

INTERVIEWS

West Papuan Nationalism and #Papuanlivesmatter

An Interview with Veronika Kusumaryati

Indigenous Papuans have sought independence from Indonesia for over five decades. Since 1969, racial discrimination, exploitation of natural resources, militarization, and the arrival of Indonesian settlers have fueled the ongoing fight for an independent West Papua. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Indigenous Papuans expressed identification and solidarity with anti-racist struggles in the United States through the creation of the Papuan Lives Matter Movement. The Journal sat down with Veronika Kusumaryati, postdoctoral fellow in the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University, to discuss the rise of Black consciousness among Indigenous Papuans and the entangled histories of colonialism, race, nationalism, and development in Indonesia. Dr. Kusumaryati also spoke about how her work in film intersects with her anthropological research.

Journal: How did you become interested in studying colonialism in Southeast Asia? What led you to focus your research on West Papuan nationalism?

Kusumaryati: I initially came to the United States to study the post-1998 (post-democratic reform) media landscape in Indonesia. I studied film and media as an undergraduate in Indonesia. Later I went on to enroll as a Ph.D. student at Harvard University. In my first year as a Ph.D. student, I wrote a paper on the internet in West Papua and its role in opening up information in this remote and highly militarized area. My Ph.D. advisor, who worked on Indonesia, read the paper and asked me to look into the situation in West Papua. I returned with a report on what I saw and heard there, and with her encouragement, decided to focus on West Papua as my research site. As an Indonesian, I had never been to West Papua before this visit but had often heard about the military operations and “development” (or lack thereof) there. Thus, visiting West Papua and confronting a situation that I had never seen in any other part of Indonesia was rather unsettling. It was not my original intention to study colonialism, but in places like Indonesia, the legacy of colonialism is still thoroughly felt. Southeast Asia, in particular, has a diverse and fascinating history of colonialism. We were colonized by various European powers (the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Malaysia and Singapore, the

Spanish and Americans in the Philippines, the Portuguese in Timor-Leste, the French in Indochina, crypto-colonialism in Thailand, and then the Japanese across the whole region).¹ We have a lot to learn from the history of these various systems, especially when the structure and ideologies from that period are still in place today. As for West Papua, I am interested in their claims of Indonesian colonialism. I used to take nationalism for granted, but after experiencing West Papua, I have a lot of questions about Indonesian nationalism and Papuans' reasons for not taking part in it.

Journal: What are the origins and goals of the #Papuanlivesmatter movement? Where does this strain of activism sit within the current system of political governance within West Papua? How does it relate to Indonesia's colonial past?

Kusumaryati: Before the murder of George Floyd, Papuans had staged protests against Indonesian racism. In August 2019, for instance, a group of Papuan students in Surabaya was subjected to racist treatment. The incident began with a rumor that the Papuans had flushed an Indonesian flag down the drain. Another rumor said that they pulled the flag down and replaced it with the Morning Star flag of the Papuan independence movement. On the evening of August 16, the eve of the celebration of Indonesian independence, members of the *ormas* (paramilitary groups) and Indonesian security forces surrounded and screamed at the Papuans and told them to go back to West Papua. They also called them "monkeys." Incidents like these show that while Papuans are Indonesian citizens, they are treated differently by other Indonesians. Secondly, this incident also demonstrates that Papuans have been fighting against this discrimination and diminishment. When George Floyd's murder sparked global protests, Papuans saw themselves as Indonesia's George Floyd. They started to use the hashtag #Papuanlivesmatter to point to their shared struggle. Similar to anti-racism protests in the United States, Papuan protests also called for an end to anti-Black racism by Indonesians.

While they share similar goals with the Black Lives Matter movement, Papuans' anti-racism movements are different in several respects. Firstly, West Papua's protests are aimed at Indonesian racism, which is founded not only on the legacy of white supremacy and the colonial racial order, but also on Indonesian supremacy and the denial of Papuan Black identity. Secondly, their anti-racism protests go hand in hand with their struggle for self-determination. Papuans still consider Indonesia a colonial state and, therefore, consider Indonesian racism as a component of the Indonesian colonial system. This last point concerning Papuans' anti-racism protests is especially difficult to digest for most Indonesians, as most remain committed to the idea that West Papua is a foundational

¹Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld defines crypto-colonialism a situation where "countries claim to have avoided colonial domination but in reality are heavily dependent on, and indirectly but materially subject to, intrusive control by Western colonial powers" (2012, 214). He gives an example of Thailand which had never been under any colonial rule but was and continues to depend on more dominant powers. See Michael Herzfeld, "The Crypto-Colonial Dilemmas of Rattanakosin Island," *Journal of the Siam Society* 100 (2012): 209-223 and Michael Herzfeld, "The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002): 899-926.

component of the nation.

It is important to note that West Papua was only incorporated into Indonesia in 1969—twenty-four years after Indonesia's independence. West Papua was transferred from the Dutch to Indonesia through the New York Agreement, a framework sponsored by the United States. The transfer was partly inspired by a racist idea that Papuans were not ready to govern themselves. This history continues to shape how Papuans see themselves within Indonesian society. Papuans have been fighting for their independence since 1965, and as a result, Indonesia chooses to carry out intensive military operations in the area. Today, West Papua remains the most militarized area in the country, where daily human rights abuses are perpetrated by Indonesian security forces. On the other hand, the Papuan Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Free Papuan Movements, also kills a significant number of Indonesian civilians accused of being military spies. The Papuan Lives Matter movement calls for an end to the militarization and human rights abuses. It also calls for an end to the everyday racism that Indonesian settlers (and Indonesians in general) commit against the Papuans.

Journal: Is the #Papuanlivesmatter movement part of a larger political conversation in Indonesia around race and indigeneity or is it a standalone movement?

Kusumaryati: This is uncertain. In Indonesia, race is not part of the popular political lexicon. I would say that Indonesia perceives itself as a race-blind society. The conception of race in Indonesia always points to the legacy of colonialism, where race was the organizing principle of colonial societies. When Indonesians talk about race, they focus on the Chinese Indonesians who, during Dutch colonialism, played the role of colonial mediators. During the authoritarian period of the New Order (1966–1998), the government used the designation of SARA (suku, ras, dan agama) to refer to ethnic, racial, and religious differences. Any discussion on SARA is perceived to be against the Indonesian nationalist slogan of “Unity in Diversity.” The Indonesian Criminal Code, especially Articles 156 and 156a, are also often used to punish expressions of SARA. The Papuans' identification with Black identities and the Black Lives Matter Movement through Papuan Lives Matter thus poses a difficult problem for many Indonesians. Indonesians understand that racism exists, but it is either “there” (in the United States or Europe) or it is mainly understood in relation to Chinese Indonesians. In Indonesia, the West Papua “problem” is frequently understood as a problem of ethnicity or separatism from Indonesia. Before Papuan Lives Matter, most Indonesians did not think racism was part of Indonesia's problem in West Papua. Now, with the global influence of Black Lives Matter, young Indonesians have become more open to discussions of race and racism in West Papua.

Papuans themselves assume multiple, intersectional identities. They are Black, but also indigenous and Christian. They also have their own tribal or ethnic identification. These multiple identities shape Papuans' articulation as Black people. In their international campaign, Papuans use their multiple identities to navigate different institutional arrangements of global politics. Thus, they participate in global indigenous movements,

use church networks to attend forums at the United Nations Human Rights Council, and speak to the Black Lives Matter movement through the internet.

Journal: How do other ethnic groups in Indonesia respond to West Papuan claims that Indonesia is a colonizer? How have indigenous Papuans reacted to infrastructure and other development projects initiated by the state?

Kusumaryati: Indonesia is comprised of more than seven hundred ethnic groups, and the nation's founding principle of "Unity in Diversity" implies that we are one nation even though we are all very different. Thus, Papuans' protests really touch upon this foundation. Indonesians understand that most Papuans live in poverty, even though they have many natural resources. They understand that development has not successfully improved the living standards of the Papuans, and that many Papuans have been killed by the Indonesian security forces. However, Indonesians tend to blame Papuans and non-Papuans alike for corruption and the lack of development, as well as for the failure of Indonesian nationalism in West Papua.

For Papuans, on the other hand, development is a tricky word. Papuans feel that they are in need of development. They are eager to participate in various schemes of improvement, but in their experience, development has always meant the plunder of their natural resources, the expropriation of their customary land, militarization, and the arrival of more Indonesians, who in turn, dominate their economy and monopolize any opportunities available for them. So, it is incorrect to say that Papuans do not like development, because the development they have experienced has always brought them harm. Consider, for instance, the construction of the Trans-Papuan Highway in the Central Highlands. The Indonesian government planned to build 4,325 km of roads connecting the western part of West Papua to the eastern part, with the intention of easing West Papua's isolation and accelerating development in the region. However, the government did not consult communities impacted by the construction. They also brought the Indonesian security forces to be involved in the project. While the government understood that Papuans have had traumatic experiences with the security forces, it still invited their participation. This is an unsound policy. Another example is the government's policy of developing large-scale palm oil plantations. Most Papuan communities are dependent on their forests for their livelihoods. Instead of developing a green economy based on Papuans' intimate relationship with the forests, the government opted to welcome corporations to develop large-scale plantations that took over Papuan lands. This carbon-heavy development model is promoted because government officials want money, not because they sincerely want to aid the Papuans. The problem of public policy in West Papua is exacerbated by racism and the denigration of Papuan cultures. Papuan intellectual Benny Giay calls this a policy motivated by a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Journal: How has the #Blacklivesmatter movement responded to #Papuanlivesmatter? Are these two movements in dialogue with each other?

Kusumaryati: I have not heard of any response from the Black Lives Matter movement, but I think that both share and exchange solidarity as Black movements.

Journal: How effective have West Papua's social movements and nationalist groups been at utilizing new media?

Kusumaryati: It depends on to which social movements and nationalist groups one refers. In general, digital media has played an important role for West Papua's social and political movements. Many NGOs use the internet to broadcast their human rights investigations. Political activists use the internet to propagate their calls for Papuan self-determination. Papuan youths have an affinity for digital media. Online platforms, such as Papuan Voices, Papuansphoto, and sastrapapua.org, have become important platforms for Papuans to show their work online through videos, photos, and writing for a broader audience. Papuans avidly use social media for various purposes, from dating and studying, to staging movements. The West Papuan Liberation Army also uses the internet to publish releases aimed at Papuan and international audiences.

Yet, the most extraordinary aspect about the use of the internet in West Papua is how it becomes the battleground of an information war between the Indonesian government and Papuan movements. As I write in my forthcoming paper, "#Papuanlivesmatter: Youth Political Movements and Black Consciousness in West Papua," during the anti-racism protest in August 2019, the Indonesian government shut down the internet for thirty-three cities and regencies across West Papua. This internet blackout violated Indonesian law and has been protested by civil society organizations.² The government argued that the blackout was meant to "prevent fake news from spreading." They also argued that it conforms with the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law. Passed in 2008, the ITE law makes use of the SARA provision. The Indonesian government and security forces have also carried out an aggressive campaign against the Papuan independence movements through the circulation of false information (hoaxes) and the creation of hundreds of fake accounts. This operation aimed to sow confusion about the reality on the ground in West Papua and counter any discourse against the Indonesian government and security forces.³ Thus, we see how important the internet is for the government and the Papuans alike, and how the control over information needs to be

² The civil society group filed a lawsuit against the president and the Communications and Information Ministry in January 2020. This group comprised of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (Safenet). The Indonesian press legal aid (LBH Pers), the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI), KontraS, Elsam, and the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR) provided lawyers.

³ See Benjamin Strick, "Investigating Information Operations in West Papua: A Digital Forensic Case Study of Cross-Platform Network Analysis," Bellingcat, October 11, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/10/11/investigating-information-operations-in-west-papua-a-digital-forensic-case-study-of-cross-platform-network-analysis/>; Benjamin Strick, "West Papua: New Online Influence Operation Attempts to Sway Independence Debate," Bellingcat, November 11, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/11/11/west-papua-new-online-influence-operation-attempts-to-sway-independence-debate/>.

understood not only in relation to a conflict situation like in West Papua but also broadly, digital rights that affect citizens.

Journal: What role do you think visual representation and communication has to play in anthropology or social science more broadly (e.g., in spreading awareness and resources about a particular social issue)? How does your work in film studies intersect with your anthropological work?

Kusumaryati: I am involved in several media initiatives with my Papuan interlocutors and friends. I recently produced a film with Ernst Karel entitled Expedition Content, which focuses on Michael Rockefeller's recordings in West Papua. The film has been screened at the Berlin International Film Festival, Cinéma du Reel in Paris, and Lincoln Center in New York. The film will have a theatrical release in North America this summer (2021). I think it is important for social scientists to understand how media works and use that understanding to develop more inclusive and innovative methods for research. Social scientists can use film and other media to broadcast our findings or discoveries. We can also use multimodal mediums as a way to engage with our subjects. I find that both academic and non-academic communities are more receptive to our research findings through non-textual formats, such as visual or aural media. My interdisciplinary background as an anthropologist and visual artist helps me to be a better scientist because the people involved in our research are also multidimensional beings.

Journal: What impact does the study of colonial legacies have for Indonesian politics?

Kusumaryati: As a nation-in-the making, Indonesia still faces myriad problems concerning the legacy of colonialism and the future of the country. We have a problem concerning majority-minority relations. Our democracy is not strong enough to deal with different forces that want to bring Indonesia back to authoritarianism. As we also see in the United States, democracy cannot be taken for granted. We have to defend it. Thus, a deeper understanding of conflicts (such the one in West Papua), racism, and the role of the military in democratic societies is desperately needed. As an educator and anthropologist, I seek to educate my students and fellow Indonesians about the enduring imprimatur of the past on contemporary society in West Papua and how notions of democracy, human rights, and justice are still far-removed from the daily lives of these people.

Journal: Can you describe your ethnographic research methodology for your upcoming book on indigenous politics in West Papua?

Kusumaryati: During my dissertation research, I used various methodologies to carry out research in West Papua. As an anthropologist, I am trained to conduct ethnographic research using participant observation. The term "fieldwork" for anthropologists usually means intensive observation of certain phenomena for a certain amount of time (at least one year) and participation in the activities that are being observed. This process also includes structured and semi-structured interviews with key informants with the purpose of gaining their perspective on the phenomenon being observed. Here, researchers can

use a traditional method of inscription, such as writing, to document their observations. They can also use a camera or a sound recorder. In West Papua, for example, I recorded numerous events, such as elections, using a digital camera. I produced photos, videos, and sound recordings.

Secondly, I am also interested in history and how history shapes the contemporary situation in West Papua. To understand racial stratification in the region, for example, I undertook archival research in the Netherlands, Indonesia, and the United States. I made use of the government's archives, missionary archives, and scientific archives to explain continuity and rupture in the identification of Papuans as Black people. The last method I used was digital ethnography. I documented how and why people use the internet. I followed a lot of social media accounts that were relevant to my research. I recorded trends, incidences, or platforms that were prominent or simply interesting. Combining these methods, I managed to gather a large dataset to support my dissertation. Though my book title continues to change, for now, my working title is *Recursive Colonialism: History, Experience, and Political Consciousness in West Papua*.

Journal: How has being connected with the Georgetown and Washington policy communities supported and enhanced your scholarship?

Kusumaryati: I am extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to work and interact with the Georgetown community. Georgetown's connection with the broader Washington policy world is such a refreshing change from my previous role as a Ph.D. candidate. As I am currently affiliated with Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and not the Department of Anthropology, I am challenged to better explain my research to a broader audience outside my field. The fellowship's support has also allowed me to broaden my research scope, rewrite my book manuscript, publish additional articles, and more importantly, prompted me to think about my project after I wrote it as a student. Lastly, I welcome the opportunity to talk more about West Papua among U.S. policymakers because the fate of this one territory may very well depend on decision-makers in Washington, DC.

Journal: As a recent Ph.D. graduate with a burgeoning career in academia, where do you see your future scholarship intersecting with the policymaking process?

Kusumaryati: I have always been interested in connecting my work with the broader public sphere, including policymakers. Though policymakers are perhaps less interested in the work of social scientists, I think engagement with the public sector and civil society is important. With our deep grassroots knowledge and data-driven approach, we social scientists have much to offer in the debates and decisions that affect people's lives. In Indonesia, I often work with the church, which is an important development actor in West Papua, and various civil society organizations such as human rights groups. I work with them based on the mutual understanding that each of us uniquely contributes to the creation of a more just world. Last year, I happened to work with a consulting firm that advises the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

I really enjoyed the experience and opportunity to exert some influence on policy. I plan to continue this engagement through my research and in other potential roles as a consultant or subject-matter expert.

Veronika Kusumaryati is an Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflict Resolution Postdoctoral Fellow in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Her scholarship engages with the theories and historiography of colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality. She has published her research in Landscape Architecture Frontiers, Indonesia, and the Asia-Pacific Journal of Anthropology. With Ernst Karel, she also produced a film entitled "Expedition Content," which has been screened at the Berlin international Film Festival, Cinéma du Réel at Centre Pompidou, and Lincoln Center. She holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology with a secondary field in Film and Visual Studies from Harvard University.
