

PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE SEMINAR ON  
THE ACT OF FREE CHOICE



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Held in The Hague 15 November 2005  
on the occasion of the book launch of P.J. Drooglever,  
*Een Daad van Vrije Keuze. De Papoea's van westelijk  
Nieuw-Guinea en de grenzen van het zelfbeschikkingsrecht*  
(*An Act of Free Choice. The Papuans of western New  
Guinea and the limits of the right of self determination*)

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## Preface

This publication contains the papers that were presented at the seminar held on 15 November 2005 in the auditorium of the Royal Library in The Hague. The seminar was organized to mark the occasion of the book launch of a monograph written by P. J. Drooglever on the history Western New Guinea up to the Act of Free Choice of 1969. It was published by Boom Publishers in Amsterdam and the Institute of Netherlands History under the title *Een Daad van Vrije Keuze. De Papoea's van westelijk Nieuw-Guinea en de grenzen van het zelfbeschikkingsrecht* (An Act of Free Choice, the Papuans of West New Guinea and the limits of the right of self-determination). The book was written at the request of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ministry had asked for an academic study that would provide sound information on the subject for a wide audience. In the accompanying contract it was stipulated that the ministry would deliver the necessary facilities, but that the responsibility for the research and the conclusions would be exclusively within the competence of the author and the Institute of Netherlands History. As a consequence, responsibility for publishing and promoting the book would also rest with the Institute.

Even during the early stages, the project already attracted a great deal of attention. At the time of the book launch, the auditorium was packed to its full capacity of 250 people, while fifty or more individuals had gathered in a separate room to follow events via a video-presentation. Those present belonged to the circles of academics, politicians and journalists from the Netherlands and abroad, Papuan exiles living in Europe and former Dutch officials and military personnel who had served their time in New Guinea. From Indonesia, too, a considerable number of parliamentarians, academics and diplomats had come over to The Hague. Among them was a delegation from the Moluccas. By their presence the members publicly demonstrated their interest in the history of the Papuans, that in so many respects had been linked to that of their own. Finally, and as an unexpected surprise, there was a large delegation of 12 prominent Papuans, including Tom Beanal, Willy Mandowen and Hamid Al Thaha, all belonging to the Papua Presidium; by far the most representative organization of the local population of the former Netherlands New Guinea, the present Indonesian province of Irian Jaya or Papua.

The monograph on the Act of Free Choice covers the history of West New Guinea from the sixteenth century onwards right into the latter half of the twentieth century. The main focus is on the period between 1940 and 1969. These were the years in which the dispute between the Netherlands and Indonesia on the future of New Guinea warmed up, which resulted in the New York Agreement of 1962 and the transfer of the territory to Indonesia in the following year. As agreed, it was followed by a UN-supervised Act of Free Choice in 1969. On that occasion, the population allegedly opted

for integration within the Indonesian state. In the book many aspects of the internal and international developments are discussed, together with the cultural and administrative history of the territory. The central question was, and still is, to what degree did the changes that took place in all these different fields work out for the Papuans. It can be added that it was the first time that all aspects could be studied together from a great many archival sources in the Netherlands, the United States, Australia and the United Nations. Moreover, it took place in combination with a research study that was being carried out for a documentary edition on Dutch Indonesian relations between 1950-1963, which largely covered the same themes. That documentary edition is now ready too. It is available in digital format on the website of the Institute of Netherlands History. In the course of the research many new facts and links could be detected. These have found a ready place, not only in the documentary edition but in the monograph on the Act of Free Choice as well.

The present collection contains the papers of the seminar, organized to offer a suitable context for the launch of the monograph. It was meant as an opening shot for further discussion. It contains seven contributions in all. Five of them were presented during the morning session which was chaired by Gerry van Klinken of the Royal Institute of Anthropology and Linguistics in Leyden. In these papers, various aspects are discussed that belonged to the central themes of the monograph. The authors were invited for their up-to-date knowledge of the field. It must be noted here that they had not yet seen the monograph and had only had access to the Summary a few days before the seminar. Therefore, their work is hardly influenced at all by its content. The Summary is added as an appendix to these congress papers, not only in English but in an Indonesian translation as well. The latter was provided by Agus Sumule of Cendrawasih University in Papua. I happily use this opportunity to express my thanks to him for this kind and generous gesture.

In the papers, attention is paid to aspects that are of direct relevance for the development of Papuan society. Two Dutch anthropologists, Leontine Visser and Jaap Timmer, focus on some fundamental changes in the position of the members of the Papuan elite before, during and after the transfer of their island to the Indonesians. The subject is elaborated further by the Australian historian, Richard Chauvel, who gives an analysis of their political ideas in the 1960s and their positioning in the conflict between Indonesia and the Dutch on the future of the country. The British historian, John Saltford, focuses on the way in which the United Nations took charge of its responsibilities during its interim administration in 1962/63 and at the time of the Act of Free Choice. Finally, the Singaporean politicalologist, Bilveer Singh, analyses the political anatomy of the West Irianese society, its friction points with Indonesia, and the geopolitical aspects of the resulting conflict in more recent years.

These contributions mainly centered around historical topics. In the ensuing discussions, however, the actuality of the past jumped to the foreground. Here, the gauntlet was taken up by John Saltford who de-



fended the thesis that the way in which the Act of Free Choice had been carried out did not conform with the terms of the Agreement of New York and the rules laid down by the United Nations Organisation themselves for events of this kind. Therefore, the plebiscite should be held once again, this time under fairer conditions for the Papuans. The thesis found support among the public, but its validity was placed in serious doubt by the other speakers at the morning session.

The afternoon session was of a more informative character and was aimed, in particular, at the non-specialists among the public. Here, the language was mainly Dutch. It opened with a presentation of the film *Anatomie einer Krise*, introduced by the journalist Rogier Smeele. The film is a composition of scenes from Indonesia and New Guinea during the early 1960s. It portrays the increasing tensions between the Netherlands and Indonesia and the stress that resulted from this for the population of New Guinea.

After this direct confrontation with the mood of the time, Jos Amapon Marey threw a retrospective view on the same episode. In 1962, he had just finished his training at the School for Native Civil Servants in Hollandia and was having his first practical experiences as a civil servant. These had given him a chance to work in close contact with some of the leading Dutch and United Nations officials. For him, it was the exiting beginning of a career that soon ended in lifelong banishment from his native country. When he had finished his sober exposé on past events the floor was taken by Pieter Drooglever who summarized the main conclusions of his book. Their contributions are included in the present collection and are numbered six and seven, respectively.

The closing scene of this session was a panel discussion chaired by Nico Schulte Nordholt. Other members of the panel were Richard Chauvel, Pieter Drooglever, Viktor Kaisiepo, Jaap Timmer and Dirk Vlasblom. They opened with a few statements to encourage debate. With good results as members of the public actively participated in the ensuing discussions. Some of the questions posed were of an informative nature; people wanting to know more about the content and background of the book. These could be readily answered. The absence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ben Bot, was a reason for critical comment. In a series of earlier public statements he had already distanced himself from this project; one that he had inherited from his predecessors. Bot had done this for political reasons, i.e. not to antagonize Indonesia. Yet, by explaining his position in interviews to the press he had even gone to the point of casting doubt upon the value of the study per se. Both aspects had irritated many participants at the seminar.

Serious criticism on the substance of the book came from the Indonesian academic, Astrid Susanto, who for many years had been an official within the Indonesian administration on West New Guinea. In her reaction she emphasised its positive aspects for the life of the Papuans. It was attentively listened to by the audience, but it was apparently on a bad footing

with the experiences of the Papuans among the public, who in emotional words elaborated on the dismal qualities of that administration as they had learnt to know it. After all, it had forced many of them to live a life without a future as exiles in foreign countries. The most eloquent representative of the latter group was Nancy Jouwe, daughter of the Papua leader Nicolaas Jouwe. Remarkable too were the contributions of the sons of his erstwhile colleague and rival Marcus Kaisiepo. Bernhard, the oldest of the two, represented the sentiment of anger and dissatisfaction. His brother, Viktor, demonstrated his diplomatic qualities, making clear that the door towards Indonesia should not be shut without a word.

With these remarks the debate returned once more to the theme of the morning session. This centred on the question of what policy towards Indonesia would best suit Papuan interests. Linked to this was the question of what advantage they would gain from the publication of the book when it finally saw the light later that day. The author emphasised that it was certainly not a report, written with the purpose of reaching conclusions that would fit in with the politics of the day. It was an academic analysis that did not stress points further than could be defended safely. From the outset it was intended to be so by the minister, the Institute of Netherlands History and the author himself. In the discussions, it was argued that the absence of the minister was in line with that policy. However, it was also argued that it was a missed opportunity to demonstrate that the Netherlands government was still interested in the fate of its erstwhile subjects. The explicit academic character of the book would have made such an approach easier.

As for the study itself, voices resonated that its non-political character was actually its strongest point. The fact that no position was taken beforehand either with regard to the conflicts of the past or the problems of the present added weight to its conclusions. What there was, was well founded. That was exactly the point made by the spokesman of the Papuan Delegation, Willy Mandowen. In an improvised and emotional address he stressed that with the present book the Papuans now could rely on an authoritative history of their own past, which for them would be a source of self-confidence.

That being said, the meeting entered its final stage with a speech by the chairman of the Institute of Netherlands History, Dick de Boer. He made clear that the board of the Institute had greatly appreciated the opportunity of being instrumental in writing a study of this kind and that it gladly shared responsibility with the author for the way in which he had fulfilled his task. Having said so, he handed over the first volume of the book to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jozias Van Aartsen, who in 2000 had commissioned the Institute to write the book. In his words of thanks Van Aartsen made clear that he had felt committed to the fate of the Papuans from the time he had been a schoolboy. It had been a recurrent subject around the table in his parental home. Small wonder, since his father was a minister in the De Quay Cabinet which had paved the way to the New York Agreement of 1962. So the commitment of the father

had been instrumental in putting the son into action in 2000, when asked to do so by the parliamentarians Middelkoop and Van den Berg. Seen in that light, the absence of Minister Bot was interesting again. After all, his father, too, had participated in the same cabinet, bearing even more direct responsibility for the conduct of the New Guinean affairs in his capacity as Vice-Minister for Overseas Affairs. During their ministerial terms, more than forty years later, the sons drew different conclusions for the present from that shared past. This underlines the tricky nature of the subject, both then and today.

The publication of *Een Daad van Vrije Keuze* did not go unnoticed in the press. It was discussed in many journals, both in the Netherlands and outside. The same was also true for radio and TV. Once more attention was drawn to the final phase of decolonisation in Indonesia, which had ended up in the dismal interaction between Dutch promises and Indonesian claims. Whatever the merits of both, they certainly had not worked out for the good of the Papuans. Small wonder, the actual position of the Netherlands government was taken note of as well, often with a critical undertone. Recent history and contemporary politics had touched each other very closely. Actually, they had been overlapping to some degree. It was the leading Dutch newspaper NRC-Handelsblad that made the point. It was regretted that the Minister, once committed to the subject, had not made one more small gesture. Accepting the unpleasant truths of history does not necessarily lead towards the conclusion that the past has to be played over again.

This encapsulates the presentation of the book and the discussions that accompanied it. It owed much of its success to the active participation of speakers and participants. I also have to express a word of thanks to my colleagues at the Institute who helped to organize the seminar. The first to mention is Donald Haks who, in the spirit of a true Director, kept tight hold of the reins while still deriving great pleasure from the race. Furthermore, we owe much to the small team led by Maria Schouten which took care of the complicated logistics. And, finally, a word of thanks has to be conveyed to the chairmen of the two sessions, who gave ample leeway to the emotions of the public without losing sight of the need for rational argumentation. In doing so, they demonstrated that politics are not the exclusive prerogative of either Jakarta or The Hague, but have a place in the world of academia as well.

Pieter Drooglever  
28 August 2007

