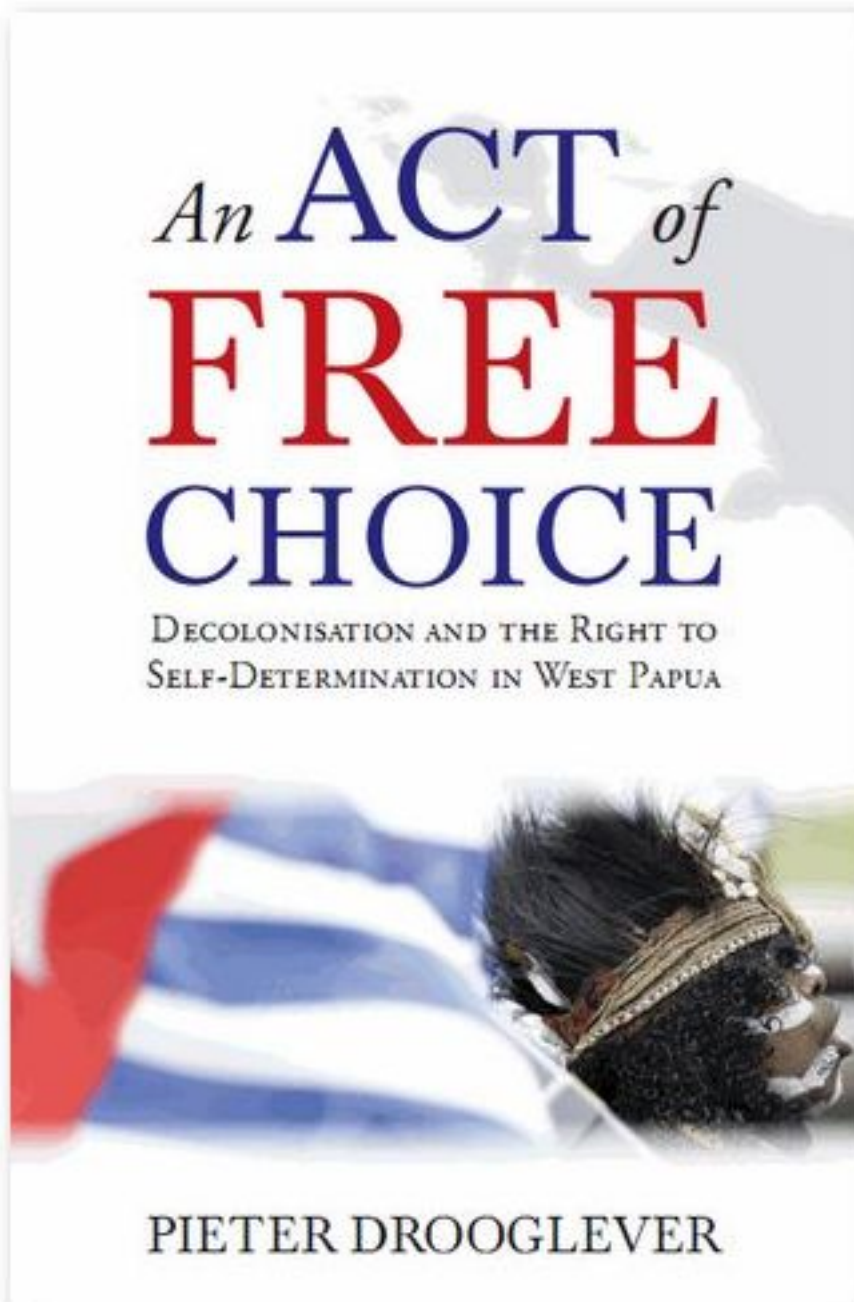


Review: Dutch decision in 1949 had huge consequences

Gerry van Klinken



The Papuan story is a familiar tragedy. This book tells it in such impressive historical detail that it will probably long remain the standard reference. An opening chapter traces the pre-World War II emergence of a small modern Papuan elite in an otherwise untouched half-island. After the war, Papua's fate was decided elsewhere – in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, The Hague, Washington and New York. During the negotiations to end Indonesia's national war of liberation, the

Netherlands excluded Netherlands New Guinea (the colonial name for Papua) from the deal. When Indonesia celebrated its independence in 1950, the territory was not part of it. Twelve years later, international politics forced the Netherlands to hand the territory over anyway. In the meantime, idealistic Dutch teachers, missionaries and administrators worked hard to bring it into the modern world. Money poured in, political parties developed, elections were held. Papuan nationalism awoke.

How sadly it all ended. Indonesia launched pinprick incursions throughout the 1950s, and by 1962 was threatening full-scale invasion. Rushed negotiations under US pressure in that year led to an agreement to transfer the territory to Indonesia via an interim United Nations administration. The Papuans were to be consulted too, but the date was put back to 1969, when things would already be irreversible. It was the third time the little colonial power had been shamed – first by the Japanese, then by the Republic, and now by the Republic again. However the Republic of Indonesia, once so full of optimism, was by 1962 suffering under runaway inflation and an authoritarian regime. The top Papuan elite fled to the Netherlands, where they built a solidarity campaign for Papuan self-determination. The Indonesian military, realising they were unpopular, banned most foreigners from Papua. They turned the 1969 Act of Free Choice into a farcical manipulation. As the human rights abuses multiplied, Papuan resistance grew. Thus the tragedy was consummated.

Drooglever's book was commissioned by the Dutch parliament in 1999 to underpin renewed dialogue with Indonesia over the fate of Papua following Indonesia's democratisation the previous year. As the foreword points out, however, it is not a policy document but an academic study that strives for 'objectivity'. It is highly readable and meticulously researched, drawing on Dutch, American, United Nations and Australian archives, as well as on interviews with Papuans and former officials and missionaries. The translation from the 2005 Dutch original is smooth and accurate.

However, I suspect the book misses a deeper sense in which the Papuan story is a tragedy. As told here, that story lies in the drama of hopes, awakened in the 1950s only to be cruelly dashed by military tyranny after 1962, even as the world looked on. This story of right against wrong is so persuasive because the wrongs continued to multiply for decades all over Indonesia. But true tragedy, as Hegel wrote in his commentary on one of Sophocles' plays, sets 'right against right'. Might not two rights clash in the Papuan story as well? Perhaps by acknowledging only one of the two we do not plumb the depths.

**The 1949 Dutch decision to take Papua out of the federal territories should be seen as a serious error**

On the one side is the right to self-determination of Papuans as an ethnic group, which this version of the story readily acknowledges. This right, by the way, remains unblemished here partly because (unlike in Papua New Guinea next door, or in East Timor) it has never been tested by history. But on the other side is that same right of Indonesia as a nation, which, the story assumes all too quickly, did not apply to Papua. Thus the moral of the story is thought to be Indonesia's failure to recognise Papua's right to self-determination as an ethnic group (since its right as a national entity is much harder to argue). Papuan ethnic distinctiveness is still today the main argument of the resistance. Drooglever appears to follow this storyline too. Fortunately his history is thorough enough that we can also read it against the grain.

## **An alternative story**

The heart of an alternative story would not lie in the 1969 Act of Free Choice, as Drooglever suggests in the title of his book. It would lie twenty years earlier, in the Dutch decision to take Papua out of the federal territories. This should be seen as a serious error. The pain this error ultimately brought to Papuans should have been predictable. At first, most Dutch players, both in Batavia/Jakarta and The Hague, believed Papua to be like every other part of the archipelago. Small modern elites among uneducated poor masses were typical of the Outer Islands. The Dutch were as aware as the Indonesians of the international legal principle of *uti possidetis juris*, namely that decolonisation should preserve colonial boundaries. Amid the shifting tides of post-war politics in the Netherlands, however, two men persuaded them otherwise. JPK van Eechoud was an energetic colonial official who proclaimed that New Guinea's primitivity and cultural diversity was so exceptional that it deserved a longer period of colonial tutelage if it was not to be overwhelmed by non-Papuans. JH van Maarseveen was the Minister for Colonial Affairs. A conservative Catholic, he came to believe that keeping New Guinea as a kind of rump colony would help soothe the Dutch public's dangerously wounded pride at having lost the rest of the Netherlands Indies to the young nationalists. Hopes of discovering great mineral wealth played a role behind the scenes. These arguments were spurious, but the Republic of Indonesia, anxious to secure a deal, accepted the exclusion under protest. In the long run, though, the Netherlands was bound to lose the international argument about Papuan exceptionalism. The Dutch tended to blame Cold War politics (the American betrayal of a small European ally in favour of a big potential Asian ally), but the reality is that it followed from the logic of established international law on national self-determination.

The consequences for Papua of Dutch hostility to Indonesia's right to national self-determination did not stop at its exclusion in 1949. The Indonesian intolerance of diversity that proved so devastating for Papua after 1962 also had deep roots in the anti-colonial struggle. If the colonial Dutch had not consistently stimulated local traditionalism in order to undermine progressive nationalism since the 1920s, things might not have escalated as they did after 1945.

The decision to exclude Papua in 1949 made some sense in the long colonial practice of

indirect rule. Within the vast multi-ethnic Netherlands Indies, ethnic identity groups occupied small territories. Stimulating autonomy at that level not only suited local conditions, it promised to make the colony easier to manage than if the Dutch had worked with the nationalists. The Dutch had begun promoting ethnic forms of representation soon after World War I. After World War II they developed these ideas into a federative structure for those parts of the Netherlands Indies that they controlled.

Indonesian nationalists in the same period were developing a consciously non-ethnic form of nationalism, inspired by French citizenship ideals and by socialism. The Republic of Indonesia that they proclaimed on 17 August 1945 did not rest on ethnic claims.

### **What if, like Britain in India, the Dutch had welcomed the nationalists as a historical reality? What if they had not gone to war with the Republic of Indonesia after 1945?**

Actually both these political principles had a fundamental right on their side. The post-1945 federalists were not just pro-Dutch Uncle Toms; they felt proud of their local beliefs and customs (adat), which were rooted in the land they loved. The republicans were not just power-hungry demagogues; they genuinely saw neo-traditionalism as regressive and looked to a future of equal rights and common prosperity. That the clash between them became so irreconcilable is Indonesia's true tragedy. When the two sides brought these rival principles to the negotiating table in 1949, they brought with them the legacies of choices made way back in the 1920s. The bitterness of that conflict, between Dutch federalism favouring divide-and-rule tactics and Indonesian republicanism favouring centralistic control, bedevils the debate about political forms in Indonesia to this day. By 1949 each side controlled real territory, and they were at war for control of the whole. The Republic of Indonesia had been losing this war militarily, but won it diplomatically because the United Nations was committed to decolonisation. The orthodox version of Papua's story forgets that, unlike in Africa, decolonisation on the basis of existing boundaries was not meaningless in Indonesia. Non-ethnic nationalism had been a reality all over the archipelago, though at varying levels of intensity, since before the Japanese Occupation.

### **Possibilities**

What would have happened if the Dutch had not chosen the path of repression in the late 1920s? What if, like Britain in India, they had welcomed the nationalists as a historical reality? What if they had not gone to war with the Republic of Indonesia after 1945? No one can know for sure, but I think we can be fairly confident of a few things. On the Dutch side, it would have weakened the arguments for excluding Papua from the transfer of sovereignty. On the Indonesian side, it could have promoted the rise of more confident politicians, open to diversity and regional initiatives. Without the heroics of a violent revolution, the military would have lacked the legitimacy that later allowed them to become such powerful players. Without a Dutch

enemy, civilian hard-line nationalists such as Sukarno might have taken a lower profile in favour of more constitutionally-minded figures such as Mohammad Hatta, Adam Malik, or a federalist like Ide Anak Agung Gde Agung – all three of whom are on the record as promoting sensitivity to Papuan feelings. Fear of subversion from the regions, that pernicious consequence of the bitter conflict of 1945-49, might have been avoided.

Granted, these are 'what-if' scenarios. They ignore the devastating effects of the Japanese Occupation on post-war politics and American support for the regional rebellion of the late 1950s. And they can never be used to justify Indonesian racism and brutality in Papua after 1962. Indeed, there comes a point when national territorial sovereignty is no longer the last word on the issue of secession by a repressed minority. But history did not have to turn out the way it did. At least these considerations ought to stimulate fresh research into the positive possibilities on the Indonesian side of the Papuan story at the decisive moment, which occurred long before 1969 – a perspective that is far too sketchily drawn in the present book.

Pieter Drooglever, *An act of free choice: Decolonisation and the right to self-determination in West Papua*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009. Translated from the 2005 Dutch original by Theresa Stanton, Maria van Yperen and Marjolijn de Jager. See for Drooglever's article in Inside Indonesia.

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