Countering imperialism: two intersecting anthropologies of Papuan histories

I Ngurah Suryawan1 and Jaap Timmer2,3

Abstract
Reflecting on the violence in Papua and how this is shaping Papuan lifeworlds and triggers attempts to disengage from Indonesian and Dutch imperialism, we, I Ngurah Suryawan and Jaap Timmer, position ourselves as nationals from colonising states—one current, Indonesia and one historic, Netherlands—in relation to our anthropological research in Papua. We came to the long-drawn-out conflict and growing affirmations of cultural autonomy in Papua from different backgrounds, and this has affected the way in which we try to contribute to remedy decades of violence. Yet, as we will show, we converge in the way we recognise that a key role we can play as anthropologists is to contribute to a better understanding of Papuan cultures and more appreciation of their creative expressions and to enable, for Papuans, a decolonial epistemology.

Keywords
alternative histories, anthropology, colonisation, Indonesia, violence, West Papua

Introduction
Papua is extremely difficult to access for anthropological research. Research permits are hard to obtain for foreigners because the state’s intelligence agency is keen to keep the region closed to Papua watchers, especially those who report on human rights abuses. The main reason for this is the ongoing involvement of the state’s armed forces in combating a low-level resistance movement, especially the poorly armed and rather localised West Papua Liberation Army. Much of the resulting violence and terror, however, quite randomly target nearly all Papuans and remain largely unaccounted for. Particularly threatening to Papuan welfare is that the West Papuan Liberation Army was recently classified as a terrorist group, following the killing of an army general (Paddock & Suhartono, 2021).

The armed forces are essentially exempt from injurious consequences of their actions. This is because military control over an imagined threat to the country’s sovereignty is seen by the central government as the key solution alongside significant investments in infrastructure development. While this long overdue infrastructure development is welcomed by Papuans, when it currently comes in the form of such programmes as Special Autonomy—the conflict-resolution package offered to the region since 2002 (Farneubun & Korwa, 2020)—it is often resisted. People see that these large funds for development tend to unilaterally benefit Papuan elites and migrants from outside the region.

Currently, decades of attempts to make Papuans into Indonesians through development are rapidly made undone when racial and ethnic discrimination surfaces all too bluntly, as we saw when racist remarks hurled at Papuan students in Surabaya was exposed in the media in 2019 (Chao, 2020). Papuan understandings of belonging have evolved in response to these currents, and many Papuans now feel that Indonesia cannot be trusted to consider their civil liberties and human rights. As a result, frequent discussions among Papuans include memoria passionis—the memory of suffering—due to a long history of state violence (Van den Broek & Hernawan, 2001) and the hardship wrought by modernisation pursued through ongoing subjugation of increasingly marginalised citizens.

It is in this context that foreign researchers get interrogated and deported when meeting with activists. But even Suryawan, an Indonesian, has to be careful with whom he consorts. In all cases, the situation in Papua forces researchers to critically reflect on their role in the field, the topics they chose to work on, and what and how they communicate their research findings. This article allows us to highlight what our positions mean to how we relate to Papua and why, what, and how we write about Papuan cultures.

1 Department of Anthropology, University of Papua (UNIPA), Indonesia
2 Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark
3 School of Social Sciences, Macquarie University, Australia

Corresponding author:
Jaap Timmer, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia.
Email: jaap.timmer@mq.edu.au
Timmer was reminded about his Dutch background by an interlocutor impelling him to listen more carefully to Papuan ways of unlearning Dutch and Indonesian imperialism. Suryawan sits on the hyphen between Papua and Indonesia where his struggle with the state’s silencing of the violence during the 1965 military coup continues and impels a sense of justice for Papua. Our different positionings with respect to Papua and Indonesia play a role, as our reflections on how we write about Papua and why we do so below show. Because of his personal experiences with legacies of Indonesian state violence, Suryawan is interested in exploring Papuan traumas to show that Papuans too are victims. Constrained by limited access to the region and because of an interest in the ways histories are produced, Timmer seeks to contribute to Papuan decolonisation by detailing counter histories available online and in books and articles written by Papuans. But, as we will conclude, our approaches converge in that we both seek to build an anthropological ethic in Papua that balances scholarly rigour with mobilisations of knowledge into social justice interventions.

Our contributions begin as we each reflect on our own journeys both within the academy and in practice.

**Unlearning imperialism from Papuan experiences—Suryawan**

I am an Indonesian citizen, born in Bali, and, following my anthropology studies at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, I became a lecturer at the State University of Papua in Manokwari in 2009. During my anthropology studies, I began to notice that Indonesians know very little about marginal ethnic groups, let alone Papuans. This stimulated me to find ways to contribute to a better understanding of Papua and communicate to other Indonesians that Papuans are not wild and primitive as mainstream media tends to portray them. This motivated me to embark on a scholarly and writing journey in Papua. My main audience is thus the people of Indonesia and, for that reason, I publish mostly in Indonesian.

My studies of Papua so far reflect my academic journey. I commenced a self-reflection process by assessing studies of the 1965 military coup and why around half a million people, including many Balinese, were killed (Roosa, 2006). This made me realise how ingrained violence and the silencing of history are in Indonesia (Colombijn & Lindblad, 2002). When I started looking at the conflict in Papua, I soon saw a similar pattern. So, when I study the dynamics of Papuan cultural identities, their concerns mirror, to some extent, my own life journey. I realise that their traumas, their fears, and their hopes of freedom are my problems too, and in fact a concern to the whole nation.

I struggled to understand why Balinese people were murdered during the 1965 mass murders. I investigated the ideas and concepts behind the violence, to deconstruct them. Now, in Papua, I see the need to again deconstruct such ideas and concepts as I watch at too regular intervals the ongoing suffering of Papuans due to poor and corrupt governance, relentless discrimination, and excessively violent armed forces. In both situations, I see the detrimental role of several political players in Papua, and I portray their roles in my writings. Above all, in my writing, I try to make real the pain in the lives of Papuans to which too many Indonesians are oblivious. To that end, I use art works and poetry by Papuans to illustrate their past and present struggles, with the aim to make visible their struggle for sovereignty and emancipation.

In those ways, I hope to contribute to social justice and eventually to the decolonisation of Papua, while realising that this will be a hard journey for all parties involved. As Tuck and Yang (2012) point out, settler colonialism and its decolonisation implicate and unsettle everyone. Imagine how we would have to deal with commercial land fixed in legal constructs, migrants having become landowners, settlers married into Papuan families, forms of internal colonisation, identities that correspond with foreign state and church ways, and so on. The sheer size and impact of decolonisation is overwhelming and in my social justice-oriented writing, I have only scratched the surface. So far, I have focused on trying to explain to an Indonesian audience how Papuans suffer.

**Life is a mystery**

*Life is a mystery* is the first line of a song composed in prison by musician and museum curator Arnold Ap in the days before he died at the hands of Indonesian soldiers on 26 April 1984 (Glazebrook, 2008). This is the complete song:

Life is a mystery

Unimaginable and unexpected

This is the reality

I am trapped in my world

What I am waiting for, what I am waiting for

Nothing but freedom

If only I was an eagle

Fly high eyes searching

But unfortunate is the fate of the unlucky birds

Hunted down and killed

The one I am waiting for

There is nothing but freedom

—translation by I Ngurah Suryawan and Jaap Timmer.

The lyrics of the song are deeply meaningful. Ap summons us to reflect, to see, and feel the fate of the Papuan people, who continue to be hunted like eagles. In Jakarta, on 19 December 2019, several Papuan activists prayed and sang the song. They were arrested by the police and charged with conspiracy and treason. They were arrested due to their raising of the Morning Star flag during an earlier demonstration in which they demanded a referendum for
independence of West Papua in front of the Presidential Palace in Jakarta on 28 August 2019. Prior to this demonstration, a Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya was attacked by local gangs hurling racist abuse at the Papuan students on 16 August 2019. Crowds accused the Papuans of disrespecting Indonesia’s national unity and called them monyet (monkeys) (Chao, 2020).

Less informed by racism is the stigma of treason that is commonly attached to Papuans. This stigma is constructed by elements in the government to suggest that Papuans pose a threat to the unity of the nation. Separatism is like a shadowy ghost—it appears at set intervals and scares and even kills randomly. Its shape is not clear to anyone, and it is an image, a mirage at times, a construction that is told in many ways, and often exaggerated to make it appear sinister. When it appears, it evokes brutal military and police operations that are designed to be a weapon against social movements imagined to be evil.

This sinister and belligerent approach to safeguarding national unity instils anger and memories of suffering. A culture of terror continues to haunt Papuans, as violence keeps alive a legacy of violence to continue the suppression of alternative voices. In the midst of the cultivation of Papuans as evil others, the ghosts of fear continue to appear, especially the separatist ghost. This ghost haunts people and makes their psyches vulnerable in the face of ongoing and seemingly endless traumatic experiences.

It is not surprising that in such a situation life becomes a mystery. As Arnold Ap wrote, The one I’m waiting for/There is nothing but freedom. Where do the mysteries of life, violence, and suffering lead to? There are two things that I have noted that give hope. The first is the interpretation of the mystery of life by Ap’s performance troupe Mambesak that was established on 5 August 1978. The troupe’s overall philosophy was about consolidation of cultural traditions towards “an overarching cultural West Papuanness” (Glazebrook, 2008, p. 35). The second are civil society groups and youth activists as well as Human Rights organisations. These are also fluid and strongly networked movements of people, which are very dynamic and crucial in supporting Papua and Papuans (Tebay, 2007).

These movements show that if we want to see where change might occur, we need to carefully comprehend how evolving Papuan worlds intersect the global world with ancestral foundations. One medium that allows for these past and present worlds to mutually animate each other is song and dance. The philosophy of Papuan cultures and ancestors are expressed in songs sung during traditional rituals, at religious celebrations, and during expressions of dissent such as demonstrations. I think it is important to highlight this in my sketches of Papua (Suryawan, 2020a).

Papua, a colony

I contend that Frantz Fanon (1963) would conceptualise the Indonesian presence in Papua as a necropolitical force wielding its power in a colonial situation by dehumanising people with the constant threat of genocidal violence. Taussig (1987) has a different view. The colonised are not treated as humans, but as objects within a field of power that continues to reproduce itself uncritically. The colonised people are not only those whose quality of life is ever diminishing but also those whose psyches start to embed inferiority and diminished personhood.

One of the key events in Papua’s history is the 1969 Act of Free Choice or Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat, hereafter referred to as Pepera, that was held in July-August 1969, and during which 1,020 carefully chosen representatives from eight regions voted overwhelmingly for integration with Indonesia (Drooglever, 2005; Saltford, 2003; Timmer, 2007a). The plebiscite is widely considered to be illegitimate, but how it was experienced by the Papuans is interestingly often not narrated.

I was fortunate to hear the story of a woman in her seventies, Maria Latuheru Betay, while she participated in a focus group discussion about human rights violations and the Act of Free Choice. The event took place at the Dewan Adat Papua (Papua Customary Council) in Manokwari in late July 2017. Maria, better known as Mama Meryl, witnessed the implementation of the Pepera in the Manokwari region on 29 July 1969. She was a school teacher and was chosen to represent an ormas (mass organisation) that was constructed for the Pepera and called Persatuan Wanita Indonesia Bersatu (United Indonesian Women Association). During the group discussion, Mama Meryl shared her story about what she experienced.

At the time of the implementation of the 1969 Pepera in Manokwari, Mama Meryl was relatively new to the town. Before coming to Manokwari, she worked at a school in Fakfak. Mama Meryl remembers that on 7 September 1962 she arrived in Manokwari. At that time, the town was different, and she was only 24 years old and recalled as follows:

“Manokwari in the 1960s was still a forest, there were many big trees and tall grasses . . . . I still remember, it was 1 o’clock in the morning on July 20, 1969. Someone knocked on my door. It was dark outside. I saw a car had stopped in front. Some people stepped out of the car. They were dressed in green army camouflage and they carried guns. I didn’t know politics back then. I was so blind”.

As Mama Meryl felt that she had done nothing wrong she ventured to ask questions. She asked what was going on and if the soldiers brought a warrant for entering her house? This surprised the soldier who replied by saying that they did not need a warrant and rather that, imitating the statement of the soldier, “we were ordered to take Mama Meryl with us”, said Mama Meryl. She was then taken to the building where the Pepera would be held. There she saw many other teachers, all brought in by the armed soldiers to get briefed by Mr Sudarto.

“All the teachers who were present had their foreheads marked with a stamp to designate who had been briefed by Mr Sudarto”, she said. She saw many Indonesian soldiers on duty to keep watch.

Mama Meryl said that quite soon after she arrived in the building she and a number of other teachers were brought to a mess in the sub-district of Sanggeng. There they were prepared for the implementation of the Act of Free Choice. Every single
person was brought to a room for instructions which they were not allowed to share with the others. Mama Meryl said that there were only three women including herself who participated in the plebiscite in Manokwari. Two other women were Ms Jokbeth Momogim and the late Ms Yakomina Urbon (Pepera, 1972). All three knew each other but had not met for some time before the event. Just before the implementation of the Pepera, Mama Meryl became pregnant and this made her reflect on the Pepera more strongly from a particular gender perspective. “We mothers don’t know anything about politics and the plebiscite. Men know these things, right?”

While in the mess, they were always watched. “Maybe only when we went to the rest-room they failed to watch us”, she explained. Mama Meryl said that when the women were in the dormitory they were watched by one policeman each. This policeman was tasked with guarding all kinds of daily activities of the so-called Dewan Musyawarah Pepera (Pepera Deliberation Council). Medical doctors came to the shelter to check the health of the residents. The examinations were carried out in a private room. Any gathering or meeting between the women was prevented. “We couldn’t meet other friends”, said Mama Meryl. This is how she pictured, from memorised experience, the control, intimidation, and en-forced instruction that characterises Indonesian government in Papua. During her time at the Pepera mess, Mama Meryl gained little understanding about the true meaning of the plebiscite. Indeed, lack of accountability and transparency continues today, as Papuans are provided little information about the rationales behind most state plans for their region.

In my work, I try to foster the conditions for inclusion and recognition by writing about Papua and Papuans in a way that makes their suffering as humans understandable to a wider Indonesian audience (Suryawan, 2020b). As I have done myself since coming to Papua, I want to ask the question, who are the Papuans and why and how are they actually not so different from others? Whenever I gain a new insight and write about it, I go back to that question in the hope that the readers too will sense the importance of the need for future equality between the people of Papua and Indonesia. In other words, I research Papua not just for Papuans, but for a wider Indonesian audience (Suryawan, 2020b). As I have done myself since coming to Papua, I want to ask the question, who are the Papuans and why and how are they actually not so different from others? Whenever I gain a new insight and write about it, I go back to that question in the hope that the readers too will sense the importance of the need for future equality between the people of Papua and Indonesia. In other words, I research Papua not just for Papuans, but for a wider Indonesian audience. In that environment, I also enjoyed Mary Bouquet’s class on post-modern anthropology which we read, among other works, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and James Clifford’s The Predicament of Culture (1988). These works became eponymous for debates on the epistemological and political issues around anthropological representation. A still more powerful incitement to critical reflection was a conversation with Albert (a pseudonym), during the second week of my PhD fieldwork. Albert forced me to ponder my country’s colonial legacy:

While the Dutch in the past said that our culture is primitive, the Indonesians who arrived in Irian Jaya [as Papua was called back then] later on said that it is kuno [obsolete, bygone] while suggesting that the latest, the modern is to be found in Jakarta. The Dutch said that they would help us to get there and did put effort into that. The Indonesians simply say that they have it and that our ways are hopelessly out-dated. The Indonesians have already reached the modern and when they took over Irian Jaya they realised that some are not yet modern. This is a lingkaran setan [vicious cycle] in which the difference in development between Papua and Indonesia aggravate each other, unstoppable. You see, it will worsen the situation. (Albert, Teminabuan, May 15, 1992)

In this note, Albert adopts an evolutionist model of development to evaluate the position of Papua in relation to Indonesia. Albert’s theory highlights how the Indonesian state—as a matter of policy—regards Papuans as backward, disorganised, not fully human, and not yet Indonesian. In addition, much of the assumptions around Papuan demands of self-determination are often grounded in ideas around Papuans being lesser humans, not capable of making their own decisions, hence, according to Jakarta prone to fall under the spell of Western human rights discourse, and thus still in need of development and guidance from the Indonesian government.

### Interpolation

Suryawan has been personally affected by a history of state violence and lack of visibility of the extent to which people suffer from violence in West Papua. This motivated him to move from Bali to Papua to expose the trauma of Indonesian violence and Papuan people’s particular cultural ways of survival to an Indonesian audience. Timmer’s motivation to work in Papua was initially driven by an academic interest in the anthropology of the region. He had familiarised himself with aspects of Melanesia during research among Huli people in Papua New Guinea, but Papua forced him to reflect on continuities of Dutch colonial legacies. This has affected his choice of topics and the way he writes about Papua with an inevitable political thread. As researchers with a similar interest, Timmer and Suryawan began to collaborate, initially by sharing interpretations of the situation in Papua then later on during a workshop on Papua in Sydney in 2018. This article has further enabled both authors to enrich their collaborations and to specifically reflect on the evolving and necessary inter-relationships between ethnography and politics.

### No history for Papua? Re-authoring a sovereign state—Timmer

Since my PhD research in Papua in the mid-1990s, I have developed an interest in Papuan-centred histories. This interest was, inter alia, incited by Johannes Fabian’s Time and the Other (1987), and his lectures on that theme at the University of Amsterdam when I did my anthropology studies there. In that environment, I also enjoyed Mary Bouquet’s class on post-modern anthropology during which we read, among other works, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and James Clifford’s The Predicament of Culture (1988). These works became eponymous for debates on the epistemological and political issues around anthropological representation. A still more powerful incitement to critical reflection was a conversation with Albert (a pseudonym), during the second week of my PhD fieldwork. Albert forced me to ponder my country’s colonial legacy:

While the Dutch in the past said that our culture is primitive, the Indonesians who arrived in Irian Jaya [as Papua was called back then] later on said that it is kuno [obsolete, bygone] while suggesting that the latest, the modern is to be found in Jakarta. The Dutch said that they would help us to get there and did put effort into that. The Indonesians simply say that they have it and that our ways are hopelessly out-dated. The Indonesians have already reached the modern and when they took over Irian Jaya they realised that some are not yet modern. This is a lingkaran setan [vicious cycle] in which the difference in development between Papua and Indonesia aggravate each other, unstoppable. You see, it will worsen the situation. (Albert, Teminabuan, May 15, 1992)
This highlights not only that many policymakers poorly understand Papuan cultures, they also fail to see that the political dynamics in the region are quite similar to those in other regions of Indonesia. They are, overall, the result of the rise of local politics over the last few decades and concern access to state and natural resources. Local politics in Papua concern democratisation —including protest, economic globalisation, urbanisation, and the deepening of regional inequalities—especially between the north coast and the highlands, decentralisation, and the resulting rise of local governance (Chauvel, 2021; Timmer, 2007b).

During the months that followed the conversation with Albert, I collected many more histories for both local groups and for Papua as a whole, broadly guided by Marshall Sahlins’ famous remark “different cultures, different historicities” (as cited in Mosko, 1992). Exploring these historicities laid the groundwork for what one could label as no history for Papua. Let me explain. They are historicities that show what a Papuan-centred anthropological challenge to imperial history in Indonesia can look like. These local histories stand in contrast to the histories produced during the so-called Dutch period—until 1962, in which Papuans were generally portrayed as the other living in a past far away from Batavia and the Netherlands. In the colonial fantasy, Papuans are often seen as living in the Stone Age (Rutherford, 2018), in the process of vanishing under the pressure of higher forms of civilisation. At the same time, the histories I engaged counter Indonesian historiography that suggests that the nation’s deep history is to be traced back to ancient kingdoms whose mandalas stretched territorially the archipelago mapped by the Dutch as Nederlands Oost-Indië or the Indone"sche Archipel, from Sumatra to Papua.

Playing with the idea that Papua once was part of Kingdom of Sriwijaya and the Kingdom of Majapahit, Reverend Onim of the village of Wersar produced an alternative history for the region whereby he re-authors Papuan identity. As I describe elsewhere, the mention of Papua in Nagarakrātāgama, the 14th century eulogy to the monarch of the Majapahit Empire, indicates that Papua has a special relationship with Java (Timmer, 2015). It is for that reason, Onim suggests, that Papua’s sovereignty should be recognised by Jakarta

if Indonesian state sovereignty can be founded on the basis of the history of ancient kingdoms then . . . the current government should logically recognise Papua as sovereign because it featured as an acknowledged sovereign region in the past. (Timmer, 2015, p. 111)

During the period I conducted fieldwork in the region in the mid-1990s, Onim was a widely respected leader and historian who was able to make sense of local histories about trade connections with the Moluccas and even Surabaya, as well as the presence of a small Buddha statue in the community’s collection of heirlooms. He brought to many the possibility of “a more pluralized understanding of modernity: not modernity in the singular (where the question is: Are you there yet or not?) but modernities in the plural, a variety of different ways of being modern: ‘alternative modernities’” (Ferguson, 2006, p. 31). Onim’s alternative borrowed from Indonesian history the idea of divine kingship to provide diverse Papuan polities with a unifying symbol. During discussions with me, Onim clearly separated divine and secular powers with the latter relating to what he consistently labelled as Indonesian government. At times, he would venture into the idea that perhaps for Papua, Christ should be king. Others in the region would more readily suggest that their history is similar to the Israelites in Egypt and that God will pronounce His blessing on Papua, providing a consoling sense of Papuan commonality under the Christian God’s rule in a majority Muslim country.

**Before Indonesia: unlearning imperialism**

The sovereignty movement in Papua has many platforms, and individuals are revered as representing pasts that are impelled by the notion of future sovereignty. Another example, which in Jakarta will likely be denied as mythology, is human rights activist Natalius Pigai’s statement that the Morning Star flag is older than the Indonesian flag. Challenging the labelling of the Tentara Nasional Papua/Organisasi Papua Merdeka, National Papuan Army/Papuan Freedom Organisation (TNP/OPM) as terrorists, Pigai said that the TNP/OPM is a legitimate and internationally acknowledged organisation fighting for sovereignty and carrying nation-state symbols. These symbols include the following: the Morning Star flag, the symbol of the Mambruk (Crown Pigeon) as a sign of peace, the national hymn Hai Tanahku Papua (O, My Papua Land) for worshipping the nation, a cartography from Sorong to Merauke, and Melanesian people with black skin. So, the OPM does not adhere to an ideology of death but an ideology of freedom (Obor Keadilan, 2021).

Pigai suggests that the Morning Star flag was born before Indonesia and that it was birthed in 1942 by Angganitha Menafandu and further fostered by the Papuanisation project by Jan van Eechoud, while Indonesia was recognised by the Dutch in 1948. The goal is Papuan independence (Obor Keadilan, 2021). Angganitha Menafandu, known as *The Woman of Peace from Judea*, was born in the lineage of Manamarkeri on the island of Insumbabi, near Biak, around 1905. She was baptised in 1932 and fell ill following the death of her husband and one of her children on a voyage to the Raja Ampat islands. Angganitha withdrew from social life on an uninhabited island. There she was visited by a man, likely a Muslim trader, who blessed her and gave her food and medicines. She recovered and returned to Insumbabi. Angganitha shares her experiences and tells that the man has chosen her “to be the messenger and leader of the life that will not end. Through her the country and the people of New Guinea will be renewed; she will usher in the Koreri [Utopia]” (Kamma, 1972, p. 158).

According to missionary and anthropologist Freerk Kamma, the origin of the messianic Koreri movement began among Biak-speaking people of the Raja Ampat region of Papua in the 1930s. Over the years, the movement grew and amended its initially inverted Dutch flag to have the white morning star in the blue band and a blue cross in
the white band, to counter the red rising sun of Japan (Vlasblom, 2004). In 1942, Angganitha was arrested by the Dutch police, soon after which Japanese forces occupied the region. The Koreri movement as an ideal is still alive today and continues to symbolically underpin ideas of nationalism. The Morning Star flag was adopted as the national symbol for all Papuans during the declaration of an independent West Papua on 1 December 1961 at the First Papuan Congress. Since then, the construction of nationhood has taken on different shapes but consistently as anti-Indonesian (King, 2002; Rutherford, 1999), and now, as Pigai’s rhetoric highlights, also inspired by Indonesian nationalism and its anti-colonial merdeka (freedom) struggle. Notions of divine powers and secular power continue to coalesce in Papuan nationalism and the Christian God plays a role alongside Koreri-like messiahs. Likewise, moral superiority of Papuans over Indonesians has increasingly surfaced more regularly.

Positioning the emergence of merdeka, or the freedom struggle, in Papua before Indonesia illustrates what Mark Rifkin (2017) refers to as “temporal sovereignty” (p. 179). Recognising the kinds of forms of temporal sovereignty is important for identifying how Papuans employ time in their attempts to work against or alongside imperial time. As a theoretical move in the discipline of anthropology, it might push further the academic attempt to unlearn imperialism. Unlearning imperialism is the search for an original epistemological framework “through which everything and every place affected by western imperialism could be brought together” (Azoulay, 2019, p. xv). Partly in response to such attempts at decolonising scholarship and the methodologies underpinning it (Smith, 1999), I put the rejection of imperial Indonesian time centage stage because I see that it is there where I may contribute to attempts at advancing social justice for Papua.

My intervention situates the study of past, present, and future firmly in the local context, which is a correction to the tendency among scholars in the humanities, especially anthropologists, to study other people’s temporalities in terms of how they differ from or are similar to European chronology (Fabian, 1987). But, I also maintain that the focus on Papuan histories should also require us to move beyond the typical kind of anthropological dichotomisation between dominating—chronocratic—and dominated times apparent in recent work (Bear, 2016; Kirtsoglou & Simpson, 2020; Rifkin, 2017; Taneja, 2017). This is particularly the case as Papuan histories, such as Onim’s Papua as part of an ancient kingdom, bring varying orders of time together.

Papuan historicities, then, often provide ways of talking about kinds of backgrounding and storying in which the past, present, and future do not line up as an evolving, continuous causal chain but in which, rather, collective experiences of time are oriented by affects—and entities—that do not follow a developmental pattern. (Rifkin, 2017, pp. 131–132)

These histories show that the past is continuously in the making in response to present concerns and future expectations. Future aspirations in particular make the ongoing construction of pasts a rewarding subject for investigation. In many instances, in Papua, these pasts are not just counter histories, but, as Azoulay (2019) argues, “counter to history”:

They oppose the transformation of the crimes against which they appeal as “past” just as they seek to foreground the violence congealed in institutions. They do not belong to history, nor do they have history. They are coextensive with the violence against which they emerged. (p. 567)

Another example is the flourishing evangelical revival movement the Sion Kids Centre. This movement was inspired by the so-called prophecy school of evangelical preachers Iris Bouman and Jan Willem Holster in Jayapura in 2005, and Bouman’s Judah and Ephraim Ministries in the Netherlands. In addition, related Papuan visits to Israel have for years been supported by the Athabu family in the Netherlands and the International Christian Zionist Center in Israel led by prophet Jan Willem van der Hoven, among others (Isir, 2006). Over the last few years, Sion Kids has grown and groups throughout Papua now organise prayer meetings around their beliefs about the gathering of all nations should start in Papua, the ends of the earth (Isir, 2006). The idea is that God is reviving Papua for a great movement to see and acknowledge God’s plan towards Israel. It is experienced as an awakening, as a realisation that Papuans have an active role in the end time (Isir, 2006). Sion Kids’ key theological principle is perhaps most clearly expressed by Devit Kambu in a recent post on Facebook:

The adoption of the kingdom of God in Papua and Israel determines everything, therefore Israel and Papua must synergize with each other, especially Papua will immediately rise to inform Israel that their God is the king of peace who will come from the eastern end of the earth (Papua). The perfection of Israel is a task that was given by God to the Papuans to make Israel into God’s heirloom—Papua is the guard of the heirloom. (Kambu, 2020, translated by Jaap Timmer)

The Sion Kids movement sees Papuans as a covenanted people with Judaic roots as evidenced in their customary past. In seeking holiness for the nation of Papua and claiming that it will play a central role in the Christian end time, Sion Kids employs a powerful metaphor. In a situation in which most Papuans are marginalised and have no agency in the future plans for Indonesia, the critique offered by the movement turns the official version of Indonesian nationhood upside down and presents Papua as being at the centre of God’s plans for humankind. This theology thus weakens the claim of the secular Indonesian state that Papuans are dependent on development programmes, while strengthening the force of religious imagination and ideas about local sovereignty and a related notion of nation.
Conclusion

Both Suryawan and Timmer’s research often comes across pro-sovereignty sentiments, and we often understand where they come from. Many in Papua hope for a revolution while knowing it is unlikely to happen because of a lack of unity. In Papua too, the revolution will not be televised as Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970 song repeats the slogan popular among Black Power movements in the USA in the 1960s (Ace Records Ltd, 2013). It will not be a popular revolution in the minds of Indonesians or Papuans, but it will be made in the streets, in the villages, in the gardens, the sago groves, and in the forest. It will be confected by a plurality of actors: actors with wildly divergent objectives mixed with a large dose of rage and indignation, actors with little knowledge of the situation beyond their immediate ken, actors subject to chance occurrences (a rain shower, a rumor, a gunshot)—and yet the vector sum of this cacophony of events may set the stage for what later is seen as a revolution. (Scott, 2012, pp. 138–139)

Similar to how the 1965 coup and the silencing of the killing of about half a million citizens associated with communism became part of national ideology for President Suharto’s New Order, the official story of that revolution will be assembled into a nationalist narrative to serve the interests of particular elites and may legitimise new waves of violence. It is hard to foretell such events, but what we can be sure of is that decolonisation of Papua will be fraught because past and present rights of settlement, differing claims to historical justice, varying ideas about divine rule, a plethora of prophets, conflicting politics around connections to land, multiple levels of corruption, and racket political alliances, have made Papua a site of differing decolonial desires.

Where we, as anthropologists, sit in that complexity is often hard to determine. We have both become careful about who we associate with, what we talk about, the topics we report on, and the ways in which we draw our conclusions from observations and historical and contemporary materials. On top of that, we know that our recordings and writings may get scrutinised by authorities who are keen to control information on events and developments in Papua. This makes us careful as our interlocutors may get implicated should our work be deemed too subversive.

On top of that, we do not want to lose our connections with Papua and we are both deeply implicated in the past, present, and future of Papuans as they experience them. There are, as our writings show, elements of speculation in our interpretations because we need “to say what we think, without pretending that our words are actually distillations of the views of the people among whom we have studied” (Ingold, 2018, p. 112). We do not speak on behalf of anyone in Papua, let alone for Papua, but we hope that our contemplations join the conversations in Papua and beyond in ways that challenge popular stereotypes, racism, and processes that marginalise Papuans and continue to divide people and regions.

Authors’ Note

I Ngurah Suryawan is Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Papua (UNIPA), Indonesia. He received his PhD in Anthropology from Gadjah Mada University in 2015 with a thesis on elite strategies for stealing power in West Papua. His postdoctoral research focuses on cultural ecology and the dynamics of natural resources in Marind communities in Papua. I Ngurah has enjoyed fellowships at the Australian National University (2016-2017) and the Royal Institute of Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies in the Netherlands (2017-2018). From 2019 - 2020, he engaged with Papuan young activists on the basis of which he wrote Infrastructure Idols – Portraits and Paradigms of Development under Special Autonomy in Papua (2020). His most recent book is Hidup Papua Suatu Misteri (Papuan Life is Mystery). At present, he is conducting comparative research on Indigenous people and exploitation in West Papua and Bali.

Jaap Timmer is Associate Professor in Anthropology at the School of Social Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, and Senior Fellow at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University. He holds a PhD from Radboud University, Nijmegen and is the author of Living with Intricate Futures (2000), and numerous articles on religion and sovereignty in Indonesian Papua and Solomon Islands, and on political ecology and access to justice in East Kalimantan. Recently, Jaap is focusing on time and history among the Asmat people of Papua.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article: This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 754513 and The Aarhus University Research Foundation.

ORCID iD

Jaap Timmer i https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5358-2898

References

Ace Records Ltd. (2013, October 8). Revolution will not be televised (Official Version) [Vidieo]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwSRqaZGspw