

# Neo-Orientalism: Indonesia's Colonialism and Papua

Written by Nathan Down

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NATHAN DOWN, DEC 17 2015

### Colonialism and Postcolonialism: The Dynamics and Enduring Legacy of Dutch Rule in Indonesia and Papua

This research first provides a basic conceptual framework appropriate for the analysis of colonialism and postcolonialism to throw light on why and how Indonesian came to colonise the Melanesians in Papua, a remarkable legacy of Dutch rule in Indonesia and Papua. It defines colonialism and imperialism as mutually transposable theories and concepts of key importance. 'Colonialism' refers to the "policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically" (Oxford Dictionaries: Language matters, 2014). Likewise, according to Abercrombie, Hill & Turner (2006), 'Colonialism' and 'Imperialism' are both an 'interchangeable' process whereby the "settlement of foreign territories, the separation of foreign and indigenous peoples by legal means", and, importantly, "the growth of racialism" had become commonplace (p. 193). Colonialism is also characterised by the attainment of knowledge and power; a product of Europe's Enlightenment and the era of scientific modernism which justified and enabled cultural dominance along racial lines. 'Postcolonialism' is generally accepted to be the study of the West's (predominantly Europe's) colonial legacy over the regions of the Middle East, Asia and Africa. According to postcolonialism's preeminent theorist, Edward Said, these colonised regions effectively created an 'Orient' ('place of colonies') and the West's recurring representation of the 'Orient' profoundly undermined local notions of identity, culture, knowledge and power (Amiri, 2015). Said (1978) defined 'Orientalism' as being the "... mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles", in that the perception and possession of knowledge have culminated in an overriding European discourse and historical narrative (p. 1-2). This definition is especially pertinent when one observes cases of current fragmentation and conflict in neo-colonial spheres, particularly in the continent of Africa, where the absence of cultural identities – or national discourses – continues to compound economic, social and political pressures, often resulting in failing states and ongoing regional instability (Nwaubani, 2015). These definitions clearly focus on the importance of the impact of European colonialism on modern world history, however, little attention is given to the existence of 'neo-Orientalism' in the development of non-European imperialism as a mode of discourse exercised effectively by Indonesia over the Papuans in the postcolonial era. It is revealing to explore the dynamics of the Dutch colonial experience and its postcolonial legacy in analytical terms to throw light on Indonesia's colonisation of Papua.

Central to the success of Dutch dominance over Indonesia was the perception of European knowledge and power, and being able to dominate over the Indonesian majority. Underpinned by Enlightenment thinking and scientific modernity (modes of discourse) Dutch colonisers were able to exploit their superior economic, technological and military resources to great effect. This enabled them to forcibly transplant European religion, history, philosophy, politics, education, economics and Dutch settlers to foreign lands to penetrating effect. For Said, Orientalism also explains the historical imbalance of the 'Occident (personified by colonial Europe) and the 'Orient' (created by the West to categorize the lesser 'other') (McLeod, 2000, p. 42). This binary juxtaposed Dutch progressiveness with 'Oriental' Indonesian repressiveness and so within this rationale the Dutch were able to create a powerbase to exert control over its colonial interests (Quijano, 2002, p. 557-558). By constructing this dichotomy, where one exists in large part to serve the other's (ostensibly commercial) interests, Europe was able to assert and maintain its colonial dominance by re-structuring and ultimately subordinating the 'Orient' in forming its cultural, economic, religious and racial aggression (McLeod, 2000, p. 42). As it was for the Dutch prolonged occupation of Indonesia, the 'Orient' was

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juxtaposed as distinctively inferior in that Indonesian "ideas, cultures, and histories" could not be appreciated (studied) in the absence of "their configurations of power", insofar that Dutch power lay in its ability to enforce its narrative (Said, 1978, p. 5). Through the narrative of Orientalism Europe posited an enduring ideological justification and function where "certain territories and people require and beseech [European] domination" (Said, 1994, p. 8). This 'Saidian turn' strand of postcolonialism, reflected by a Dutch minority managing to maintain (economic) control and the perception of power over an Indonesia majority, also highlights the importance of how the production of knowledge (culminating in legal, administrative control and the suppression of local media) led to the possession of real power. This dynamic continues to have a profound psychological impact on the colonised and the coloniser in a postcolonial world, notably in the case of Indonesia's control over Papua. It seems to be that European colonialism has been rebadged with an Indonesian character under similar pretences. Borrowing from Foucault's perspective on structures of knowledge, Orientalists believed that the Occident controlled "the production of Oriental knowledge and images for the purpose of legitimising the exercise of colonial power" (Pourmokhtari, 2013, p. 1770). By utilising Foucault's ideas on knowledge, Orientalists posit that "intellectual and pedagogical ramifications of imperialism" continue to be immense for the developing Third World (Goss, 1996, p. 240). However, Said and other postcolonial theorists give no formal acknowledgment or credence to the potential for neo-European colonial practices to replicate similar strategies to their European predecessors in the suggested 'postcolonial setting'. By providing a critique of arguably the most overt example of non-European colonialism, specifically Indonesia's settlement of Papua, this article will examine how Indonesia's own colonial experience has been used to justify and facilitate its determined occupation of Papua. The key is the legacy of European/Dutch colonial rule in historical terms.

We examine now the colonial objectives and rewards of the Dutch and Europeans generally in the region under consideration. The Dutch, along with other European colonisers in the Asia-Pacific, tried to manipulate and control the perception of culture and identity to benefit its own colonial code and practice from the late 16th century until the declaration of independence in 1945. There is a strong parallel between the Dutch-Indonesian and the Indonesia-Papuan colonial experiences in terms of the important components of the normalisation of knowledge and the power of identity. For those previously colonised, identity is elusive and often hard to pinpoint especially if one's language and culture have been suppressed or diminished as it had been in Papua. Identity can be constructed socially and politically, as it has now become in the case of Papua, deeply entrenched in an enduring legacy of Dutch and now Indonesian colonialism. The attainment of knowledge is something not coincidental or accidental within the colonial setting, but frequently mimicked, exploited and manipulated, whether intentionally or otherwise in the course of colonisation and its enduring narrative. By sharing a degree of cultural identity, the European colonialists created a third space whereby differences between the cultures could be minimised without lowering the European status amongst the colonised. Thus 'white culture' became performative (as Indonesian culture is now in Papua) in that it signified the naturalisation of cultural superiority and privilege, sometimes in alliance with a localised puppet elite. For the Dutch, this hybridity was a feature of its power (as it was for other European colonial powers) in that the appeasement of an Indonesian [local] elite and oligarchy served an immediate interest in the governing of a potentially hostile local populous. This elite responded in mimicry of what they perceived as Dutch culture, control and influence. This replication of Dutch culture by the local elite reinforced preconceived notions of superiority over other Indonesians, rather than indicated any degree of friendship or empathy for the Dutch colonialists (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1998, p. 13). The small break in Dutch colonial rule during the Second World War demonstrated to the Indonesians that Dutch culture and power were indeed surmountable. This altered state of affairs, according to postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, destroyed the calculations of the 'empowered' [Dutch], allowing the 'disempowered' [Indonesians] "to calculate the strategies by which they are oppressed and to use that knowledge in structuring resistance" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 81). Thus, the once repressed local Javanese elite learnt the strategies of oppression, in particular, and to apply them to the Melanesian population of Papua to a penetrating degree.

## The End of Colonialism? Varying Colonial Experiences and the Decline of Dutch Influence

The commencement of the Second World War, and the ensuing Japanese military offensive of 1942, changed the dynamics in Asia forever. This wartime experience for Asia resulted in the dismantling of the longstanding myth of 'white man' dominance over the Orient, and importantly, it gave precedence and rise to the prospect of Asia for the Asians. For the Dutch, their colonial aspirations had been dealt a fatal blow in 1940 following Nazi Germany's invasion of the Netherlands. However, the removal of Dutch colonialists at the hands of the Japanese from the East

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Indies (in Indonesia) was arguably more telling and symbolised the end of Dutch influence in the region (Van Der Heijden, 2005). After the Allies won the war, the Dutch along with the other European powers vied to reassert themselves in the region and renew their colonial and imperial ambitions but they did so entering a hostile and fundamentally transformed world. The era of decolonisation had begun. This influential period in world history resulted momentarily in the gradual yet complete expulsion of all European domination over Asia.

In conceptual and historical terms, the Dutch colonial experience, combined with the impact of the Second World War had resulted in a contrasting legacy. It yielded independence for Indonesia and Indonesian (non-European) colonial rule over Papua, a change of masters for the latter. In the case of Indonesia the Dutch were unable to completely control or suppress the Indonesian identity. In the case of Papua the Dutch had not set out to completely control the Papuan identity, but rather to exploit any commodities belonging to distant province. Indonesia is currently employing its own binary way of learning, thinking and positioning the Papuan population as the modern-day and inferior 'Orient', just as the Dutch had once done. This is plain to see in the dissemination of scholarship, media reports and social media activism covering the treatment of the indigenous Melanesian population. Here we have an interesting instance of non-European/Indonesia colonialism in the postcolonial era. It remains to explore Indonesia's policy and rewards as coloniser over Papuans. Indonesia exhibits a very deliberate and prolonged strategy of Indonesianization in an attempt to negate the legitimacy of Papua's own secession aspirations, culture and identity more generally, something eerily reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> Dutch/European imperialism but with a modern Indonesian character.

Indonesia's colonial consolidation in Papua has in large part been, and continues to be, influenced by Dutch colonialism. Initially a policy implemented by the Dutch in managing Indonesia's overpopulation and apparent skilled worker shortages in Sumatra during the 19th Century, the *Transmigrasi* (transmigration) program was responsible for moving hundreds of thousands of ethnically, culturally diverse Indonesians (Marr, 1990). The transplantation of culturally different people from one location to another en masse, as seen in other colonial theatres such as with the partitioning of India and Pakistan after the Second World War, has left enduring problems to varying degrees for current international affairs and world peace. Papua is a remarkable exemplar of Indonesia's unique neo-colonial rule: Indonesianization with transmigration being one of its central strategies. Although transmigration unofficially began under Sukarno after the signing of the 1962 New York Agreement, it was Suharto who made transmigration and colonial settlement in Papua official Indonesian Government policy in the 1970s-1980s, along with escalating the systematic exploitation of Papua's vast resources and mineral wealth in partnership with the United States-listed mining company, Freeport McMoRan. Papuan resources and subsequent royalties have and continue to be disproportionately diverted away from Papua and then making their way to formal and informal stakeholders, investors and oligarchs in Jakarta (Gietzelt, 1989, p. 204).

The transmigration of Javanese, Sumatran and Moluccan settlers to Papua has become a modern imitation of 18th Century European colonial strategy aimed at achieving long-term commercial gain. There are clear, compelling similarities at play here between Freeport's current requirement for labour at its Grasberg operations and the colonial Dutch East India Company's own transmigration of human labour to meet cost and productivity demands. Moreover, arguably aware of the future potential for international dispute over its occupation of Papua, Suharto and subsequent Indonesian presidents have arguably recognised that transmigration should be employed as a long-term apparatus of legitimacy (Tirtosudarmo, 2014). This policy of Indonesianization (under the guise of integration), which has been sponsored and funded in part by international benefactors including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. Indonesia has ostensibly adopted Indonesianization as a "vehicle to promote national stability and integration", at the human cost of Papuans, whose identity forcibly "transcended in the face of Indonesian hegemony" leading to a clash of vastly different cultures (Gietzelt, 1989, p. 207-209). Thus, the systematic influx of ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse Indonesian settlers into Papua over the course of decades has strategically added considerable weight and justification to Indonesia's claim over the province in that there is the real possibility that Indonesians will come to outnumber the Melanesian Papuans if current transmigration trends continue (Marr, 1990). Under Suharto transmigration was a concerted policy serving Indonesia's security concerns in stabilising and legitimising the secession-threatened province by out-populating and diminishing the local Papuans through Indonesianization (Elmslie, 2002, p. 73-74). The cultural incongruity of Indonesia's occupation of Papua is aptly expressed: "[s]urely it is a perverse twist of fate that has put a nation of mostly Muslim, mostly

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Javanese, people in control of a place like Irian Jaya [Papua]. You could not imagine, even if you tried, two more antipathetic cultures" (Flannery, 1998, p. 224).

In social and political terms there is a striking parallel to European settler colonisation such as Australia, Canada and the US during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries with Indonesia's current transmigration policy in regard to the demarcation of races from certain social and political positions. Both are instances of systematic cultural marginalisation of indigenous peoples, whereby resource proprietorship and competition for profits ultimately trump human rights considerations (Degoy, 2006). After decades of military occupation, marginalisation and economic exploitation embodied in Suharto-inspired transmigration, one must seriously ask the question whether indigenous Papuans will ever be in a position to realistically engage with Indonesia and assertively negotiate any practical autonomy or workable peace. Within the disputed province itself, however, Indonesia's systematic repression of all Papuan political representation takes the form of intimidation, enforced exile and potentially worse (Salim & Aritonang, 2015). From Suharto through to the present Jokowi leadership, a climate of hostility prevails in which layers of political representation become increasingly one-sided to serve the objectives of the dominant Indonesian colonialists, primarily based in Jakarta with the political elite and leadership, rather than the 'subaltern' indigenous Papuans. This Indonesian elite are primarily concerned with revenue and royalties (Freeport) leaving Papua for Jakarta. Second in order of power to the foreign Indonesian settlers are those of the local Indonesian governing class (bureaucrats and administrators); Indonesians by ethnicity who either moved from Indonesia or who were born in Papua as a result of transmigration. The third class are the installed Papuan elite, as mentioned above, who occupy a largely symbolic yet subservient ('buffer' between elite and subaltern) position in Papuan power structure. For the local Papuan underclass, or the subaltern, life is dominated by the two Indonesian groupings operating from both Jakarta and at the local administrative/judicial level. The Papuan subaltern has no meaningful political or judicial representation within the Indonesian system (Spivak, 2010, p. 26). Political consciousness frequently takes the form of civil demonstrations which are declared illegal and censored by the Indonesian authorities. It is not surprising then that the Papuan situation looks likely to deteriorate without shifts in how the province is managed from the Jakarta leadership down to the Papuan subaltern.

## Conclusion

Papua has been colonised by an ex-colonised non-European, Indonesia. This presents a highly unusual case of non-European colonialism/imperialism in the postcolonial area. The dynamics of this have been explored in theoretical, conceptual and historical terms and the shared experience of Dutch rule in Indonesia and Papua have been contrasted through to the virtual end of European colonialism in Asia. Postcolonial theory, in particular Edward Said's conception of Orientalism: Europe's calculated cultural attack and undermining of societies belonging to the Middle East, Africa and Asia, does comprehensively define the insidious nature of Europe's cultural, colonial dominance and its subsequent enduring legacy. It does, however, not adequately appropriate meaningful credence to an ex-colonised nation engaging in its own cultural and colonial dominance over another. This article suggests that lessons learnt from Dutch colonialism have resulted in Indonesia's mimicking and replicating its own code of imperialism, resulting in Papua's accession into Indonesia. The creation of an overriding Indonesian narrative underpinned by commercial interests and systematic transmigration – not too dissimilar from the preceding Dutch stratagem in Indonesia and Papua – have resulted in an instance of postcolonial colonialism. Lastly, it should be pointed out that the situation in Papua frequently changes. Current indications suggest that the Jokowi Government are endeavouring to address past human rights violations and systematic injudiciousness perpetrated against Papuans, albeit gradually and only in part.

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