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Engelenhoven, A.T.P.G.; Snoeijer G., Peters N.

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The Dutch Enigma of Kisar Island: Buku Tembaga

(Southwest Maluku, Indonesia)

Aone van Engelenhoven

Leiden University

“The Dutch named this island Kisar Island. But actually this is Yotowawa Island.”

Angelina Bakker-Aitameru, Kotalama, Kisar Island

Kisar is a tiny Indonesian island of about 81 square kilometers on the sea border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. It is part of the remote Southwest Maluku Regency in Maluku Province that contains about 25 islands and islets of which 16 are inhabited. While all other islands in the Regency correspond to the tourist’s dream of exotic places with lush forests and white beaches, when seen from the sea, Kisar Island rather looks like a dry, uninhabitable stone. This is, in fact, a delusion caused by the unique feature that the mountains form a ring at the outside of the island. Inside the mountain ring one will find hills that can only be reached through a narrow clough at the west and the east side of the island.

Officially Kisar Island can only be reached by means of bi-weekly high traffic coastal ferries that sail between West Timor and Ambon Island. Up to 2015, when Kisar’s only town – Wonreli – still functioned as the capital of the Regency the island also had a weekly air service with the city of Kupang on West Timor. This still operates albeit illegally and whereas our travel to Kisar Island from Ambon took five days at sea, by air from Kisar Island to Kupang took only four hours.

The Kisar population divides into two main groups each with its own language. A minority that lives in two villages in the Southeast of the island speaks Oirata, a language supposedly related to the languages of New Guinea. The majority who refers to itself as *Meher* – derived from the Dutch word *meester* ‘master’ – speaks a language that is related to Indonesian.

Our project focused on a small group of families who all acknowledge European descent, the so-called ‘Mestiços of Kotalama’. Though the group is greatly underrated by the island society, the exhaustive study *Die Mestizen auf Kisar* by the German physical anthropologist Ernst Rodenwaldt brought them to the attention of the Western world although he was not first to coin this description. Information about a group of Mestiços on Kisar Island first appeared in the reports of the Dutch Missionary Society, *Het Nederlandsch Zendelingen-genootschap* (NZG) in the 19th Century. Also in the voluminous book by J.F.G. Riedel – then Governor of the Moluccas *The Races with Straight and Frizzy Hair between Celebes and Papua*.¹

“We experienced trouble because of these [Dutch] names.”

Ernst Belder, Kotalama, Kisar Island.

The foreign traveler who arrives on Kisar Island for the first time is immediately astonished by the multitude of Dutch surnames. In contrast many of the surnames of the indigenous population, whose background are predominantly Protestant Christian, have Biblical origins.

One that comes immediately to mind is Uncle Bob Moses, the name of the owner of our hostel in Wonreli. Still others use the Christian names of the first baptized forebear, such as Mr Herry Frans, our Kisarese contact on Ambon Island. The adoption of the name of a highly respected person, a typical Kisarese way to pay homage, created an extra inflow of Dutch names. The indigenous family Christiaan, for example, exchanged its original name for the first name of the Dutch Reverend Christiaan van den Boer. In contrast, local history has it that the Kisarese Royal Family acquired its very Dutch sounding name Bakker somewhere in the 18th Century from a clerk who misspelled their original name Pakar. Kisar society distinguishes between two main Bakker clans. The ‘Black Bakkers’ descended from marriages with local nobility clans and as such are heirs to Kisar’s monarchy. Conversely, the ‘White Bakkers’ find their origin in the repudiated courtships of King Bakker V with a local woman and a mestiço from Banda.

“They cooked up a plot to let the Dutch do the dirty work”
Willem Bakker, Kotalama, Kisar Island.

Although it faded away a long time ago, we inferred the importance of Kisar Island’s location from a strategic military perspective for the *Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie* (VOC) by the two forts it constructed there: Delftshaven and Vollenhoven. Local folklore informs that king Pakar asked the VOC for help against Portuguese invaders who were retaliating a previous Kisarese raid on nearby Portuguese Timor. The compliance by the VOC in 1665 resulted in a complete reshuffle of the Meher-speaking domains on the island and the construction of Fort Delftshaven. They installed Pakar as king and relocated his domain, which is nowadays called Wonreli, to the vicinity of the fort.. Here, the ruins of the 18th Century Immanuel Church are silent witness to the success of the company’s Christianization policy on the island. Three years later, in 1668, the VOC board at Banda stationed a small garrison of European soldiers there and accommodated their families in newly built houses near the fort that became known as *Kotalama* ‘the old town’.

“The first *mestisen* was Johann Willem Joostensz, our ancestor was the second.”
Willem Lerrick, Abusur, Kisar Island

However, most Mestiço families in Kotalama are the offspring of sixteen soldiers and their families who served the VOC detachment in the 1700s. Local folklore refers to these families as the ‘Eleven Families’. Factually, currently only eight still exist.

While all these families acknowledge a Dutch origin, in fact, this only applies to the Wouthuysen family who descended from the Dutch corporal Abraham Wouthuysen. Rodenwaldt proposes English origins for the name of common soldier Eduard Peelman. Corporal Johann George Lander has Swiss origins. Johannes Ruff, whose origins are German, is remembered most for his meteoric career rise from common soldier to *posthouder* (agent of the VOC) on Damar Island. Of interest too is the changed nomenclature of another German Sergeant, Anthonie Gaving – whose name has survived as Caffin. His only descendants now live in the Netherlands. The offspring of the mestiço Guillaume Belmin, another common

soldier with French origins, split into two separate families: Belmin and Belder. Only Anthonie Gaving, Johann Joostensz, himself a mestiço from Banda, and Abraham Wouthuysen, married Mestiço women.

The families Lerrick and Joostensz have a special status among the Kotalama families. The Joostensz' inherited their 'high esteem' from ancestor, Johann Willem Joostensz, a mestiço from the Banda Islands who had never been a soldier, but worked as a clerk on Kisar Island during the governance of Resident Christiaan Carouw 1783-1791. After the VOC was declared bankrupt, Johann remained on Kisar Island and from – 1805-1807 – was Resident for the entire Southwestern Islands.

The Lerricks descended from Corporal Hendrick Lerrick. There is still is no consensus on his origins. Suggestions are widespread and include Germany, Switzerland and Friesland in the Netherlands. All agree that the Lerricks are the largest family. They have members on Moa, Sermata, Ambon and in Kupang. By contrast the Thomas, Cornelis and 'White Bakker' families are generally acknowledged as fellow inhabitants of Kotalama, however, not as one of the 'eleven families'.

“Cat eyes only appear when people marry within the family”

Ana Siyane Kaipatty-Lerrick, Kotalama, Kisar Island

Over time, the Kotalama Mestiço families managed to get hold of native land. Sometimes the first ancestor had acquired it from native landowners either by marrying into a land owning family, or by trade or trickery.

Only four of the 'eleven families' can claim traditional links with indigenous land owning families. Corporal Hendrik Lerrick married Francina Elisabeth Norimarna because of which, the Lerrick family is connected to the noble house of Mauradi in Wonreli. Similarly, the Belmin and Belder families are connected to the Yawuru domain through the marriage of their ancestor Guillaume Belmin to Maria Salomon. Eduard Peelman linked his family to the Abusur domain, when he married a noble woman from there.

Though no longer customary, the tradition to 'marry exclusively' among the 'eleven families' began with six of the original sixteen soldiers marrying a girl from the Kotalama community. The German soldier Johannes Ruff, for example, married a 'White Bakker' girl: Leonora Bakker, a granddaughter of King Johannes Philippus Bakker V. The Swiss corporal Lander married Christina, a granddaughter of Corporal Abraham Wouthuysen and Anna Miellart. Rodenwaldt says that rumour has it that she was possibly a Kisarese Mestiço whose family has disappeared early in local history.

In the following generations there is a strong tendency to marry exclusively among the 'eleven families', albeit that marriages did occur with indigenous Kisarese girls and girls who descended from rich plantation-owning families on the Banda Islands, the so-called *Perkeniers*.

The typical Kisarese habit of compounding one's maiden name to the husband's name after marriage is reminiscent of a Dutch tradition. For Kisarese this functions as a quick way to

assess someone's family affiliations and consanguinity. Ms. Angelina Bakker-Aitamere, remarked specifically on her consanguine relation with her husband Willem Bakker – they both are grandchildren of Bakker-Lerrick. This also confirmed her familial relation to Mr. Willem Lerrick. “Mr. Willem Lerrick instantly knew he and I were second cousins once removed, him being a grandson of Lerrick-Johannis and me a great-grandson of Johannis-Denu”. Mr. Ernst Belder profiled himself as a son of Belder-Joostensz.

“They felt they did not need us anymore.”

(Frans Ruff, Kotalama, Kisar Island)

During the time of VOC governance on the Banda Islands, Kisar Island developed into the administrative center of the Southwest Malukan islands. To secure the government's control, Kisarese islanders were stationed as agents or *posthouders* on the surrounding islands. However, after the British interregnum from 1810-1817, Kisar Island's importance began to diminish increasingly. As a consequence of the loss of its economic and military importance, the Government of the Moluccas, the Colonial predecessor of the Indonesian province of Maluku, decided to disband the Garrison in 1819. This implied that the European soldiers and their offspring, whose status was purely based on their service in the Garrison, lost the strong position they held in 19th Century island society. They became an exclusive group of Burghers who referred to themselves as *anak Compagnie* ‘children of the Company’.

The five-year British interregnum created a political void for which the Government of the Moluccas devised a policy with which it could secure Dutch rule in its territories again. The increase of Muslim and British traders from South Celebes and the newly built trade post – Port Ensington in Northern Australia – was interpreted as a signal of flawed Dutch control in the region. However, this policy also unexpectedly provided temporary support for the European descendants on Kisar Island.

Within the framework of the government's policy, the NZG initiated a Missionary Program in the Southwest Moluccas to safeguard the Christianization project instigated by the VOC. Because of poor governance by the NZG board in The Netherlands, the competition between the two supervising deputy directorates in Ambon and Kupang and the inaccessibility of the region the program was eventually dropped in 1841. Parallel to the mission was an educational project in which school teachers from Ambon were stationed at several Southwest Malukan islands. Only Kisar Island was allocated a local teacher: Jesaijas Bakker, a former student of the Dutch missionary J.J. Bär from Kotalama.ⁱⁱ

Without the Garrison to keep a check on them, both ethnolinguistic groups, the Meher and Oirata, returned to their traditional competitive behaviours directed at acquiring supremacy of the island. Throughout the 19th Century there were continuous outbursts, for example the Porok Mountain Battle between Oirata and Lekloor in 1863 and the Tuber Leaves Battles between Oirata and Wonreli; the last was reported in 1887. The additional absence of a military backup for the Dutch Assistant Resident was an incentive for certain domains to challenge the supremacy of the ‘Black’ Bakker royalty.

The continuous political unrest on Kisar Island was amplified by a series of ecological disasters. In 1830 the island was devastated by a huge famine. The incessant warfare and absence of structural help in the years that followed meant the island was slow to recover. When in 1867 and 1872 Kisar Island was struck by lethal epidemics of cholera and smallpox, the government decided in 1882 to move the Residency's administration from Kotalama to Serwaru on Leti Island.

By the second half of the 19th Century, the inhabitants of Kotalama had lost their special status. This is confirmed by their recruitment for *heerendienst* or forced labor for Wonreli by the Bakker kings. Despite Missionary Bär, and Governors Riedel and Baron van Hoëvell having reported this several times to the missionary and colonial administration, a solution was not offered until 1918.

In 1912, the Southwestern islands became a dependency of the Residency Timor and Dependencies under the name of *Klein-Timor* 'Little Timor'. The Residency's capital, Kupang, was in fact a constellation of migrant quarters around the Dutch Fort Concordia. One of these quarters was *Tode Kisar*, where Kisarese migrants lived that worked as civil servants in the residential administration. In 1918, the Government built ten houses in Kupang to lodge Mestiço families from Kotalama. They were also to receive Dutch schooling to retrieve the Dutch identity that gradually had disappeared on Kisar Island.

“The books of Ernst Rodenwaldt are our identity.”

(Thomas Belder, Kotalama, Kisar Island)

The abusive term (in Meher) *Walada morso*, 'sloppy Dutch', from the Dutch word *morsig* 'messy', summarises ably how the inhabitants of Kotalama continued to depreciate the Mestiços. The inability of the soldiers and their families to fit into the traditional societal system of Kisar Island had their Dutch traditions stamped 'outlandish' and their descendants labeled aliens or foreigners.

As a consequence these families preferred to identify as *Mustisen* or *Mestisen*. This sobriquet is a corruption of the German word *Mestizen* derived from the Portuguese word *mestiços* in the title of Ernst Rodenwaldt's books. This label was acceptable in its time, it related to similar Eugenic-based research in South West Africa, Portuguese Timor and Australia. Although, Ernst Rodenwaldt's research had been dispraised out of scientific attention by the end of the 20th Century due to his Nazi links, on the other hand his publication on the Mestiços remain(ed) the foremost, if not only source for research on the consanguine relations among these Kotalama 'eleven families'.

“Left to their fate, they have become Kisarese.”

(Governor J.G.F. Riedel, 1886)

A quick comparison of the Kotalama people with the other inhabitants of Kisar Island confirms that Governor Riedel's observation was correct. Although the descendants themselves are a living memory of the final days of the VOC rule, in terms of tangible indicators only the forts ruins remain to evidence the Dutch presence on the island. When in 1925 the Immanuel church burnt down all Bibles and hymn books were lost in the fire. No written evidence remained of what the role of the Mestiços in the Mission project of the 19th Century might have been.

Past external indicators – clothes, shoes – that used to distinguish the Mestiços from the other Kisarese are no longer visible. In the 18th and 19th century only Kotalama male Mestiços wore shoes and trousers. These probably functioned as a visual confirmation of their connection to the VOC and the colonial government. After the Christianization's success in the Southwest Moluccas in the 19th Century, shoes and trousers functioned mainly to distinguish male followers of the Christian faith from Muslims who would wear a sarong and a skull cap. However, as Governor Riedel observed, by 1886 the men only wore typical European clothing on special occasions. Nowadays, shoes and trousers are common property and required in official contexts throughout Indonesia. Indonesians, however, may still wear traditional clothing for certain ritual purposes like weddings or festivities like Independence Day.

The island of Kisar is known in the region as a center of traditional *ikat*, a special tie-dye technique that is unique to the southern regencies of Maluku Province, Nusa Tenggara Timur Province and Timor-Leste. Each clan has its own exclusive motives that testify their history and position in local society. In a Kisarese context, therefore, the lack of traditional clothing stresses the exclusion of the Kotalama Mesticos from the island society.

In the eyes of the Colonial Government, the Mestiços on Kisar Island were the outcome of an 'unplanned experiment' to plant and maintain Dutch culture outside the motherland. The 'Redutchification' program that started in 1918 in Kupang was obviously due to the awareness that the 'experiment' in Kotalama had completely failed.

Viewed from the other side, the Mestiços are rather the outcome of a successful acculturation to Kisarese society. Governor Riedel also reported in 1886, that the Mestiços only spoke Meher, hardly knew any Malay and definitely did not know any Dutch. Unlike in the Central Moluccas no material culture survived in Kotalama's daily life that could evidence Dutch origin.

The families of the Kotalama community have completely assimilated in the island society. This is very well exemplified by the extended Lerrick family clan. The several Lerrick lineages are grouped into two clan houses: *Marna Woladana* 'Dutch Chieftain Offspring' and *Mesyapi Woladana* 'Dutch Autonomy Offspring'. The members of the first clan house are considered as nobility and direct descendants of Corporal Hendrick Lerrick, the first soldier ancestor. They are expected to safeguard the historical knowledge of the *mestisen* families. The members of the other clan house automatically become candidates to represent their domain outside Kotalama. Dutch people don't have clans or clan houses. **SYNCRETISM???**

Another example of their acculturation are the so-called *nama hindu* or ‘Hindu (pagan) names’ that their ancestors appear to have. These indigenous Kisarese names are generally linked to pre-Christian times, or in other words: to times before the arrival of the VOC. As such, Mestiço ancestors are not supposed to have a ‘Hindu name’, since they are intrinsically connected to the arrival of Christianity. Whereas in the Belmin family for example these names probably derive from Kisarese in-laws, in the Lerrick family they may have derived from Meher nicknames.

“In the perception of the islanders, the Mestiços have always been Europeans or Dutch.”

(Ernst Rodenwaldt, 1928)

In fact, it is the surrounding native groups that assign a ‘foreign’ status to the Mestiços. Whereas Ernst Rodenwaldt’s books became a narrative artifact for the Mestiços with which they proudly prove their European origins, other Kisarese depend on more traditional instruments to construct and maintain their identity.

One persistent island narrative has the Mestiços originating from a boat that sunk near the south coast in the early 17th Century. Similar stories are found in Aceh in North Sumatra and in Buton, Southeast Celebes where the communities also acknowledge lodging groups of Dutch descendants. The only boat, however, that was ever reported as having sunk near Kisar Island was the *Amboyna* in 1829. This vessel, planned as a supply ship for the missionaries on the Southwestern Islands, already sank during its maiden voyage. The Mestiços seem to have conflated this fact with the arrival in 1665 of the *Loenen*, whose captain brought the VOC contract that declared Pakar the first king of Kisar Island.

“Who we are? We are assimilados with a past.”

(Jacques Caffin, Heerhugowaard, The Netherlands)

Their diaspora throughout across the Indonesian archipelago and eventually into The Netherlands shows that the identity of the Mestiços is closely connected to Kotalama itself. Inside Kotalama they divide the families into more or less strict castes based on the seniority of their origin. It is here that we heard people talk about ‘pure’ Mestiços opposed to others who did not have any Mestiço blood at all or were already too much mixed with outsiders.

Mestisen, living outside Kisar Island more readily identify as Kisarese rather than Mestiço. For example the Mestiços in Tode Kisar in Kupang in West Timor and in Kampung Kisar in Tantui on Ambon Island only confirm Kotalama as their place of origin.

As such, the families Bakker, Joostensz, Ruff and Lerrick that came to The Netherlands in the aftermath of the Indonesian Independence War may initially identify as Moluccan exiles or migrants. Their fathers or grandfathers were one of the soldiers who were fired after their imposed passage to the Netherlands. Within the Moluccan community they identify as Kisarese or Southwest Moluccans and only within the Kisarese sub community do they

present as Kotalama people. During the anxiety of Dutch society in the seventies of the previous century that was caused by the terrorist actions of Moluccan youth, Southwest Moluccans decided either to hide their ethnic identity, or as the Mestiços could do, claim a Eurasian origin.

The Caffin family disappeared completely from Indonesia. The representatives of the only remaining lineage came to the Netherlands as a Eurasian family from Gorontalo in North Celebes. Although initially there was still contact with other Kotalama families, it has never been followed up after the parents passed away.

ⁱ *De sluik en kroesharige rassen tussen Selebes and Papua*

ⁱⁱ C.A. de Jongh and J.A. Patijn. 1858, *Algemeen verslag van den staat van het schoolwezen in Nedertlandsch-Indië, a. voor Europeanen en inlandsche Christenen opgemaakt door de Hoofd-kommissie van Onderwijs, b. voor inlanders opgemaakt ter algemeene Sekretarie*, Batavia: W. Bruining. [General Report on the Condition of the Educational System in the Neherlands-Indies, a. for Europeans and native Christians edited by the Chief Commission of Education, b. for natives edited at the General Secretariat.]