Life Stories

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*Locating Life Stories:  
Beyond East-West Binaries in  
(Auto)Biographical Studies*

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EDITED BY

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A BIOGRAPHY MONOGRAPH

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## CONTENTS

<i>Maureen Perkins</i>	
Never the Twain: Life Writing's Geographical Contexts	1
<i>Philip Holden</i>	
Refusing the Cultural Turn: Amir Muhammad's Politics of Surfaces	15
<i>Kenneth George</i>	
Life Writing and the Making of Companionable Objects: Reflections on Sunaryo's <i>Titik Nadir</i>	35
<i>Mathilda Slabbert</i>	
"These people are my people, these places are my places": Cultural Hybridity and Identity in South African Artist David Kramer's Oeuvre	55
<i>Tony Simoes da Silva</i>	
Under New Management: Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South African Life Writing	83
<i>Craig Howes</i>	
The Fictobiographical Pact	97
<i>Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada</i>	
Hidden Heroes: Cultural Interaction and Nationalism in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Hawaiian Biographies	115
<i>Maria Faini</i>	
Ethics, Oral History, and Interpreters in the Iraq War	139
<i>Gerry van Klinken</i>	
"Don't write this": Researching Provincial Biographies in Indonesia	169
<i>Peter Read</i>	
Biography in the Court Room? Far from a Final Judgment	193
<i>David T. Hill</i>	
Writing Lives in Exile: Autobiographies of the Indonesian Left Abroad	215
<i>Kirin Narayan</i>	
Local Boons: The Many Lives of Family Stories	239
<i>Pei-yi Wu</i>	
The Jiwen of Shen Cheng for his Daughter Azhen	259
CONTRIBUTORS	263



## **“DON’T WRITE THIS”: RESEARCHING PROVINCIAL BIOGRAPHIES IN INDONESIA**

GERRY VAN KLINKE

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 February and March 1966, the months when the military suppression of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, 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 PKI-ers.’ 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”?

Biographers frequently perceive their task in a different light than do the gatekeepers of biographical 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 honor of family, town, class, or perhaps even nation, and if the biographer comes from the old colonial country. Happy are those who reach an agreement to satisfy scholarship. In my case, although my informants 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.

Where are the limits of my ethical responsibilities to informants? I have tried to adhere to the following four principles:

- (a) information given in confidence must never be reported if it can be traced to a particular informant;
- (b) if the same information is also available in a public document, it can be quoted from there, even if I first learned it confidentially;
- (c) if it is possible to anonymize information given in confidence, it can be included if it illustrates a broader trend already identified from publicly identifiable sources;
- (d) beyond these ethical limits, my primary responsibility is to a broad readership; if my informants do not share that responsibility, they cannot have the last word, even if they have become friends.

I applied these principles in the first paragraph above. Mass killings of alleged PKI members or sympathizers in Kupang in the mid-1960s have been documented elsewhere. The horror of being forced to watch recurred in other interviews I held in Kupang. I have not identified the person who told me his story. However, I realize this does not entirely solve the problem of having written something I was told not to write, and we will return to this question at the end.

In the northern summers of 2009 and 2010 I spent a total of two months in and around Kupang, capital of the impoverished eastern Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTT). I wanted to learn about the rise of an indigenous provincial middle class outside the central island of Java. This was the historical part of a collaborative ethnographic project on middle classes in middle-sized towns—a social zone that we, partly thinking of Middle America (Lynd and Lynd), called Middle Indonesia (Klinken). Unlike the “commanding heights” of politics in the metropolis, or



Map reproduced by courtesy of the KITLV (Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies).

the “grassroots” in the village, the provincial town mediates between the center and the countryside, between ruling elite and poor majority, between state and society. These complex mediation processes hold the country together, so it is surprising that they have been so little studied.

The bureaucratic town of Kupang is one of five case study sites in Middle Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> If the birth of this new middle class took place in the 1930s, when Kupang was a sleepy town of 7,000, and it reached adulthood at the height of the developmentalist New Order in the 1980s with a population of 91,000 (Leirissa, Kuntowidjojo and Kartadarmadja 53), then its formative childhood years were the 1950s and '60s. I decided to focus on the lives of several individuals who, to my social science mind, more or less represented the most important social struggles in Kupang in those decades. I wanted to keep in mind two broad perspectives. One was class, which seemed to me to be the main driver of the remarkably intense political struggles of this period.<sup>2</sup> The other was a sense of location, of geography, or of what Daniels and Nash called “lifespace” (456). I did not pretend that such large themes could be studied definitively through the lives of just a few individuals, but those lives could certainly serve as heuristic guides.

My preliminary reading, which I am elaborating elsewhere, led me to think of two struggles that were won, and two that were lost. Similar struggles were won and lost in many other provincial towns at about this time (Sutherland). They were the rise of Indonesian republicans (mostly commoner bureaucrats), the decline of traditional aristocrats, the rise and subsequent decimation of left-wing organizers, and (linked to the latter) the rise of the military. The contexts for these struggles were multidimensional, but can be sketched in a few phrases. They include urbanization, which quickened after World War II in a predominantly rural landscape; the absence of a national revolution in the eastern archipelago, which unlike the central island of Java, remained under colonial control until 1950; the subsequent elitism of government in this area, with its preference for technocratic rather than democratic modernization; and oil-powered transportation that steadily reduced the distance to the capital, and hence facilitated political centralization. These structural transformations intensified cultural ones. Movies and magazines stimulated new lifestyles, religion became more modern and more prominent, new gender roles emerged, easier mobility and long-distance communications altered language usage. None of these changes are as yet well understood by historians of this area.

Who would become my subjects? History belongs to the victors, so identifying representatives of the rising forces was fairly easy. In 2006, IH Doko (1913–1985) was proclaimed the province’s second National Hero (*pahlawan nasional*). The perfect republican. Moreover, this educator and politician

wrote prolifically, also about himself. As for the military, who so thoroughly dominated government throughout the New Order (1966–1998), no one could represent them as well as the flamboyant Elyas Tari (1926–1978), provincial governor for twelve years from 1966. The losers were more difficult to bring to light, as they had largely disappeared from the public record. I chose Alfons Nisoni (1907–1987), the last king of Kupang, as my declining aristocrat. Michael Marcus (1906–1966), a Kupang politician who from 1960 headed up a successful district branch of the communist-affiliated Indonesian Farmers Union (Barisan Tani Indonesia, BTI), became my representative leftist.

Where could I learn more about these four individuals? None were nationally significant, so they are practically absent from standard history books and national Who's Who collections such as Roeder's. Indeed, little of national moment ever happened in this town. Perusing the national daily *Merdeka* from 1946–1959, my research assistant Basilius Triharyanto found only a single reference to Kupang, namely when President Sukarno visited in May 1954 ("Presiden"). Many locals share that blank feeling. Hearing about my interest, one Kupang student responded with a puzzled look: "Does Kupang have a history?" This ordinariness makes the town an excellent case study site for Middle Indonesia.

Nevertheless, Kupang is a literate society, and it has plenty of written local history. The provincial office of the Education Department has produced a stack of history textbooks for use in NTT schools. These are available at the downtown state library, which I always found full of students writing their assignments. Prominent figures such as IH Doko wrote memoirs late in life. Many of the city's streets are graced with the names of local luminaries like Tom Pello, ER Herewila, Herman Johannes, and of course El Tari and IH Doko. There are a startling number of statues. K. Passar, an enterprising journalist, compiled a 300-page biographical encyclopedia of NTT personalities with about 1,000 entries. Passar's encyclopedia is by far the most comprehensive Who's Who, but several other NTT collections also contain biographical sketches or interviews (Adam et al.; Leirissa, Kuntowidjojo and Kartadarmadja; Liliweri, Didoek and Kulas; Widiyatmika, *Sejarah*). In short, Kupang's middle class loves writing and reading about its own prominents. However, this knowledge circulates in rather personalized ways. Passar's extremely useful encyclopedia can only be bought at the author's home in a dusty backstreet, after office hours, over tea. Memoirs, too, disappear off the shelves of the town's only decent bookstore, Gramedia, within six months of publication. The reader is advised to visit the author at home to obtain a copy.

Needless to say, my "social forces" and "political struggles" interest these local historians little if at all. Their template is the national hero, who resists

the colonial Dutch, brings Kupang into the Indonesian nation, and helps build religion and the economy. After noting in his preface the “colossal and monumental” scope of his magnum opus, Passar wrote that he and his committee chose as their subjects all those who “had spread the sweet aroma of the greatness, the nobility as well as the success and the esteem of Nusa Tenggara Timur as a part of Indonesia’s civilized future” (ii). In his foreword, Professor Alo Liliweri praised the compiler’s creativity, and only feared some readers might find cause to ask: “Is this person important, is this person a prominent, is this person a leader, did this person make a positive contribution, is this person a successful human being, etc.” (v).

A massive bust of Doko stands in the vast grounds of the provincial Education Department, which he founded in 1959. It was raised by the thousands of teachers whose careers he made possible. His political achievements on behalf of the Republic are told in one of his own books (*Nusa*). As Governor El Tari wrote in a foreword, the book proved “that Nusa Tenggara Timur has never been absent in the struggle for national RIGHTS” (emphasis in the original)—a veiled rejection of the feeling in Jakarta that poor, peripheral, Christian NTT had only been dragged into the republic by forces beyond its passive, not to say backward, self. Doko belonged to a small group of Kupangers, most educated in Java, who rose to prominence under the Japanese (1942–45). Afterwards, Indonesian republicans in Java proclaimed an independent republic, but at first its writ ran only in parts of Java and Sumatra. The Dutch easily reasserted control outside Java. They appeased nationalist sentiment by creating a number of “states” within a federation that also included the Netherlands (the idea was inspired by French Indochina). Timor belonged to the most successful and most democratic of these federal states, the State of Eastern Indonesia (Negara Indonesia Timur, NIT), whose capital was at Makassar. Trained before the war as a schoolteacher, Doko belonged to a nationalist faction. His bright personality and speaking talents led him to be appointed first Assistant Minister for Information in 1947, then full Information Minister two years later, and finally Education Minister in 1950. Doko himself figures prominently in his well-told story of the decolonization of this part of the archipelago. His narrative is punctuated by mobilization rallies in Kupang whose frequency belied the town’s passivity, alternating with elite conferences in Sulawesi and Java. The nationalist cause travels with Doko, backwards and forwards between the center and the islands. Thanks to a multitude of such efforts by the young nation’s educated elite, republicanism had triumphed over colonialism even in the remotest islands by 1950. His version of history has since then become unassailable. It is retold with little variation in all the provincial history textbooks (e.g. Djeki et al.; Koehuan, Kotten, and Bunga; Soh and Indrayana; Widiyatmika,



NIT Information Minister IH Doko visiting the Raja of Kupang, probably around 1949 (NIT Information Ministry photo; private collection, reproduced by courtesy of Mr. Leopold Nisoni).

*Lintasan*). Doko's books also remain a major source for western-trained historians (Ardhana; Farram, "From").

If Kupang's teachers are proud of their Doko statue, the town boasts no less than three of former NTT governor, Brigadier-General (posthumously promoted to Major-General) El Tari. All are in good repair. He is one of a gigantic threesome on a roundabout at the eastern end of El Tari Road.<sup>3</sup> Another one decorates the driveway into El Tari Airport outside Kupang. And he stands two meters tall in front of the Agriculture Department office, arm outstretched in a commanding posture, instructing the peasants to "plant, plant, plant, and plant again" (*tanam, tanam, tanam, sekali lagi tanam*) (*Passar* 272).<sup>4</sup> (I discovered afterwards that this tree-planting scheme to combat soil erosion, lacking funding and land allocation, could never succeed; see Liliweri, Didoek and Kulas 112). His successor as governor, the soldier and medical doctor Ben Mboi, now retired but still energetic, frequently urges student audiences to become "young El Taris" (Mboi 84). The man's paternalistic good humor and frequent tours to inspire the poor to better their lot are still held to be exemplary.

Thus Kupang honors its emancipators. What did surprise me was that even these heroes are so little understood. The rather detailed entry on Doko in *Passar's* encyclopedia is misfiled under his middle name "Huru," so I did

not discover it till much later. It does not report his death date, twenty years before publication. To learn more, I had to go to the home of the Kupang historian who wrote the bio of him that accompanied the National Hero application. Indonesia now has 156 official national heroes, and the bureaucratic procedure that produces them is complex but well-oiled.<sup>5</sup> As often happens, Doko's process was initiated and financed by his son. Paultje Doko is a retired banker in Jakarta. He asked the Kupang academic Munandjar Widiyatmika to do the research. Later he paid a well-known national author to write a full-scale biography, with the intention of distributing it free of charge at a special provincial ceremony (Manafe). The book was not in the Kupang bookshop; Paul Doko gave me a copy when I met him in his father's house in Kupang. Until then I had relied on a biographical sketch in the newspaper clipping on Doko's herohood from 2006 (Malehere and Krenak), and on a rather confusing little biography written years earlier by an Education Department staff member (Boenga et al.). Finding the latter again entailed a visit to the author, who still worked at the department, to borrow his last copy for photocopying. My visit was enlivened by half an hour's banter with all the other office workers, for whom I was welcome relief from boredom in the stifling heat.

For all he was the province's most adulated governor, El Tari turned out to be even more difficult to pin down on paper than Doko. Orphaned as a child, he has no surviving relatives literate enough to ensure immortality by ordering a biography. Only one obscure source mentions a birth date: 18 April 1926 (Nahak). The one apparently fact-laden paragraph in the long El Tari entry in Passar's encyclopedia, containing a list of his military appointments from 1945 until his death in 1978, is



El Tari (painting at El Tari's family home in Fontein, Kupang; artist unknown; photo by Gerry Van Klinken).

unsourced and full of outdated military acronyms that the editor had not understood. I later discovered that the source for this paragraph was the official obituary distributed at his funeral (Setwilda). Unfortunately, this document, too, was marred by errors and omissions. Military acronyms common in 1978 were backdated anachronistically to the 1950s, or misspelled unrecognizably. Informal revolutionary militias of the late 1940s are presented as full-scale regiments, which are then puzzlingly absent when I go to cross-check them in the national registers. Military campaigns in which he had taken part were omitted. I recovered them laboriously from the list of his medals (themselves in military shorthand) appended to the obituary.

If this is how it is with victors, how much deeper is the ignorance surrounding losers? At least Alfons Nisoni, the last raja of Kupang, has an entry in Passar's encyclopedia. It details his civil service career, but not the role rajas played under Dutch colonialism to control the peasant population, nor the republican challenge that led to their decline in the 1950s. Michael Marcus, the communist BTI leader in Soë, 110 km from Kupang, does not occur in the encyclopedia at all, nor do most other leftists (an exception is the inimitable Christian Pandy of the 1920s). Aristocrats in decline, and activists championing losing causes, are clearly not "successful human beings." For more information on both I had to resort to guerrilla tactics—fragments in older books, newspaper clippings, archives, and oral history.

## SOURCES

This is when I learned what a historical wasteland the Indonesian provinces of the 1950s and '60s are. It is easier to write about a medieval European town than Kupang in the 1950s. Up to 1942 the situation is not too bad. Kupang's long colonial history can be deciphered from archives preserved in the Netherlands and Jakarta (Ardhana; Farram, "From"; Fox; Hägerdal). A small VOC (Dutch East India Company) garrison first settled at the Portuguese-built Kupang fort in the early seventeenth century. By the early nineteenth century, the township was a significant imperial outpost. It acquired municipal boundaries in 1886, and by the 1930s the town had no fewer than nine regular (if slim) newspapers, some mailed out to Kupangers scattered throughout the archipelago's colonial civil service. Submarines and aircraft paused at Kupang on their way to Australia. World events punished Kupang harshly after 1942. Allied bombing during World War II left the town in ruins. The Chinese shops by the harbor, the imposing official home of the Resident, the *societeit* overlooking Fort Concordia where elite Dutch and the Europeanized aristocracy had played bridge and billiards—all were gone.

Fire, impoverishment, bureaucratic inertia, and especially repeated and violent regime change played havoc with historical records after 1942. Today there are only three towns outside Java that have a continuous newspaper record for the 1950s, and none have any for the crisis-ridden 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Just when Kupang had been rebuilt, increasingly shrill politics in Jakarta caused the economic and institutional fabric to fray around the country. Only four short-lived newspapers appeared in Kupang during the half-century between 1942 and 1992, and of these only one, the wartime broadsheet *Timoer-Sjoeho*, survives in a Dutch library, where it is searchable online.<sup>7</sup> The colonial discipline that once required every provincial newspaper to submit an archival copy of each edition to the state secretariat apparently broke down after 1942. Politics have been more brutal than bombs. To my knowledge, no one in Kupang dared to keep their copies of the communist broadsheet *Pelopop* after the government banned it in October 1965. A photo in the post-1965 Catholic magazine *Dian* (published in Ende) shows how the new regime regarded the past. A man is burning communist papers, over the caption: “so they will not be read by those who don’t have the right” (“Warta”). Just before *Pos Kupang* finally restarted on a sound footing in 1992, NTT was one of only



“ . . . so they will not be read by those who don’t have the right”: burning politically suspect papers, probably in Flores, sometime after the 1966 regime change (from the 24 Sept. 1976 edition of *Dian* magazine, p. 8; photographer unknown).

six provinces (out of twenty-eight) without its own daily. The only regional news journal that occasionally covered Kupang in the 1950s was the Catholic fortnightly *Bentara*, published in Ende. Significant parts survive in Catholic libraries in Ende and Maumere.

Disasters have also done their share of damage. The town's archives, once containing material going back to VOC times, were lost when the temporary wooden building in which they were housed burned down in 1964. What was left was flooded, then apparently burned again in 1982. Today Kupang, in keeping with its regional status, has a state library and no less than three official archives—provincial, district, and municipal. They contain abundant government publications (“grey matter”) starting from the 1980s, but nothing from the 1950s and '60s. Yet few of the generous staff resources at these institutions are devoted to recovering those years. A relaxed atmosphere of chatting and newspaper-reading prevails in them. One is directed by a former harbor official (punishment for corruption?) who claimed to “know nothing” as he had “only been here eighteen months.” Another only allows non-official visitors to peruse documents that have been personally approved in an interview with the busy director. A dedicated young archivist at another, and an enormously helpful librarian at the State Library, by their contrast with the norm, merely underscored the tremendous theft of public resources that occurs in most provincial government offices.

Scarcity makes knowledge a valuable resource, and its gatekeepers all the more powerful. Beyond the flimsy official texts and the statues, knowledge of the past is not public property, but a private hobby for the town's elite. Personal archives have a higher standing among those in the know than state collections. A visiting researcher soon learns that former governor Ben Mboi, for example, possesses the best library in town, although I also learned, after a good dinner at the table of this gigantic man that included imported red wine, that it does not cover my period. Leo Nisoni, son of Alfons Nisoni, a retired civil servant who now makes a modest living as a tennis coach, keeps a large and well-indexed collection in his bedroom. He will dig into this with unfailing generosity for anyone interested, producing photographs, clippings, books, and papers. But some personal collections too have suffered from fire. IH Doko's considerable personal library had been preserved by his son Paul-tje, but the house burned down in 2002. The neighbor's house burned down as well, containing a reportedly excellent photographic collection made by a Mr. Lobo. Some personal archives are still waiting to be re-discovered. My biggest find in Kupang was the personal library of El Tari—twenty-six meters of books and official reports, still sitting on their original shelves in his house three decades after his death. The house was occupied by two sons of a man whom El Tari (whose marriage was childless) had “adopted” as his younger

brother. Both are private security guards and seemed practically illiterate, but they were determined to preserve the library in memory of the great man. They had refused to surrender it to the State Library, as the law requires of its retiring top officials. El Tari's Mercedes still stood in the garage, deliberately looking neglected so rivals in the family (which seemed seriously divided against itself) would not come to claim it. The good-natured men let me spend hours perusing the library. Beyond that, leads to several old people in and around Kupang said to possess enormous archives turned up little. "People borrow things and do not return them" was the usual stoic explanation.

### **ESTABLISHMENT**

After thus circulating around Kupang on my little rented motorcycle for some weeks, calling often on acquaintances who possessed books and memories, my next discovery was that I had passed from free-floating researcher to a friend of the town's historical establishment. Every provincial town has such a loose network, just a handful of people, whose knowledge is widely recognized as authoritative. The privatized nature of the best archives makes them real intellectual gatekeepers. In Kupang in 2009 it certainly included Leo Nisoni, Munandjar Widiyatmika, and Hendrik Ataupah, the latter a retired professor at Nusa Cendana University. They do not agree on everything, but lives lived as government advisers, speakers, and columnists have given them all a sense of decorum. I have not yet met a truly knowledgeable historical dissident in the provinces; the town would not tolerate them. When the rare foreign researcher comes to Kupang, these local historians feel a responsibility to be helpful but also to ensure that no dangerous impressions arise that might discredit the town. Every researcher is familiar with the generous but stifling host who offers to arrange all contacts. The answer is to diversify sources. Once it becomes clear that one has a broad range of contacts, pressure eases and respect grows.

The history of Kupang for my period, such as it is, was written by this little establishment. Most of its members are survivors of (and in some measure collaborators with) the anti-communist purges of 1965–66. Beginning in 1966 and lasting well into the 1970s, the rector of Nusa Cendana University, Mr Muhammad Syah (whose family came from West Sumatra) hosted a weekly gathering at his home open to all interested in the history of NTT. Alfons Nisoni was there, so were Munandjar Widiyatmika as a young lecturer new to Kupang, the anthropologist Hendrik Ataupah, not long back from a Master's in the US, the bookish retired civil servant JJ Detaq, two priests interested in physical anthropology and prehistory—Verschuren and Darius Ngawa—the young female historian Mia Patty Noach just back from studies in Central Java, and two people about whom I know nothing more—I Toto and

Teddens. Like a benign shadow over the group, but too busy to attend, was IH Doko, who had started the history department at the university not long before that. Several of these people later wrote historical books about Kupang. Mia Noach told me they talked about uncontroversial topics. She remembers the legends of the rajas, the graves of Dutch missionaries, colonial regulations, and the books on colonial Timor by Schulte Nordholt and Ormeling. The meeting did not debate, but “exchanged information.”



IH Doko holding forth, visiting Kupang as cabinet minister in the State of Eastern Indonesia (NIT), circa 1947–1950 (private collection, reproduced by courtesy of Mr. Leopold Nisoni).

Politeness on some topics was matched by silence on others. No one was interested in the 1950s (“there was nothing here then”) or even in World War II. Also never verbalized, though so recently seared into everyone’s consciousness, was the anti-communist bloodbath of 1965–66, in which thousands died in NTT. Munandjar Widiyatmika recalled to me, with some self-accusing agitation, that they did not even discuss the destruction of tradition that occurred as droves of communist peasants flocked into the church for fear of being labeled “atheists,” surely a topic of great interest to this predominantly anthropological seminar. Thus the most terrible event ever to have happened in Kupang, the purges against communists following the military takeover in Jakarta, was left unspoken, a gaping hole from which one looks away. These things did not happen, as Gabriel Garcia Marquez put it in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. The few foreign scholars who *have* tried to write about these events have ended confessing they were hardly able to penetrate the prevailing silence wrapped in blatant falsehoods (Farram, “Revolution”; Webb).

## DON'T WRITE THIS

Then I learned another lesson. The theatricality of public historical discourse in Kupang has limits. Out of the public view, beyond the cardboard cutout heroes without birth dates, other biographies circulated in private. Here, losers condemned to obliteration by the town's establishment once more stirred to life, and even winners were seen to be human after all. Here, lives did not run predictably along tracks laid down by the invincible force of nationalism, but zigzagged hazardously among the contingent shoals of regime changes and personal rivalries.

Leo Nisoni told me how his father, a tall heavy-set and kindly-looking man, realized in the 1950s that the "good old times" at the *societeit* were over. The "clerks" who had stood only just above peasants on the colonial social ladder now ran the show. Like the Balinese princes in Geertz's *Peddlers and Princes*, Nisoni went into business with some wealthy Chinese he knew. Taking advantage of government assistance, he oversaw the construction of the town's first factory. It was a small meat-canning plant, built on his royal lands on the edge of town. It drew on the cattle that are Timor's only significant export. He told his children to be thrifty, "like the Chinese." But the family never had to go hungry. Republicanism in Timor did not extend to seizing aristocratic land



Alfons Nisoni with family, at his silver wedding anniversary in 1960 (private collection, reproduced by courtesy of Mr. Leopold Nisoni).

(though there were some half-hearted attempts in that direction). There was enough money for Leo to play basketball with the rich kids in town, and to be in Holland for high school throughout the 1950s. Leo and I spoke Dutch together; he learned Indonesian only in 1963. He remembered how his mother loved the silks at Toko Baru, the best Chinese store in Kupang. Less playful stories emerged too. He remembers how his father made fateful choices in uncertain times. When national politics became polarized in the early 1960s, and the PKI stepped up its “anti-feudal” rhetoric, Alfons Nisoni joined the military-backed party IPKI. “It was for protection; a good strategy,” the son told me, “otherwise our life could have been very different after 1965.” We had reached the dark heart of Kupang’s history.

A Protestant reverend in Kupang, whose own father had been detained briefly in 1965, drew me further into this dark history. He put me in touch with a parishioner who was the daughter of Michael Marcus, the BTI leader. She agreed to talk about her father, at first reluctantly because she had never before talked of this man whom the civil servant in her regarded as a sinner, then in a flood of tears as the daughter in her remembered the father she had last seen through the bars of Kupang’s old colonial jail early in 1966. She showed me photographs of a family man standing next to his neatly dressed wife, Loisa Nenobais (he met her at the home of a Dutch missionary in Camplong,

near Soë, married her in 1929, and they had ten children); of an active churchgoer posing with the congregational council after worship; of a white-shirted 1950s politician in a delegation lined up before a banner during a visit to Jakarta. Like IH Doko, Michael Marcus was the son of a farmer on another island, Rote. Also like Doko, Marcus trained as a teacher, probably at the church-run teacher’s college in Rote. He taught in rural church primary schools around Timor for years. When the Japanese came and the schools closed down, he appears to have fed his family with a small business that later involved a truck. Real upward mobility came with independence. Like so many teachers, he was asked to fill a political position in Kupang,



Michael Marcus, 1961 (private collection, photo reproduced by courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Henny A. Nitbani-Markus).

first as member of the assembly for Timor and its nearby islands. This was a highly prestigious moment, but also a risky one.

In the Timor assembly he was close to the assembly speaker, ER Herewila, who was the same age and a strong modernizer with a distaste for the rajas. Herewila introduced him to the secular nationalist party PNI ahead of the 1955 elections. PNI was strong among bureaucrats in Java, but in Timor it was badly outpolled by the Protestant and Catholic parties. Recriminations flew. Michael's truck was supposed to have been used for smuggling to East Timor (quite possible), and he spent three months in detention before ER Herewila negotiated his release. From then on he worked in various executive positions in local government in Kupang (education, health) and, some time in the late 1950s, in Soë, a few hours drive from Kupang in good weather (finance). His wife's family, the Nenobais, were influential in the district of South Central Timor of which Soë was the central town. Some of them were interested in leftist ideas, others in religious ones. In the late 1950s the communist party PKI launched a major drive to increase its presence and legitimacy in the provinces. It aimed not at revolution, but like the Italian communists, at a gradual shift in the balance of forces. The president gave it the support of his magnificent oratory. The farmers union BTI was its most impressive achievement



Michael Marcus and family, 1952 (private collection, reproduced by courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Henny A. Nitbani-Markus).

(Pauker). The organization was effective at recruiting local talent. Michael Marcus became a part-time but committed BTI organizer in Soë in July 1960. Mainly because of abuses by the local raja, who remained powerful, more farmers joined BTI here than in any other district of NTT. Soon Marcus had become a competent public speaker on land issues. His daughter remembers him engaged in serious conversation with a lawyer friend about legal technicalities, and at other times with peasants on his veranda talking in the local Dawan dialect, which he had learned. The peasants spat blood-red betel nut juice on the ground, but he was too middle class to chew.

Then the fates intervened again. Some months after the dramatic events in Jakarta on 1 October 1965, of which Marcus knew nothing, the military organized a bloody purge of communists throughout the country. Officers arrested him at his home, and took him to Kupang's overcrowded little colonial jail, where he languished for weeks. Then one night some time after mid-February 1966, they took him away and he was never seen again. The daughter has no idea where he is buried. He was sixty years old. She lost her oldest brother the same way. An older sister had joined the left-wing women's movement Gerwani, but she survived with a jail sentence. All this was told to me through a veil of tears. Others in the family prefer to remain silent. The sister, who was still alive in 2009 and knew more, sent word she refused to speak with me, adding "I have forgiven everyone." Another brother, now passed away, had been an activist with the Protestant political party Parkindo in 1965. He had strongly opposed his father's communist links, and did not dare visit him in jail in 1966, not even after his father sent him his own watch as a keepsake via his sister.

Others told me similar stories of disaster striking unsuspecting families—of uncle so-and-so whom no one ever mentioned again after his death in 1966; of grandfather, a policeman who had felt quietly guilty his entire life because he was forced to execute a pious neighbor; of motorists who still today honk their horns when passing a mass burial site to ask the spirits not to disable their engines. Near Ende, in Flores, I found the site at which a prominent local communist named John Timu had been burned alive in a public execution. It was still marked with a cairn of stones laid by the village community. Even young locals could tell me how he had died, holding out his arms in the flames "like Jesus." Older people told me memories of having heard military trucks pass by at night, presumed to be carrying prisoners to their executions (a student in a dormitory at the time); of having been forced to dig a mass grave (a farmer in a village, who was afterwards sleepless with horror for weeks); of having repeatedly witnessed mass executions (a party activist at the time, who appeared quite cool about it now—the communists had been "neatly cleaned up"). Near the village of Buraen, southeast

of Kupang, a Christian teacher took me to see an overgrown mass grave in a forest, suggested a moment's silence, then prayed simply: "Dear God, we are visiting this place to learn about man's inhumanity to man. Help us to find the truth of this incident." Only one researcher has tried to recover these histories systematically (Farram, "Revolution").

These older informants often told me their stories in a changed voice, whispering so I had to crane forward to catch them. The discordant fragments would pop out at the close of a conversation about other things, just as the notebook had been put away. "People were taken away at night, stabbed to death and cut to pieces, and the parts thrown into the dry riverbed. It was terrifying. People were not supposed to know and must never mention it, yet everyone knew it was the military," one aged informant in Atambua told me. Or the informant would say, "Don't write this," and proceed to tell me a horror story that was never supposed to see the light of day. Where the source of a story is easily identifiable, and cannot be quoted from any publicly available source, I have felt obliged to keep it a secret. The alternative would be ethical betrayal—but thus, I too become complicit in the silence.

Once alerted to these jarring slivers of an alternative history, other fac-toids, hidden among the surviving paperwork, yielded fresh significance. For all their autocracy, NTT governments in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s were diligent in their reporting. When tracked down to the unlikely crevices where the tides of history had deposited them, I found in these reports detailed lists. Some were of government property, down to the chairs and typewriters. Others reproduced all the public committees (political party organizers, government information campaign members, etc.) down to the district level, for multiple years. From these one could reconstruct an alternative history of a provincial political class at work. The PKI had a strikingly routine presence in these lists. New Order ideology portrays the party in demonic terms, as atheists who sowed dissatisfaction among the ignorant while undermining legitimate government by intrigue and assassination. Even today, the plots that the PKI were said to have hatched to murder Christians, "revealed" by the military late in 1965 to terrorize the elite into collaborating with the anti-communist pogroms, are still recounted as fact. Yet in these pre-1965 lists, in those democratic years, PKI representatives sit on the same parliamentary committees, party advisory boards, land reform committees, and bureaucratic reform commissions as the other political party representatives. The BTI was doing "truly constructive" modernizing work among peasants, the governor noted in a 1957 report (Reksodihardjo 37). Michael Marcus crops up repeatedly in these lists, moving from one official appointment to another, like every other busy member of the rising bureaucratic bourgeoisie of that time. By 1965 he was nearing retirement.

Such buried lists sometimes also revealed more about the victors than today's establishment discourse cares to admit. The list of medals attached to El Tari's obituary (omitted from the *Passar* encyclopedia, and preserved only in the library of Leo Nisoni because he used to work at the state printer that produced it) made it clear that this jovial man's life before becoming NTT governor in 1966 had been filled with fighting against fellow Indonesians. The adopted son of a well-to-do tradesman in Kupang, Elyas Tari was sent to Java for a Dutch-language primary schooling before the war. He was at a trade school for sailors when the Japanese invaded. After the war, in his early twenties, he found himself with the revolutionary republican army, fighting the colonial forces. A mortar wound left him with a scar on his jaw (he later met and punched up the ethnic Indonesian soldier who had fired this mortar). After that the army was engaged continually in putting down insurrections. Tari received medals for being part of republican battles against the following internal foes: communist rebels in republican Madiun, East Java, in 1948; a military insurrection (*Perang Ratu Adil*) in republican West Java stimulated by the Dutch intelligence officer Westerling in 1950; a revolt by Ambonese ex-colonial soldiers (RMS) in the early 1950s; the Islamic rebel movement *Darul Islam* in South Sulawesi in the mid-1950s; and the North Sulawesi-based rebel movement *Permesta* in the late 1950s (Setwilda).

In 1962 the battle-hardened 36-year old major was assigned to territorial duties in his hometown of Kupang. To face the growing power of the communist party at this time, the military began cultivating anti-communist political forces. The civilian governor, WJ Lalamentik, was too much the bureaucrat to engage in politics, so to help stem the growing left-wing tide within the civil service, the increasingly militarized central government appointed their man El Tari deputy governor in May 1965. Tari also controlled the militarized civil defense force (*pertahanan sipil, hansip*). In July 1966, after the territorial command had completed its grisly program of murder and arbitrary arrest, Tari rose to provincial governor. His first task was to cleanse the civil service of communist sympathizers, and to reward with official appointments those civilians who had collaborated in the suppression. This last crumb of information I found, after the usual circuitous expeditions to locate a copy, in the detailed report Governor El Tari's staff produced under his name at the end of his first term of office (Tari). An obituary in a Catholic magazine in Flores, which the ravages had overlooked because it was hidden in a monastery, even restored some appealing signs of human frailty to the victorious El Tari. Flores had never quite forgiven Protestant Timor for running away with the new province in 1958. The paper's editorial upon the governor's death expressed its disappointment at his legacy: so many badly



Brigadier-General El Tari, as Governor of East Nusa Tenggara province, meeting unknown Indonesian military officers (private collection, reproduced by courtesy of the El Tari family, Kupang).

built roads and school buildings, put up willy-nilly without public consultation unless it was that of the laborers forced to neglect their farming to build them (“Sejemput”).<sup>8</sup>

Even my own institute, the KITLV, turned up a little gem. In the archive belonging to a colonial official, I found his lengthy interrogation of IH Doko immediately after the Japanese occupation. Doko had been the Timorese face of the Japanese regime, running education, propaganda, and labor recruitment projects on their behalf. Here he explained in detail what he had done to help the Japanese, who, he wrote, were too ignorant and often too drunk to do without local help. But he had committed no serious crime, and was not prosecuted by the Allied military tribunal in Kupang that convicted so many others (Locher). According to historian James Fox, fears that their collaborationist past might haunt them under the Dutch was one reason for the Timorese elite to chose the republican cause after 1945 (180).

### **MOBILITY AT A PRICE**

Thus, slowly, the outline of a set of biographies began to emerge. They contained almost no psychological insight, for lack of sources. But at least they gave some social insight into a dynamic provincial society, full of struggles won and lost. Contrary to the situation in Java before World War II (Sutherland),

the new middle class in Kupang was not composed of the fortunate children of traditional aristocrats but of underprivileged subsistence peasants (Doko, Marcus) or urban tradesmen (Tari). History offered them mobility beyond their wildest dreams—but at a price. As the town grew, it became increasingly estranged from the rural environs that had nurtured it. Its newly privileged middle class looked more readily for its living to dispensations from far-away powers. Both the aristocrat whose lineage was rooted in the soil, and the communist organizer who had promised to bring modern emancipation to the peasants, ultimately became dispensable. Their place was taken by the urban bureaucrat and by the soldier. Thankfully blotting out their own impoverished past, both drew their strength from the modern state's impressive capacity to generate money, coordination, and violence.

Again unlike Java (Anderson), these prominents did not win their spurs by their own deeds of revolutionary heroism, but by adroit, pragmatic demonstrations of loyalty to greater powers elsewhere. In the 1930s the higher powers had been the Dutch; during World War II they were the Japanese; afterwards, the Allies and then the Dutch again; still later, they were political party bosses, bureaucratic chiefs, and military commanders in Java, who were themselves often at loggerheads with each other. Contingency marked provincial elite lives to an extraordinary degree. As one regime violently succeeded another, first in 1942, then again in 1945, in 1950, and in 1965, their survival often depended more on others than on themselves.

This combination of thrusting upward mobility and extreme contingency, so beset by moral compromises, is among the most typical features of the provincial elite biography as it, in my view, should be written. It entailed a process that deposited numerous skeletons in the cupboards of the survivors, and unending pain in the hearts of those losers who got away with their lives—to say nothing of the dead. This history also explains why establishment accounts of the past are so pragmatic and shallow, so full of taboos. It explains the gap that yawns between the schematized, historicist public accounts of lives as they are written, on the one hand, and the dramatic contingency of the private accounts that the biographer “must not write,” on the other.

The biographer who decides to incorporate the forbidden accounts into a wider story anyway might be taking a gamble on relationships with his or her friends. The worst that can happen is to be accused of betraying confidences. My four ethical principles are intended to prevent betrayal. But they cannot completely remove a feeling of discomfort, which is practically inherent in the procedure I had to adopt. Since there are almost no written documents about what I considered to be the dark heart of Kupang's political history, and since so few leftists or even their relatives survive who are able to tell

their side of the story, I was forced to amplify the whispered stories of those who were on the right of the political spectrum. These are people who have something to lose by telling them openly. I suspect that the problem I have described applies to writing the history of any Indonesian provincial town for this fraught period, and it is not wholly open to resolution. Of course, I am not writing only for my informants, but for any world citizen interested in the lives of townfolk in a developing country. As for my informants, the best that can happen is that what they read might, Copernicus-like, open a dynamic new perspective on their own past.

## NOTES

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1. The others are the trading city of Pontianak (West Kalimantan), the bureaucratic town of Ternate (North Maluku), the industrial town of Cilegon (Banten, western Java), and the light manufacturing town of Pekalongan (Central Java).
2. For an example of how class can be studied biographically, see Bertaux and Thompson.
3. The Tirosa Statue stands on the "PLN" roundabout. The acronym Tirosa stands for the three main islands in the colonial Residency of Timor and Dependencies: Timor, Rote, and Sabu. These gave rise to today's three main rival ethnic groups in Kupang's local politics. Timor is represented by Raja HA Koroh, Rote by Prof. Herman Johannes, and Sabu by Maj-Gen. El Tari.
4. An even larger statue of him, in a similar pose, stands in the up-country town of Soë.
5. See "Pahlawan." Doko was the second National Hero from NTT. The first was Dr. WZ Johannes in 1968. Doko was followed in 2009 by Prof. Dr. Ir. Herman Johannes, cousin to WZ Johannes. A number of others, such as ER Herewila and JW Amalo, have the lesser status of Pioneer of Independence (*perintis kemerdekaan*).
6. Medan, Padang, and Ende have papers for the full 1950s. Makassar, Banjarmasin, and Palembang have papers for the early 1950s (see Santoso).
7. See "Indonesian"; also see Kleden, Banda, and Putra.
8. See also the 24 July 1978 special edition of *Dian* on El Tari's death, and particularly the photograph showing a medal being pinned posthumously on the chest of the dead soldier (8).

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