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The politics of history in West Papua - Indonesia conflict

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how history is used as a source of legitimacy and a political instrument in the sectarian conflict between the Indonesian government and the West Papua nationalists. This paper explores the debate surrounding two historical aspects relevant to West Papua’s demand for independence: first, West New Guinea’s past as part of the Dutch colony and its relations with Indonesia and second, the 1969 referendum, the so-called Act of Free Choice, to decide West Papua’s fate. The Indonesian democratization in 1998 provided momentum to revise the narration of West Papua’s history. Democracy has empowered the Papuans as the victims of a power struggle to challenge the previous Indonesia’s monolithic narration of history. The Papuans’ alternative narration of history also serves as a medium of liberation from oppression by the Indonesian government. The Papuan story counters the theory that the narration of history is a privilege of the ruler and the winner.

KEYWORDS

Indonesia; West Papua; History; Independence; Conflict; Democracy

Introduction

History played a substantial role in Indonesian politics during Suharto’s regime, which lasted from 1966 to 1998, because the narration of history was systematically arranged to uphold the power.1 The importance of historical narrative in a political struggle is perhaps can be referred to Eric Hobsbawm’s (1994) view on ‘invented tradition’ that show the role of history in the construction of identity and nationalism. Hobsbawm study on the making of The Second German Empire points out how history, despite it is being socially engineered and invented, is notable in unifying the people under one ‘nation’ and legitimate the state formation. The process involves the invention of a national symbol and the promotion of national historical experiences. Then, ceremonials and monuments are created to nurture the nationalist feeling. Indonesia’s experience supports the postulate in which the ruler constructed and offered a single version of historical narrative under the pretext of keeping the unity of the nation.

In the conflict between West Papua and Indonesia, history also has been used as a means to justify actions and demands.2 This study defines conflict as disagreements between West Papuan nationalists and Indonesia over the political status of West Papua based on historical perspectives of each party. It is important to note, however, that history is one among four other sources of conflict of West Papua and Indonesia.
as suggested by a study by Widjojo (ed.) (2009). During the period from 1945 to 1962, Indonesia was involved in a dispute with the Netherlands, the former colonial ruler, about territorial rights to West New Guinea. The dispute ended after Indonesia won the 1969 West Papua referendum with support from the international community. During the period between 1969 and 1998, Indonesia’s historical account of West Papua went unchallenged even though Papuan politicians believed Indonesia’s claim on West New Guinea was extortionate. The Papuan politicians claimed that Papua wanted to be—and was—an independent country. In the post-Suharto era, the separatist wish that had been suppressed by the authoritarian regime was rearticulated, and the liberation movement in West Papua was revived. To legitimate their demand for the political right to secede, the Papuans offered new narratives of their history. A Papuan freedom fighter, Alua (2002a), defines the occurrence as the Papua Spring.

This paper aims to explore how the narration of history has served as an instrument in the political struggle of West Papua by investigating how history was constructed and developed by opposing parties. The study finds that democracy has made it possible for the weaker party to offer counterarguments to the ruler’s monolithic narration of history.

**Problematic history of West Papua**

Two main issues of history were challenged by the West Papuan nationalists: first, the history of West Papua as part of the Netherlands colony and its relations with Indonesia and second, the history of the 1969 referendum known as the Act of Free Choice (AFC). The first issue revolves around two claims. The first refers to the cultural and racial differences between the indigenous Papuans and the majority Indonesians. The second is the political claim that West Papua was an intrinsic part of the Netherlands East Indies, the embryo of Indonesia. These debates were founded on the status of West Papua during the Netherlands’ colonial period; they focused on whether West Papua was regarded as part of the Netherlands East Indies or whether it was considered a distinct entity.

The second issue is based on the claim by Papuan nationalists that West Papua declared its independence in 1961, making Indonesia’s rule of West Papua and the AFC illegal. The AFC was recommended by the United Nations based on an agreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia on the fate of West New Guinea, namely the New York Agreement of 1962. The Papuans argued that the New York Agreement was illegal because it excluded the subject of the dispute from the negotiations.

**Indonesian government narratives**

The Indonesian government is very careful in navigating debates about the history of West Papua and Indonesia. Because choices of diction influence the tone of any report, the Indonesian government usually uses terms such as ‘restoration’ to define the process by which Papua officially became part of Indonesia. For example, such terminology appeared in a report by the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia to the United Nations in 2001. Moreover, studies by Indonesian government-affiliated historians use phrases such as ‘kembalinya ke pangkuan ibu pertiwi’ (coming back [of the Papuans] to the motherland) to define the formal acknowledgment of West Papua as part of Indonesia. In contrast, West Papuan observers typically choose words such as incorporation or
colonization, as evidenced in writings by Peter King (2002, 2004). These variations in diction imply that for the Indonesian government, West Papua was returned to Indonesia post-1969, whereas for many observers, West Papua has been an object of domination.

Indonesia’s perspective on West Papua consists of the following points. First, Indonesian territory is based on the Netherlands East Indies’ territory. Indonesia insists West Papua was a legal and intrinsic part of the Netherlands East Indies and had a long historical connection to seventeenth-century Tidore Kingdom. Indonesia argues that different racial characteristics between majority Indonesians and the Papuans should not prevent the union of people as one nation state. Second, the struggle of the Papuans to resist the Netherlands power is a proof of Indonesian nationalism among the Papuans. Third, the Papuans had decided to be with Indonesia through a political referendum in 1969.

**The tale of the Netherlands east Indies**

As the basis of its claim on West Papua, Indonesia holds to the international principle of uti posseditis jurist that confirmed the territories of emerging post-colonial countries would follow their pre-sovereign territories. Indonesia argues that in the Netherlands constitution, West Papua had always been regarded as part of the Netherlands East Indies (Nederlandsch-Indie) and had never been identified as a separate entity or a self-governing territory (Pemerintah Indonesia, 1950). Indonesia also points out that the constitutions of the Netherlands East Indies, namely the Indische Regerings Reglementen of 1854 and de Indische Staatsregeling of 1925, stated that the governor general’s territory covered all territories of the Netherlands East Indies and never excluded West Papua (Yamin, 1956; 1958). Soebandrio (2001, pp. 7–8) argues that West Irian had been part of the Netherlands Indies since 1828 under the border agreement of Meridian 141° and the acknowledgment of the Tidore Kingdom’s territory. Furthermore, according to Subandrio (2001), the political history of Indonesia in West Papua was also proven with the exile of thousands of Indonesian nationalists to Boven Digul, Tanah Merah and Merauke in the 1920s because the Netherlands would only exile the prisoners within its territories.

Additionally, President Sukarno believed the Papuans harboured Indonesian nationalist feelings as a result of being contacted by and acculturated with Indonesian political prisoners in exile (Departemen Penerangan Republik Indonesia, 1962; Patiara, 1984; Pemerintah Indonesia, 1950; Sjahrir, 1968; Soekarno, 1961; Soewarsono, 2013; Yamin, 1956). Moreover, Indonesian historians claim that local uprisings that occurred between 1939 and 1943 to resist the Dutch and the Japanese in Manokwari and Tanah Merah were tokens of pro-Indonesia movements (Bachtiar, 1963; Pemerintah Indonesia, 1950). The uprising in Biak was labelled Koreri. Sociologically speaking, however, the Koreri related more to the cargo cult sentiment than to the struggle for Indonesia’s independence. Kamma (1955) and Penders (2002) argue the movements were reactions to harsh treatment by the Dutch, the Japanese and their subordinates.

On the racial differences between the Papuans and Indonesians, Mohammad Yamin (1956, 1958) argues that racial characteristics should not be a burden because Indonesia was built by hundreds of different ethnic groups and various racial groups, which was also the case in the formation of the Netherlands Kingdom. More recently, Indonesian arguments in opposition to the notion of the racial distinction of the Papuans as a key component of West Papua’s bid for independence have relied on historical materials.
regarding the relationship of the region with Java and the Majapahit kingdom as well as its connections with Ternate and Tidore. Indonesia argues that the Netherlands’ representative admitted before the UN Security Council in 1948 that the diversity of Indonesia was ‘a product of common Netherlands sovereignty’; this argument was reinforced by a Netherlands report to the United Nations in 1949 that said, ‘Racially, the indigenous peoples may be broadly divided into Malays in the West and Papuans in the East. As these races have to a considerable extent intermixed, they are not separated by clearly defined boundaries’ (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia to the United Nations, 2001). Thus, Indonesia argues that racial homogeneity should not be used to claim the political unity of a community.

The Indonesian West Papuan

Indonesian historiography records Papuans’ uprisings in the 1940s as a struggle for Indonesian independence. Indonesia proclaimed independence on 17 August 1945, but the Netherlands did not deliver sovereignty to its former colony until December 1949. During the intervening years, the Netherlands tried to maintain control of the Netherlands East Indies by proposing through many conferences that Indonesia become a federal or union state. In the conferences, the Netherlands introduced the concept of a federal state of Indonesia to the eastern regions of the former Netherlands East Indies without adding West New Guinea to the plan. The Netherlands insisted on retaining West New Guinea by claiming that the Papuans had different racial characteristics than the majority of Indonesians. The Netherlands also was encouraged by statements from the Indonesian statesman Mohammad Hatta, who repeatedly argued in favour of excluding West New Guinea from Indonesia because of the racial distinction of the Papuans.10

The first conference, the Malino Conference, was held in South Sulawesi and was intended to negotiate the idea of the United States of Indonesia, comprising four federal states: Djawa, Sumatera, Kalimantan and Timur Besar (Great Eastern). The Netherlands administration in New Guinea appointed a Papuan Biak, Frans Kaisiepo, to represent West New Guinea. The Netherlands expected that Kaisiepo would oppose Indonesia based on his experience as a Netherlands employee. At the conference, however, Kaisiepo declared that the Papuans wanted to work with Indonesia and the Netherlands. Interestingly, one day before the Malino conference, on 15 July 1946, the Netherlands formally established West New Guinea as an autonomous residence (karesidenan) separated from its former parent entity, Maluku. West New Guinea was a ward (afdeling) of the Maluku residency (Indonesian territory) until 1944, after the Pacific war.11 West New Guinea was only identified as a residency several years later through Decree No. 180, dated in July 1949. Then, West New Guinea officially became an independent province of the Netherlands in a decree dated 29 December 1949.12 Sinaga (2013) and Koentjaraningrat and Bachtiar (1963) argue that the installation of an autonomous residence highlighted the region as an independent political entity in the future territorial disputes.

The second conference, the Pangkalpinang Conference, was held in October 1946 and was attended by representatives from minority communities (i.e. Arabs, Chinese and Dutch descendants). In the conference, Indonesian-Dutch descendants proposed
autonomous status for West New Guinea under the Netherlands kingdom with the objective to secure the region as the colony of the Indonesian-Dutch people.

In December 1946, the third conference, the Denpasar Conference, was held. At the Denpasar Conference, representatives from Kalimantan and Great Eastern were invited, but representatives from West New Guinea were left out. Delegates from other regions objected the exclusion of West New Guinea by releasing a motion to affirm West Papua/Irian as an integral part of Indonesia. The motion, which gained 68 out of 70 delegations’ votes, was the first dispute over the status of West Papua. The participants of the conference finally agreed on a new federal state—namely the state of Eastern Indonesia—on 24 December 1946. The newly established state thereafter was always involved in disputes with the Netherlands over the status of West Papua. According to Drooglever, Schouten, and Lohanda (1999), the Netherlands decision to exclude West Papua from the proposed Great Eastern State was due to political reasons; the decision was intended to emphasize that the region as not part of the Federal Republic of United States of Indonesia. Indonesia argues that the demand of Papuan representatives at the Malino conference and the Netherlands efforts to suspend Papuan representatives from attending other conferences are evidence of Indonesian nationalism amongst Papuans (Bachtiair, 1963; Sinaga, 2013).

In the mid-1940s, political parties thrived in West Papua. In Biak, the Peoples’ Voice Political Party, which aimed to promote the people’s welfare and expel the Netherlands, was established by Lukas Rumkorem in September 1945 (Meteray, 2012). Rumkorem also founded an organization named the Union of Indonesian Independence (PIM); in retaliation, the Netherlands imprisoned him from 1947 to 1949. In 1949, Rumkorem reactivated the PIM in Bosnik alongside Corinus Krey, the vice chair. Rumkorem was again imprisoned, this time at Hollandia Prison, which was 500 kilometres away from Biak. He was then moved farther away to Digul Prison, where he stayed until 1957. Penders (2002) notes that after Rumkorem was imprisoned, political movement in Biak essentially ceased.

In Hollandia, on 16 November 1946, a female Indonesian doctor, J Gerungan, and Papuan activists (Corinus Krey, Petrus Wettebossy, and Marthen Indey) established the Committee for Indonesian Independence (KIM). It was amid this enthusiasm for political movements that the Netherlands held the Denpasar Conference, which excluded Papuan representatives, in December 1946. In protest, KIM members Marthen Indey, Corinus Krey and Nicolaas Jouwe published a letter addressed to the Netherlands. This letter, dated 13 December 1946, made two important points: first, Papua should be incorporated into the Indonesian federation by what was previously known as the Netherlands Indies; second, the Netherlands decision not to invite Papuan representatives to the conference in Bali should be rejected (Meteray, 2012).

During the same period, political movements also erupted in Serui. On 28 November 1946, Silas Papare, Baldus Dumatubun, Benjamin Kajai and Barnabas Aninam—supported by Sam Ratulangi, an Indonesian politician and the exiled Governor of Sulawesi—established the Indonesian Independence Party of Irian (PKII). PKII also was backed by groups from different races and religions, such as the Tionghoa (Chinese) association at Serui, which was led by Yakop Thung Tjing Ek. The PKII spread in Sorong in the 1950s, and Silas Papare soon became an influential figure in the Indonesian struggle for West
Papua. Papare was adamant that West Papua was historically a part of Indonesia because Indonesia consists of numerous races and religions (Meteray, 2012).

In Fakfak, in March 1948, Raja Rumagesang Al Alam Ugar Sekar (the raja of Kokas) ordered his people to lower the Netherlands flag. This action prompted the Kokas people to clash with the Netherlands forces. The Netherlands punished Raja Rumagesang with a life sentence and exiled him to Makassar Prison at Sulawesi Island (Sinaga & Syukur, 2013).

The struggles to unite West Papua to Indonesia continued in the 1950s. For instance, Abraham Koromat established the Indonesian Youth Association, Sangaji Malan formed Perintis and Bastian Samori created the Irian Youth Organization. In the late 1950s, Galim Raesa and Ismael Bauw established the Revolutionary Movement of West Irian in Fakfak to support the Indonesian government. In Biak 1958, Lukas Rumkorem, who had just been freed from the Netherlands prison, established the Tjendrawasih Reserves Army (TTT). The TTT soon spread in other areas and helped the Indonesian government gather photos and information about the Netherlands’ vital military installations in West Papua (Tarumaselly in Meteray, 2012).

Indonesia believes that Papuans were among the participants of a milestone event in Indonesian history: the Youth Pledge (Sumpah Pemuda), which occurred on 28 October 1928. Ramses Ohee, a chieftain from Waena-Jayapura and a voter in the AFC, claims that his father, Abner Poreu Ohee, was one of the Papuan youths attending the Youth Pledge (Kompas, 2009). Abner Ohee was a prominent Papuan from Tobati-Enggros of Waena. Another Papuan who was claimed to have attended the Youth Pledge was Aitai Karubaba from the Ambai village of Serui. The two Papuans supposedly joined Jong Ambon (Moluccans youths) because West New Guinea was part of the Tidore Sultanate at the moment. These claims support the previous statements made by Papuan student organizations in 1963–1964 in support of the Youth Pledge. Interestingly, Singh (2008, p. 97) argues that these statements were a product of special intelligence operations led by General Ali Murtopo, who created students’ movements in Yogyakarta and Jakarta to show Papuan youths’ support for Indonesia.

Indonesia has been persistent in the claim that West Papua is undeniably an integral part of the Republic of Indonesia because the region was also the part of the Netherlands East Indies. Therefore, the struggles between 1945 and 1969 are portrayed as efforts to free its territory from the colonizer. Indonesia believes that the political developments in West Papuan nationalism in the 1960s were a game played by the Netherlands to retain its power in West Papua. On 19 December 1961, therefore, President Sukarno declared an action to seize West Papua; this decision was termed the Three People’s Commands (Trikora). To uphold Trikora, Indonesian military prepared the Mandala Command to attack West Papua and take it over by 17 August 1962. The initial military operations were executed; however, the primary attack was delayed and then called off following a series of negotiations that resulted in the New York Agreement.

**Indonesia’s arguments on the act of free choice**

The Indonesian government is aware of the protest over the execution of the 1969 referendum and its result. The representative-consultation system of voting through the so-called Consultative Assembly has become one of the points subject to accusations of
fraudulence by Papuan nationalists. The result that showed 100% of voters were in favour of Indonesia was also criticized. In an official document released in 2001, the government of Indonesia finally replied to the inquiry over the West Papua issues through the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia to the United Nations.

Indonesia argues that the United Nations, which observed the process through UN Secretary General (UNSG) representative Ortiz-Sanz, supported the implementation of the AFC. The document highlights that Ambassador Ortiz-Sanz gave his approval for the musyawarah method of the AFC after engaging in discussions with the Indonesians and travelling all over the region to communicate with the people. Indonesia’s argument for the voting arrangement was that in the 1960s, the particular socio-cultural condition of the Papuans and the geographic difficulties presented an enormous challenge to a one-man-one-vote voting system.

Moreover, Indonesian claims that consultations with the representative councils during the election of members of the Consultative Assembly and the AFC were also attended by the UNSG representative team. The UNSG representatives also participated in all the Consultative Assembly sessions for the AFC. Indonesia further notes that the Netherlands was kept informed of the arrangements and policies made by Indonesia to execute the AFC. Indonesia points out that on 20–21 May 1969, at the request of the Netherlands government, the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia and the Netherlands met in Rome. The Rome meeting resulted in a joint statement of approval from the Netherlands government for the musyawarah method of the AFC as the best procedure for practical and technical reasons. Furthermore, Indonesia claims that it instituted the necessary arrangements to guarantee the AFC’s implementation by the New York Agreement and the wish of the Papuans. One of the provisions issued on 25 March 1969 by Indonesia’s Minister for Home Affairs was Decree No. 31, which stipulated that the Council for the AFC members had to be native Papuans and that they had to be elected democratically following the aspirations and traditional values of the Papuans. Indonesia argues that these undertakings provide definitive proof that the AFC was a valid exercise of political self-determination.

With regards to the result of the referendum, in which all representatives decided to remain united within the Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia states that the result was expected because the government had been overwhelmed by support from the Papuans before the referendum. The government claims that it received well-documented petitions from the Papuans between 1962 and 1968 showing their strong commitment to be a part of Indonesia and their view of the AFC as ‘unnecessary’. Subandrio, the then-Indonesian Foreign Minister, also noted that members of Papuan political parties visited Jakarta to submit their petitions in support of integration with Indonesia without a plebiscite (Drooglever, 2010). Also, Indonesia has stressed that the referendum was carried out peacefully without violence of any kind, which indicated there was no serious disagreement.

The international reaction after the AFC has been used as evidence of widespread recognition for Indonesia’s good deed. After the referendum, Indonesia and the UN Special Representative separately submitted reports to the Secretary-General, who annexed the two reports in a final report to the United Nations General Assembly on the fulfillment of the second stage of the New York Agreement. The report concluded that ‘an act of free choice has taken place in Papua, in accordance with Indonesian practice, in which
the representatives of the population have expressed their wish to remain with Indonesia’
(United Nations Secretary General, 1969, p. 2; United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.). Indo-
nesia notes that the Netherlands did not challenge the result of the AFC. Subsequently,
Indonesia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Thailand, and Malaysia co-sponsored
a draft of a General Assembly resolution. Finally, the General Assembly adopted the draft
as resolution number 2504 (XXIV), on 19 November 1969, by a vote of 84 to none with 30
abstentions. The General Assembly accepted the report of the Secretary-General and
appreciated the fulfillment of the tasks assigned to the UN Secretariat General. For Indo-
nesia, the United Nations Resolution 2504 (XXIV) was a further gesture of the affirmation
of the result of the AFC and the final conclusion to the question of West Papua. Indonesia
argues that the adoption of the resolution by the General Assembly indicates that the inter-
national community at that time fully, formally and irrevocably recognized West Papua as
a part of Indonesian territory (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in London-United
Kingdom, 2011). Furthermore, because the Charter of the United Nations (Article 10)
also guaranteed the validity of the AFC, the AFC is viewed as a valid law in Indonesia.

The Papuans’ contested narration of history

During the Suharto era, Indonesia was privileged with unchallenged historical narration.
The Papuans did not have enough of a platform to voice their account of history, not only
because of the scarcity of historical documentations but also because of the Suharto
regime’s iron glove treatment of the Papuans. The regime answered political and cultural
movements with severe punishments or assassinations, as happened in the case of Arnold
Ap.19

After Indonesia started to democratize its political system, the Papuans had the oppor-
tunity to present their own account of history. The raise of democrats as presidents—
namely, President Habibie (1998–1999) and President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–
2001)—made space for Papuans to articulate their political concerns. Papuans were
allowed to express their political aspiration without fearing of state’s persecution. Encour-
aged by Indonesian government’s spirit to uphold democracy by opening the freedom of
expression, in 1998, the Papuan leaders quickly consolidated political movements and
offered counter-narrations of the established history. Indigenous Papuan writers
thrived, advocating West Papuan political movements. The first public upheaval to intro-
duce Papuans’ version of history was a political gathering: the Second Papuan People’s
Congress, which occurred 29 May–4 June 2000 and was attended by thousands of indigen-
ous people from all over the region. Because history is central to the Papuans’ struggle, the
main theme of the event was ‘rectifying the history of West Papua’.”20 One victory of the
political movement was the return to the name West Papua from the Indonesian name,
Irian Jaya.

The Papuans suffered a setback in their exercise of freedom of expression during the
Megawati presidency, which lasted from 2001 to 2004. The aggravation culminated in
the murder of Theys Hiyo Eluay by Indonesian Special Forces in 2001, the imprisonment
of Benny Wenda in 2002 and politically motivated communal clashes during this time
period. After 2004, during Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s administration, the government
took a democratic approach to the West Papua problem. As hope rekindled, Papuan
writers and politicians again began offering their interpretations of Papuan history.
Democracy has empowered the Papuans to dare to raise their political aspirations. Indigenous leaders, religious leaders, politicians, and students in big cities were the front line of the movement, while the society at large followed behind the leadership. Political articulations, however, remained exclusive to the Papuan elites as they were resourceful. Majority of the members of Papuan society, who are also poor, were unaware of their political rights due to the lack of education. Nevertheless, re-narration of history by the Papuans can be seen as an initial step to be peremptory in politics.

On a nation named West Papua

The notion of West Papua as a nation finds its root in the racial characteristic of the Papuan people and the region’s political development. Other reasons for Papuan nationalism include dissimilarities in ethnology, biology, language, geography and history with Indonesia.

The notion of racial difference as a reason to secede was at the heart of the Papuan Spring. The Papuan writer Mandowen (2005, p. 28) states, ‘Historically, Papuans have always been ethnically different from the Asian-based population of Indonesia.’ Wonda (2009, pp. 20–23) writes that even though Papuans have ethnic similarities with some groups in Indonesia, the people of West Papua are entirely different from Indonesian’s ethnic majority; thus, Papuans are never admitted as part of Indonesian because physically they are not same as they ethnic Malay people. Wonda also highlights that trying to ‘Indonesianise’ the Papuans, who are physically and culturally different, is equal with obfuscating the true identity of the Papuans. Most West Papuan indigenous communities practise Melanesian culture as proven by governmental features such as big-man leadership, community-level decision-making, and small, close-knit communities that do not answer to a higher authority. Tribalism is a central component of Papuan socio-political organization; thus, Papuan cultures vary amongst each other. The claim of distinctiveness in race and culture is documented in a manuscript of the Papuan political event termed the Great Consultation, which took place in 2000.

Historians have conducted studies on the connection of some parts of West Papua with Maluku kingdoms of the sixteenth century. The kingdoms—Tidore, Bacan and Ternate—were also connected with the Netherlands government as vassals to both the Netherlands and the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie; that is, The Dutch East Indian Company). To contest the historical documentation of Tidore Kingdom’s rule over parts of West Papua in the sixteenth–nineteenth centuries, Papuan nationalists highlight the colonial context of that period. Papuan scholar Benni Giay points out that Ternate and Tidore’s rule over West Papua was colonialism rather than a nation-state experience because Papuans suffered and were oppressed (Giay in Alua, 2002b, p. 59). Mandowen (2005) argues that it was a ‘historical accident’ because the Netherlands ruled West Papua through the Sultan of Tidore for practical administrative reasons. Therefore, because the relationship was essentially exploitative in nature, the Papuans did not experience nationhood under the Maluku kingdoms’ rule on West Papua.

An additional argument in favour of identifying West Papua as a separate entity from Indonesia is the absence of Papuan youths at the Indonesian Youth Pledge on 28 October 1928. The Papuans believe their representatives were absent from the event. The Papua People’s Congress 2000 decided that because Papuans were not involved in the Indonesian
Youth Pledge, West Papua was not part of the territory of the Republic of Indonesia (Alua, 2000). According to Thaha Al Hamid, a West Papuan leader, the absence of Papuan youth at the Youth Pledge indicated that Indonesian nationalism was built without the participation of the Papuans. Moses Werror, the chief of the Revolutionary Council of Free Papua Organisation, shares this opinion.

Nevertheless, the main argument for West Papuan nationalism is the proclamation of West Papua as a sovereign state. In his opening speech at the Papua People’s Congress 2000, Theys Hiyo Eluay, the leader of the highest body of the Papuans (the Papua Presidential Council), claimed that West Papua had declared sovereignty on 1 December 1961. Eluay argued that Indonesia had robbed West Papua’s sovereignty through the Trikora and the AFC. Furthermore, Eluay insisted that Papua had never been culturally and politically integrated with Indonesia because Papua never had a historical connection with Indonesia and never lived with Indonesia (Alua, 2000, pp. 38–39).

Eluay’s views resonate with the arguments of many Papuan nationalists in terms of their political demands since the Papuan Spring. West Papuan writers such as Alua (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c), Karoba (2004), Mandowen (2005), Wonda (2009), Peyon (2010), and Yoman (2010, 2012) share these ideas explicitly or implicitly. Wonda (2009, p. 30) argues that the world needs to recognize that West Papua’s sovereignty was established, acknowledged and active during the Netherlands Kingdom period named Nieuw Guinea Raad and had both the Morning Star flag and the national anthem, Hai Tanahku Papua. Leaders of West Papuan armed groups, such as Lambert Pekikir and Goliat Tabuni, or political leaders, such as Benny Wenda and Buchtar Tabuni, also insist that West Papua achieved independence in 1961 (BBC Indonesia, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2011). Particularly, the notion of a deliberate twisting of the history of West Papua’s incorporation into Indonesia is shared by ordinary people, such as a man named Om Imbi whom I met at a Manokwari beach during fieldwork on 15 April 2014. Imbi believes the Dutch, the Indonesians and the international community tricked the Papuans with the New York agreement by leaving Papuan representatives out from negotiations processes, making a decision on West Papua without the people’s consent and ignoring West Papua’s claim of sovereignty. Imbi’s chronological description of the international events is surprising given that he is an ordinary person, who spends his time on Manokwari beaches and greeting strangers. This same vision of West Papua’s history and sovereignty can be found amongst the ordinary Papuan’s ordinary people regarding West Papua’s history and sovereignty can also be found at Kirksey’s study (2012, pp. 34–37).

The problem of the AFC

West Papuan nationalists, such as Mandowen (2005) and Yoman (2010), argue that West Papua was ready to claim sovereignty with the help of the Netherlands in the early 1960s. The political development culminated on 1 December 1961, which was marked with a ceremony and a political manifesto. During the early 1960s, Papuan political parties were established in many afdeling (administrative regions) in preparation for establishing the New Guinea Council. In April 1961, the West New Guinea Council was inaugurated as the political representation of the Papuans. Albeit 13 out of the council’s 29 members were appointed by the Netherlands government and only in Manokwari and Hollandia
was direct voting conducted, the establishment of the body was seen as a proof of Papuans’ ability to practise democracy. During this time, West Papua already had a thin layer of ambtenar (government officers) and intellectuals from the indigenous people. The New Guinea Council then established another political institution, the New Guinea National Committee, which had around 70–80 elected members. The committee submitted a political manifesto to the Dutch governor, Plateel.

On 1 December 1961, a ceremony was held to announce the New Guinea National Committee’s political manifesto. The ceremony was held in front of the New Guinea Council’s office in Hollandia and was attended by Governor Plateel and followed by Papuans in all afdelings in West New Guinea. That day, all Papuans working in schools or governmental offices were given a day off to join the festivities. In the ceremony, New Guinea’s name was changed to West Papua. The West Papua flag flew side by side with the Netherlands flag for the first time (although it was allowed to fly only in public spaces and not in government offices). After singing the Netherlands national anthem, the Papuan students’ choir sang the Papua national anthem. Points of the political manifesto were as follows: first, West Papua is the chosen name of the West New Guinea; second, the nation is called West Papua; third, the Morning Star flag is the flag of West Papua; fourth, Hai Tanahku Papua is the national anthem.

Papuan nationalists have argued that a proclamation of independence took place that day. Alua (2006, p. 43) writes, ‘On 1 December 1961, with the approval of the Netherlands royal government, the Papuan National Committee declared the independence of West Papua in Hollandia’. Similarly, Willy Mandowen, the appointed mediator of the Papuan People’s Congress 2000, stated on 4 July 2000 in front of President Abdurrahman Wahid that a sovereign state was established on 1 December 1961 (Alua, 2000). Interestingly, Fritz Kirihio, a Papuan politician in the 1960s, acknowledged that this date was not, in fact, a proclamation of independence (Chauvel, 2005, pp. 17–18). However, many post-2000 Papuan nationalists believe West Papua announced its proclamation of independence on that day. Consequently, the AFC of 1969 is viewed as erroneous because it denied the existence of the sovereign state of West Papua and the preceding negotiations were conducted secretly without addressing the concerns of the Papuans.

The AFC was a political consequence of the New York Agreement that was signed at the headquarters of the United Nations on 15 August 1962, and it became the United Nations Treaty Series 1962, No. 6311. Critical points of the agreement were as follows: First, the Netherlands New Guinea would be transferred to United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) and would be passed to Indonesia by 1 May 1963. Second, Indonesia, with advice, assistance and participation from the UN representatives, would arrange the AFC for the inhabitants of West Papua. Third, the referendum to honour the right of self-determination would be completed before the end of 1969. After the exercise of the right of self-determination, Indonesia and the UN representatives would submit final reports to the UN Secretary-General, who would report to the General Assembly (United Nations, 1962).

West Papuan nationalists not only perceive the AFC as illegal, but they also are infuriated by its execution in 1969. The implementation of the AFC was problematic because the voting system did not follow democratic principles. The common international voting practice is a one-man-one-vote system in which every eligible adult under agreed category has a right to vote. The structure used in the AFC was a
musyawarah (consultation) system in which the vote was conducted by representatives of the people who were chosen by a committee from selected groups. The main challenge the practice of the musyawarah system in the AFC is the potential for foul play in the execution of the system because both the representatives and the committee responsible for choosing those representatives were handpicked by Indonesia. Another argument is that at the national level, Indonesia had already practised direct election in its two prior elections; thus, the nation should have supported similar conduct in West Papua. The third argument is that the one-man-one-vote system had been used in two cities in West Papua—Manokwari and Hollandia—to choose the New Guinea Council members in 1961, even though other areas were using the representative mechanism. Therefore, Papuans should have been ready to implement the one-man-one-vote system in other places in West Papua.

Benny Wenda, the leader of Free West Papua and a spokesman for the United Liberation Movement of West Papua (ULMWP), argues that ‘it is Indonesia’s claim that Papua is a part of Indonesia, but, for us the Papuan people and nation, [we] do not recognize such an Indonesian claim because, according to international law, the decision was not based on one-man-one-vote’ (BBC Indonesia, 2014). Buchtar Tabuni, the leader of the National Parliament of West Papua (PNWP), shares Wenda’s opinion. Tabuni claims that the one-man-one-vote system was exercised in 1960 during the election of the New Guinea Council (Papua Post, n.d.).

The Papuans’ accounts of history, however, mostly based on opinions and interpretations of events that lack adequate empirical evidence. Although personal history cannot be discounted, a shared experience by the people presents a more powerful argument. Also, the lack of Papuan intellectuals and writers who support the Papuans’ perspective of history create repetitiveness in the narration of the history. As a result, the Papuan alternative history becomes no less monolithic than Indonesian version of history. Finally, more Papuan scholarships and investigations into past events regarding the history of the relationship between West Papua and Indonesia are critical to helping the Papua case.

The justice by historians

By examining the VOC and Netherlands colonial archives, historians such as Goodman (2002; 2006) and Cribb and Kahin (2012) have proven the validity of the claim that West Papua is an integral part of the Netherlands East Indies. Furthermore, scholarly publications in the 1930s and 1940s also regarded Dutch New Guinea as part of the Netherlands East Indies. Vlekke (1943, p. xi) in his study of the history of Nusantara, a forerunner of Indonesia, states that the Netherlands East Indies consisted of areas ‘from the western point of Sumatra to the Dutch-Australian boundary in New Guinea’. In his account of Japanese occupation in Indonesia in the 1940s, Vlekke (1943, p. 408) wrote that ‘the enemy never succeeded in completing the conquest of Indies. In Merauke, capital of the district of South West New Guinea, the Dutch flag was still flying when these lines were written, well guarded by soldiers of the Netherlands Indies and of the United States Army’. Furnivall (1939) clearly states that the Netherlands India comprised five larger islands with New Guinea as the largest island. Since these books were published before Indonesian independence and the dispute over West Papua started, the notion that New Guinea was once part of the Netherlands East Indies is undeniable.
Studies on the AFC, on the contrary, have empowered the Papuans’ counter-narration of history. Drooglever (2010) and Saltford (2003; 2008) have conducted studies on the AFC agreement and its implementation. Drooglever (2010) sees the execution of the AFC as marred by manipulation and tricks intended to gain the results favoured by the organizer. The study criticizes the Netherlands and the United Nations for the unfairness of the referendum. One of the criticisms is based on the wording of the UN Secretary General U Thant’s report before the General Assembly that says ‘an act of free choice has taken place in Papua’. Drooglever suggests that the use of the word ‘an’ instead of ‘the’ in the report indicates that for the Secretary General, a referendum had taken place, but because of the low standard of the referendum, the more definite, convincing word ‘the’ could not be applied.

Saltford’s (2003) study is based on materials from the UN Archives in New York, British and Australian National Archives, and US and Netherlands government records. Saltford provides a study of how the 1962 New York Agreement was applied with particular emphasis on the role of the UN. Saltford’s aim is not to question the legitimacy of the West Papuans’ right to self-determination, which was guaranteed by the Netherlands and Indonesia through the New York Agreement and the responsibility for ensuring that these rights were properly upheld fell to the UN Secretariat. Rather, Saltford argues that the UN Secretariat’s priority in the implementation of the AFC was to make West Papua legally recognized as a part of Indonesia with minimal controversy and disruption, as recommended to the UN by Washington in 1962. The New York Agreement guaranteed Papuans’ political and human rights, specifically the right of full self-determination. In the implementation, however, Papuans’ rights were ignored through the poor performance of UNTEA and the UN Secretary’s representatives. Saltford (2003, p. 184) remarks that if the UN’s motive in 1962 with the New York Agreement was to prevent a damaging war between the Netherlands and Indonesia, there was no similar danger in 1969 that could justify the UN’s tolerance of misconduct in the implementation of the AFC.

Conclusion

This study highlights the political process of forming an historical narration to legitimate a claim and shows that Indonesia received greater support than did the Papuans. West Papua was the victim of a large political game played from the 1940s to the 1990s. In the political struggles between the world’s two political poles, the wishes of the Papuans did not matter. Nevertheless, the efforts of the Papuans to deliver their account of history in the 2000s proves that the narration of history no longer belongs solely to the powerful. Democracy has allowed the weaker parties to present their sides of history. Although the new narration of the history of the Papuans might be problematic because of a lack of evidence and also monolithic in its own account, it is nevertheless clear that the reinterpretation of history also serves as a medium of liberation from oppression. Equally important for West Papua’s keen observers, it is now evident that an understanding of West Papua’s conflict rooted in its history is also a friction itself because of the variations in the elucidation of that history. In the end, the starting point for studying the West Papua conflict may be determined by which version of history is accepted.
Notes

1. Suharto was the President of the Republic of Indonesia from 1966 to 1998 and used violence and oppression to consolidate and sustain his authoritarian regime. The backbones of Suharto’s power were the military, the union of the state’s civil servants, a political party named Golongan Karya and industrialists enticed through crony capitalism. Suharto resigned from the presidency following political turmoil and economic crisis in 1998.

2. The study uses the term West Papua to refer to a region, now formally known as Papua, that consists of West Papua Province and Papua Province. The region was alternately known as West New Guinea, West Nieuw Guinea, Netherland Nieuw Guinea and West Papua during the Dutch colonial period. The region was called West Irian or Irian Jaya by Indonesia during the period from 1945 to 2000.

3. Those are the history of integration, status and political identity; political violence and human rights abuse; the failure of development; and Special Autonomy Status’ policy inconsistency and marginalization to the indigenous.

4. Alua (2002a) highlights the term ‘Papua Spring’ to address Papua’s post-1998 movements. He argues that the post-1998 political struggle had different characteristics than previous struggles in 1961 and 1965. The new struggle was characterized by some new values: it was based on people’s power in rural cities, involved all elements of the people, and exercised peaceful and democratic behaviours.

5. The New York Agreement was a deal reached between Indonesia and the Netherlands to resolve the dispute over the status of West New Guinea after a series of negotiations mediated by the United States and authorized by the United Nations. Indonesia and the Netherlands had disputed the status of West New Guinea since 1949. On 2 January 1962, the Netherlands agreed to negotiate with Indonesia. The initial negotiation failed, however, because the two parties could not find common ground; the Netherlands demanded that the West Papuans’ rights be central to the talk, whereas Indonesia required a transfer of power as the basis of negotiation. In April 1962, a US diplomat, Ellsworth Bunker, presented the so-called Bunker proposal. The plan was first offered in a secret ambassadorial-level meeting in Middleburg, Virginia, in March 1962 and went through a series of negotiations before finally being agreed upon by both parties. On 15 August 1962, an agreement based on the Bunker Proposal, namely the New York Agreement, was signed at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York.

6. On 28 August 1828, the Netherlands East Indies government established a post named Fort du Bus in the southern coastal area of West Papua. The post was held as a token of the Netherlands power over the western part of New Guinea with the 141st meridian east of Greenwich as the border. The border was set based on Tidore’s authority. In the post’s opening ceremony, which corresponded with the birthday of the king, Commissaries van Delden read a proclamation in the name of King Willem I. After the ceremony, the kings of Namamotte (Sendawan) and Lakahia (Kassa) as well as the Orang-Kaja (‘big man’) of Lobo and Mawara (Lutu) signed an agreement of cooperation and accepted silver-headed sticks as a symbol of their power in their respected areas. The Dutch considered the agreement to be a recognition of the Netherlands’ power.

7. The Indonesian political prisoners exiled at Boven Digul, Tanah Merah and Merauke in New Guinea from 1927 to 1942 were known as Digoelists.

8. When World War II ended, West Papua was still very much underdeveloped. Most parts of the region, especially in the Central Highlands, had come into contact with the outside world only four or five years prior to the war. During the Japanese occupation (1942–1944), education, health facilities, food supplies from outside regions and religious services were banned. The Japanese also forced the Papuans, along with around 1700 forced workers from Java, to work in military facilities in West New Guinea. Japan employed the Amberi (Maluku people) and a few Dutch-educated Papuans to work in clerical and security jobs.

9. Koreri is a messianic or cargo cult movement practiced by the Biak people, a leading tribe in West Papua. The movement was initially practised as a tradition of the Biak people but
became a political movement as a result of Japanese oppression (Kamma, 1955). In Biak and its surrounding islands, Koreri to resist the Japanese was led by Stephanus Simopyaref. Stephanus Simopyaref was a follower of Angganita Manufandu, a leader of Koreri since 1939 who was already in jail when the Japanese entered Manokwari. Penders (2002) also describes a similar movement in Tanah Merah (700 kilometres away from Biak) as Koreri in 1939–1943. This movement was led by a cotter named Simson Sommilena and also grew stronger because of the Japanese occupation. The uprising by Simson Sommilena was known as Agama Kubur ('the religion of the grave'). To tame the resistance, the Japanese military beheaded Angganita Manufandu and Stephanus Simopyaref in Manokwari in August 1942. Simson Sommilena was beheaded in February 1943.

10. Mohammad Hatta, an Indonesian leader, stated his opinion regarding the Papuans on many occasions. During the conferences in preparation for Indonesian independence by the BPUPKI (Investigation Body of Preparation of Indonesian Independence), Hatta agreed that the Indonesian territory should not exceed the Netherlands East Indies territories of Dutch colonialism and the To Indo (East Indo) reach of the Japanese government but insisted that the Papuans were Melanesian and that should not be incorporated with Indonesia. Of the 45 members of the BPUPKI, six people voted in support of Hatta’s opinion regarding West Papua. In a meeting with General Terauchi, the commander of the Japanese military in Southeast Asia, in Saigon on 12 August 1945, Hatta opined that as a Melanesian-Negroid race, the Papuans should be allowed to decide their own fate (Alua, 2000). During a negotiation between the Indonesian and Netherlands governments in November 1948 on matters related to the transfer of sovereignty, Hatta highlighted that he personally was not interested in adding West New Guinea to Indonesia because the West Papuan indigenous people were racially different from the majority of Indonesians (Drooglever, 2010, p. 146). Hatta, however, changed his stance on West Papua after Indonesia achieved independence. In his role as Indonesian chief of delegation in the Round Table Conference in 1949, Hatta opined that the time would come for the Netherlands to realize that holding Irian and not delivering it to Indonesia would not benefit them (Hatta’s speech in Subandrio, 2001, pp. 28–29).

11. The Maluku residency consisted of Afdeling Amboyna, Afdeling Tual, Afdeling Ternate, Afdeling North New Guinea and Afdeling West New Guinea; each was led by an assistant resident. The capital of Afdeling North New Guinea was Manokwari, whereas the capital of Afdeling West New Guinea was Fak-fak. At the same time, North and West New Guinea belonged to the Tidore Kingdom (zelfbestuur). Another part of Western New Guinea in so-called South New Guinea was put under Afdeling Tual. Two smaller regions, Boven Digul and Merauke, were directly administered by a European (Drooglever et al., 1999). Afdeling West New Guinea and Afdeling North New Guinea also were separated formally from the Tidore Kingdom. In another decree (1949, no. 420), the residency of West/Netherlands New Guinea was extended to accommodate the Radja Empat Islands.


13. The motion narrated that ‘West Irian is a political union of the Great Eastern State; that because West Irian is the biggest part of Eastern Indonesia, the inclusion of West Irian into the Eastern Indonesia state is not only wanted but also affirmed; that because the Unites States’ army has made strategic power bases, West Irian is especially needed for Indonesia’s defense; and, West Irian’s natural resources are beneficial to help the Great Eastern’s finance’ (Drooglever, 2010, p. 141).

14. Silas Papare was a nurse who helped evacuate 1500 forced labourers from the Bird Head area of West Papua during the Japanese occupation. For his service, he received a bronze medal from the Netherlands government and a certificate of appreciation from the US intelligence agency (Meteray, 2012, p. 76). Papare was disappointed by the Dutch when his appointment to attend the Malino conference was cancelled because of his strongly anti-Amberi feelings. He was also frustrated to see the slow socio-economic development in West Papua after the war (Penders, 2002). After his close work with Ratulangi, he became pro-Indonesia. During
the Indonesia–Netherlands dispute, Papare led Indonesia’s military infiltrations of Papua. He established the Silas Papare Battalion, a military battalion under the West Irian Bureau, which was formed by Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo. Papare’s fondness for Indonesia ended bitterly. In 1967, Papare went to Jakarta to hold a protest in front of the Indonesian parliament after Indonesian military aeroplanes bombarded Manokwari and killed thousands of Arfak people, the indigenous people of Manokwari.

15. The organization was supported by prominent leaders David Woisiri, J Tarumaselly, Faidiban, Marten Mayor, Aris Kadun, Yonathan Saroy, Rafael Maselskou and Alberth Marantika. The first chairman of the TTT was David Woisiri (Meteray, 2012).

16. Sumpah Pemuda was a declaration written in a summit of youths from all over the Netherlands East Indies to affirm their support to the future independence of Indonesia. The summit was held in Waltevreden (Jakarta) and produced a so-called Sumpah Pemuda (Youth Pledge), in which the youths vowed to uphold one nation and one country (Indonesia) and speak one language (Indonesian). The event was seen as a pillar of Indonesian nationalism. The youths who participated in the event were sorted into organizations based on their ethnicities and origins. They called themselves Jong Java (Javanese youths), Jong Sumateranen Bond (Sumatera youths), Jong Batak Bond (Batak youths), Jong Celebes (Celebes youths), Jong Ambon (Moluccans youths) and so forth.

17. The Trikora commanded three points: first, to defeat the formation of the puppet state of West Papua made by Netherlands colonialism; second, to fly Indonesia’s national Red and White flag in West Irian as Indonesian native land; and three, to call the people to be ready for mobilization to defend the independence and unity of the country and the nation.

18. The declarations were expressed between 1962 and 1968, and tens of thousands of petitions were written by people in various places in the region, such as Manokwari, Fakfak, Doom, Kotabaru, Sorong, Serui, Munggei, Wamena, Tion, Biak, Torea, Genyem, Mappi and Warsa.

19. Arnold Ap was a curator of the Cendrawasih University Museum and an artist with his group, Mambesak. His artworks highlighted the cultural wealth and natural beauty of West Papua. Ap composed songs, lyrics and sketches and documented West Papuan traditional dances, sculpture and the traditional songs of various tribes. The Papuan public were very fond of the group, for it was very rare in West Papua to have modern songs with local cultural content and appreciation of the local culture. The government accused Ap of working to raise Papuan nationalism. On 30 November 1983, Ap was arrested by military special forces and was moved to police detainment in early 1984 without a trial. On 22 April 1984, police announced that Arnold and his friend, Eddy Mofu, had escaped from police detainment. Police shot Mofu to death that day. On 26 April 1984, Ap was shot at Pasir Enam beach near Jayapura and later died in hospital. Ap was then buried in Abe Pantai Christian cemetery. His family lived under political asylum in the Netherlands.

20. Papua Congress 2000 was the first mass political gathering of the Papuans in the post-Suharto era. It was termed the second Congress because it was considered the second people’s congress, with the first being held in 1962 by the Papua National Committee. The congress resulted in a resolution in which the people mandated the creation of the Papuan Presidium Council (PDP) to lead the struggle for acknowledgement of West Papua’s sovereignty.

21. West Papuan nationalists held a mass meeting called the Great Consultation (Musyawarah Besar) on 23–26 February 2000 as a test of the readiness of the Papuans for democracy. Around 500 people from all over West Papua attended the event. The result of the consultation was the establishment of a Papua Panel Council comprising 200 members; a Papua Presidium Council with two chiefs, three mediators, and 22 members; and a political communiqué.


23. Mailing list e-mail conversation. 2 August 2000.


25. The voting method of the 1969 plebiscite was the Consultative Assembly, which used a system known as musyawarah. In this system, the members of the regional bodies
participating in the consultation served as representatives of various political, traditional and functional groups in their respective districts. One member of the Consultative Assembly represented 750 inhabitants of the territory.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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