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Helene van Klinken

The President’s children: Transfer of East Timorese Children to Indonesia

ABSTRACT

On 3 September 1977, less than two years after Indonesia invaded East Timor, the Indonesian president, Suharto, invited twenty small East Timorese children to his private home in Jakarta, a meeting which was reported widely in the Indonesian media. This essay examines why Suharto invited these children to his own home, its impact and what the meeting signified about the relationship that his New Order regime was trying to develop with the East Timorese.

BIOGRAPHY

Helene van Klinken is a PhD student in the Department of History at the University of Queensland. She lived and worked for ten years in Indonesia, between 1984-1991 and 2000-2002. In 1999 she worked for the United Nations, which organised the referendum in East Timor, and was also a volunteer for the East Timor Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2003. She comes from Brisbane and currently lives in Leiden, The Netherlands.
THE PRESIDENT’S CHILDREN: THE TRANSFER OF EAST TIMORESE CHILDREN TO INDONESIA

On 3 September 1977, less than two years after Indonesia invaded East Timor, the Indonesian president, Suharto, and his wife, Ibu Tien, received twenty small East Timorese children in their private residence in Jakarta. The meeting with the children, who were often referred to as the “President’s children,” was reported widely in the Indonesian media. Why did Suharto invite East Timorese children to his own home, what was its impact, and what did the meeting signify about the relationship that his New Order regime was trying to develop with the East Timorese?

Indonesian New Order propagandists and military intelligence operators created many narratives and myths by which they sought to legitimize the annexation of East Timor. They repeatedly stated that Indonesia had no territorial or colonial ambitions in relation to the Portuguese colony, and claimed that Indonesia became involved there because it had been requested by the Timorese. Several weeks after the Indonesian military invaded the capital city, Dili, on 7 December 1975, the Indonesians set up a temporary government with a Timorese acting governor who immediately informed the United Nations that the people of Timor had chosen to integrate with Indonesia. In May 1976, a group of fifty East Timorese delegates from the temporary government arrived in Jakarta to meet with President Suharto and formally request integration, which was officially ratified on 17 July 1976 by the Indonesian People’s Consultative Assembly. Indonesia’s New Order rulers claimed that these requests were the legitimate wishes of the majority of the population. However, the international community did not recognize the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia.

In the face of international criticism, Indonesian leaders maintained that they had a genuine concern for the welfare of the Timorese, and that they would prove their good intentions by developing the territory and alleviating the suffering of the people. When the delegation of fifty East Timorese arrived in Indonesia to request integration, Suharto greeted them as brothers returning to the Indonesian fold. One of his first promises of help was to the children who had been orphaned because their fathers or parents had been killed by Fretelin, the political party in East Timor that rejected integration with Indonesia.

Suharto had a genuine concern for orphaned and abandoned children, perhaps because of his own experience as a child, passed from one relative to another and forced to drop out of school. In September 1975 he established the Dharmais charity foundation to provide for the welfare of orphans and indigent children, and also the families of disabled veterans and war widows. The Dharmais foundation focussed particularly on caring for Indonesian victims of the military campaign to integrate East Timor with Indonesia. The foundation also took the initiative and provided the funding to transfer young children from East Timor to be cared for and educated in Java. It claimed it was necessary to remove them from East Timor, as the child care institutions there were overcrowded. However, the motivation for the president to bring these children to Java was because of the sacrifice of their parents who had been killed in the struggle to integrate with Indonesia. Through Dharmais,
Suharto wanted to reward these loyal victims of the war by offering their children a superior education in Java. He also believed that an education in Indonesia would contribute to the development of East Timor.\textsuperscript{viii}

In October 1976 a group of five young children, one only two years old, were sent to an institution run by the Department of Social Welfare in Bandung, West Java.\textsuperscript{vii} Another 25 children were sent to the privately run SOS Kinderdof, also in Bandung, in 1976 and 1977.\textsuperscript{x} The children came from families that supported integration. Their fathers had been killed by Fretiin, which blamed them for working together with the Indonesians and inviting them into East Timor. In some cases the children’s parents had been killed by Fretiin after it won a short, bloody conflict between the two main political parties in August 1975.\textsuperscript{xi}

Besides these children, the Dharmais Foundation also organised and funded another thirty orphans, several from each district of East Timor, to be sent to Java. The military helped to select the children and transported them to Dili, then later to Java: 20 in 1977, and 10 in 1979. These children had a different story from the 30 children described above. Most of them lost their parents during Indonesian military attacks against their villages and some belonged to families that supported Fretiin.\textsuperscript{xi} It may have been a gesture to the Timorese to show them that even the children of Fretiin could receive an Indonesian education. However, the children chosen had to be 10 years of age or younger, so that they would be easier to influence and train. The 20 children brought to Suharto’s home in early September belonged to these “representative orphans” from districts throughout East Timor.

The Indonesian nation has often been conceived in terms of a harmonious family and during the New Order this concept was greatly strengthened. Suharto was portrayed as the benevolent patriarch who guided the nation.\textsuperscript{xiii} The narratives to justify East Timor’s integration with Indonesia employed many familial images and they had a significant impact on the relationship between Indonesians and Timorese. The Timorese were “brothers” with close cultural and social ties with Indonesians;\textsuperscript{xiv} they had requested integration with Indonesia, which had a moral responsibility to accept them and save them from the threat and terror perpetrated by “communist” Fretiin.\textsuperscript{v} Timorese were also characterised using a common metaphor as “children” who had returned to the Indonesian “family,”\textsuperscript{xv} and were invited, in another example of Indonesian national mythology, to return to Indonesia—to the “lap of Mother Earth.”\textsuperscript{xvi}

Suharto’s meeting with the East Timor children at his home in Cendana Street in Jakarta appealed to many familial images. It took place in the Suhartos’ home, their family treasures visible in the press photographs. The president reportedly gave the children advice as a father would to his children. Ibu Tien helped them wash their hands and served them food. She was said to have felt a “motherly” sadness for these little children—the youngest only four years old—who had no one to care for them in East Timor and had to be sent so far from their own environment.\textsuperscript{xxviii}

The news stories of Suharto meeting the children appeared in the press immediately following an offer of amnesty to the Fretiin fighters and their approximately 300,000 supporters still hiding in the mountains.\textsuperscript{xii} There were also calls for the East Timorese who had fled overseas to return home.\textsuperscript{xii} Suharto symbolically extended the invitation to all Timorese to be part of the Indonesian family through his overture to these 20 small children. They became, on behalf of East Timorese, putative members of his family, the “President’s children,” and by extension of the Indonesian family.

The children in themselves proved that Timorese wanted to integrate with Indonesia. The use of children to represent and convey this message intensified its impact, especially by invoking the trope of the orphan. Some of them were orphans, but not all. Some were separated from their parents whose whereabouts and fate was unknown at that time. The children were handed over by relatives who were the guardians of the children, and in at least one case by the mother. They agreed to send their children because of their difficult circumstances and the offer of a free education for their children. Only one of the children, Gatot, had no knowledge of his family. He was found by a soldier and given the soldier’s name.

The children’s experiences in Indonesia give us further clues about why they were brought there. Suharto assured the children who visited him in September 1977 that all their basic needs would be met.\textsuperscript{xii} An official letter from Dharmais to the St. Thomas institution run by the Catholic Church in Semarang, where the children were sent, promised that the cost of food, clothing and education would be covered by Dharmais.\textsuperscript{xii} According to Petrus Kanisius Alegria, one of the Timorese children, Dharmais did not give St. Thomas sufficient funds to cover even their basic needs, excluding school fees. The president also explicitly promised that his Supersemar foundation, set up to disperse fees to clever but indigent students, would pay the university fees of the children who succeeded, though Petrus never received any help for his tertiary education from this source.\textsuperscript{xviii} Once the
children were handed into the care of the institutions, Suharto and the Dharmais foundation took no further interest in them. The children had served their purpose of representing and symbolising Indonesian generosity to the Timorese.

Nevertheless, children’s lives were involved and the project is also judged by what happened to them. While the children at St. Thomas were generally well cared-for, the manner of removal and loose connections back to their families in East Timor exposed them to dangers. Not all the families were told that the children would be sent to Java. Some thought that the plan was for them to attend school in Dili and they learnt only later about their transfer to Indonesia. The Dharmais entrusted the children completely to the care of the institution, providing no continuing supervision of the children or reporting to parents and relatives. It would have been difficult for the institution to take on this role as there was war in East Timor and travel and communications were restricted. Cipriano from Viqueque’s mother, who gave permission for Cipriano to be sent to Java in 1977 (along with four other “representative orphans” from Viqueque), discovered only after six or seven years that, in Dili, Cipriano had been taken by a soldier to be adopted and had never been sent to Java. He is still missing.

The children lost their knowledge of their Timorese languages and their culture in East Timor as they adapted to their Javanese environment. There was no attention to their psychological needs, nor an understanding that they had been removed from a conflict area. One young boy, who had witnessed the killing of his parents by the Indonesian military, suffered from psychological trauma in the succeeding years. There was often tension between the Javanese nuns and the older Timorese boys living at the St. Thomas institution. The tension resulted from cultural differences and misunderstandings, not only from the lack of funds. The Timorese children had to work hard, doing both inside household tasks and working outside, tending the gardens to grow extra food. They felt that there was often insufficient food, and, as growing youths, were always hungry. If they asked for extra food they were told they were greedy, and if they took fruit from the garden without permission they were punished. Their unrestrained, often disobedient behaviour contrasted markedly with the submissive, obedient behaviour expected of Javanese children. In 1984 the situation at St. Thomas was reported in the local newspaper, perhaps an attempt by the nuns to draw attention to the fact that the government was not fulfilling its promises in relation to the Timorese children. However, the article made remarks about the children that the children regarded as derogatory, such as the fact that they ate roots never eaten by Javanese, food fit only for animals. The Timorese were angry and refused to go to school for one week. Five of them ran away from the institution. Four were quickly identified after telling the bus driver they did not need to pay their bus fares as they were the “President’s children.” They were handed over to the police and returned to the institution. However, fifteen-year-old Henrique from same disappeared. According to Petrus, there was no effort to find him and he has never been heard of since that time. The institution made some changes to accommodate the children’s grievances, but the disappearance of Henrique left them feeling abandoned and fearful.

A majority of the 60 children sent to Indonesia by Suharto’s Dharmais foundation achieved a good education and returned to take up responsible positions in East Timor. The children are grateful for their education, although many suffered trauma and distress because of the dislocation, and question why it was necessary for them to be removed from their families and social environment at such a young age. The number of children transferred to Indonesia by the Dharmais foundation was only small but these transfers had a wider impact. Suharto’s example contributed to the prevailing attitude that removing children from East Timor was a generous and acceptable way to help the many destitute children and to tackle the problems of backwardness and underdevelopment. Although the removal of children was never an official policy of the regime, nevertheless many children were removed, and it was known and condoned by those in authority. Possibly in the range of 4000–5000 East Timorese children were removed to Indonesia during the occupation between 1975 and 1999. While some of the children were taken with the consent of their parents or families, many were taken forcibly. Often parents did not dare to refuse offers to take their children, especially if they were made by soldiers. Many senior military officers followed Suharto’s example as did regular soldiers in their turn. Soldiers who removed children from East Timor usually adopted them or gave them to other families to adopt. As the fighting in East Timor subsided, children were also taken from East Timor to be educated in Indonesia, particularly by religious institutions.

The New Order believed that sending children to Indonesia to be educated, like all the impressive physical development it brought to East Timor, proved that Indonesia cared about the Timorese. At the same time, the rights of Timorese children and their families not to be separated were denied, and treating the children as orphans ignored the responsibility of the extended family in relation to the children of its deceased members. Correspondingly, many Timorese felt that in the delivery of development in the territory, the New Order often manipulated and excluded them and used it to justify denying them their political rights. The story of the children who met Suharto at his home provides a lens on a paternalistic and colonial relationship, and the
children encapsulate in microcosm the intention of the New Order to use development in the project to dominate East Timor.

Kompas, 5 September 1977

REFERENCES


iii After the fall of Suharto, the United Nations organised a referendum in 1999 in which the East Timorese chose overwhelmingly for independence.


viii Letter from the governor of East Timor, Arnando dos Reis Araujo, to the Dharmais foundation, 25 August 1977 (archives of St. Thomas). In 1969, after West Irian was incorporated with Indonesia, Suharto publicly stated that educating Papuan children outside the province would contribute to the development of the territory: “Proyek Perikemanusiaan Irian Barat: Bukan angkat anak setjara phisik,” Sinar Harapan, 10 November 1969.

ix The Development of East Timor Province (Indonesia: Government of Indonesia brochure, n.d. [1977?]).

x Interview with staff at Kinderdorf, Bandung, 27 January 2004.

xi Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, Report, 7.3.8: 172–178; 7.3.7: 139–157.

xii For a description of the campaign to capture Fretelin leaders and force the surrender of the population, see ibid, 3.12, 3.13.

xiii David Bourchier, Lineages of organicist political thought in Indonesia (PhD diss.: Monash University, 1996), Ch.1 p.1.

“Pernyataan pemerintah mengenai perkembangan terakhir Timor: RI wajib melindungi rakyat wilayah Timor,” Sinar Harapan, 4 December 1975.

In Indonesian, si anak yang hilang telah kembali (Antara, 4 August 1975).

In Indonesian, pangkuan Ibu Pertiwi (“Pelajaran dari Timor Portugis,” Merdeka, 8 December 1975).


Interview with Petrus Kanisius Alegria, Dili, 4 May 2004.

Interview with Duarte Sarmento, Tuapukan refugee camp, Kupang, 8 February 2004.

Interview with Petrus Kanisius Alegria, Dili, 4 May 2004.


Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, Report, 7.8.4.1: 353.

The children were not legally adopted. The Indonesian term used to refer to the children is “anak angkat.” Adoptive parents, bapak/ibu angkat, take on all the responsibilities of natural parents.

Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, Report, 7.8.5: 440.