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Dispatch

Re-claiming Shared Identity and Restoring Hope for the Survival of the Remaining Commons in Papua, Indonesia

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Introduction

Indigenous communities live daily with the legacies of historical and contemporary dehumanisation in the form of colonisation, coloniality and globalisation. As a Papuan woman who is a descendent of colonised settlers, I have experienced the pain of mixed identities and the struggle to define myself, and have been trapped by the politics of identity. My work as an adult educator for social justice is a means to reconstruct my self-conception and reclaim my "self," at the same time as I support others in their journey of self-reidentification. Regaining self and collective identity is pivotal for building social movements to dismantle injustices.

This dispatch presents and discusses my journey of self-reclamation while I supported self-discovery and identity reclamation among the members of homestay associations in Raja Ampat and Fyarkin, a fishery community living on Numfor island in the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua. My long engagement (from 2012-2020) with community groups in the Raja Ampat and on the island of Numfor catalysed my much deeper awareness of the collective identity crisis suffered by wider Papuan society.

Following local practice, I use the term "Papuans" for the people inhabiting the entire Indonesian territory of western New Guinea, known internationally as West Papua. Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) constitutes the western half of New Guinea island. The Papua region now consists of two provinces, including *provinsi Papua Barat* (West Papua province) and *provinsi Papua* (Papua province).

The map below points to the places where the following testimonies and accounts of personal experiences occurred.

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Figure1. Map of West Papua (source: Wikimedia Commons, n.d).

My Story, Their Stories, Our Loss

Papuan society has experienced colonisation (beyond territorial invasion) and globalisation as the two most powerful forces that have undermined our sense of being as individuals and our freedom to belong. These forces have trapped individuals and collectives as objects of other subjects; we have become lost to ourselves in the process. We are wounded by global forces, and we feel trapped in a status quo that wants to keep us in that state forever. We are not exceptional in this experience.

I was born into a family from Maluku, a group of small islands located next to Papua. Apart from the community I grew up with, stories about my maternal ancestors have a great influence in shaping my self-conception. My Malucan maternal ancestors settled in Okaba on the south cost of Papua in early 1900, when it was a small village. My grandmother, my mother and her siblings were

born in Okaba, and her paternal grandfather and great grandfather were missionaries. Her maternal grandfather was a carpenter and was not part of the elite. My father moved in when he met my mother and they settled in Sorong, a small town in the bird head of New Guinea where I was born. Shortly after my birth, we moved to Gag, an island in the Raja Ampat group. Gag Island shaped my early sense of and connection to the place and the people.

Yet, despite growing up as a local, by appearance I am an outsider and I've been called an incomer irrespective of the way I live. This trapped me in an identity crisis and had a strong emotional impact on me. By the time the story I will tell in this dispatch begins, I had been devaluing myself for a while and felt as if I had no place to call "home."

As a settler-colonial descendent, I was at risk of sustaining the values and acts of oppression of the coloniser (Freire, 1996; Ruth, 2016), and of seeing the world through the coloniser's lens. But having grasped this challenge, I embarked on a journey of self-re-identification through investigating my origins and recalling the stories that my mother shared. My ancestors had brought Christianity as promoted by the Dutch reformed church, an institution steeped in capitalism and modernity (Weber, 2002). Yet, I also recalled other stories about how my mother's family embraced Indigenous value systems and identity, speaking the language and living the traditional ways of Marind communities, who are indigenous to the south coast of Papua.

When my mother was born, she was named Mboke in addition to her Christian name, Wilhelmina. Mboke is a species of bat regarded by the Marind people as a spiritual safeguard of Wewung, a stream that lies between Okaba and a smaller neighbouring village, Wambi. A psycho-spiritual relationship exists between people, natural and supranatural beings, and so each clan among the Marind Indigenous communities is represented by an animal or plant totem (Kalsched, 2013). As I recalled stories like this, I began to connect with my inner feelings and perceptions, and as I realised that my own stories are shared with fellow Papuans, my self-identity became stronger.

Like others, this has taken me a long time. I resonate strongly with the insight of Ntombi Nyathi (in several personal communications) who says, "the moment one is able to say *I am, I can*, a new world is possible," but I never imagined that defining myself would involve such a long process of assessing and unmasking the structure of my psyche and my own humanity.[1]

In this journey, Paulo Freire (1996) offered me a helpful theoretical framework and approach via "critical conscientisation," a method of reclaiming identity by thinking critically about the system of colonisation and coloniality that I started applying when I returned to Raja Ampat in 2012 to undertake ethnographic research with a group of homestay owners who provide traditional accommodation. Because I'd grown up on one of the Raja Ampat islands, I found my way into this community, assisted by my cousin,

[1] Nyathi is an adult educator and a director of Training for Transformation based at the Grail Centre in Kleinmond, near Cape Town, South Africa.

who lived there and introduced me to them. My assignment involved listening to their life stories in reflective conversations while I lived in the traditional accommodation they provided.

Raja Ampat's homestay owners are caught in an ongoing socio-economic and psychological crisis in which they try to cope with the enormous pressures of complying with modern standards and expectations of living. Many have tried to solve these dilemmas through strategies like selling their land, illegal logging, trading endangered wildlife and accepting government handouts. They also build and rent out traditional housing, because for many years while they themselves struggled to pay for education and health, they watched outsiders benefit from occupying ancestral land on which they built resorts for holiday makers.

Through memory work, homestay owners told stories and remembered the lives of their ancestors. I encouraged them to use creative ways to present their stories, and they chose to play skits, revealing in the process their longing for the life of their ancestors who were greatly supported by abundant natural resources and by community sharing. Money did not matter much then as it was not factored into relationships, but the peace and harmony of those times has been lost. In tears of frustration, one participant said, "love does not exist anymore."

After the research project ended, I continued working with the homestay owners using blended conscientisation methods and tools such as Training for Transformation and adapted Memory Work to support them to dig into the root causes of their predicaments and to process the emotions that arose.[2] When I first started my life there, my overarching question was "how can I support Raja Ampat families to set up an organisation to manage community initiatives and assert their rights?" A decade later, I wish my initial question had been, "how could I support communities in a process of reclaiming themselves; redefining and reconstructing collective identity?"

In 2019, when I relocated to Numfor, an atoll off the northern coast of Papua in the Pacific Ocean, at the mouth of Cendrawasih Bay – an area hundreds of kilometers to the east of Raja Ampat – the same question came up. In Numfor, I spent nearly a year in two neighboring villages of Saribi and Submander, listening to and mapping stories, using the same blended conscientization methods that had been successful in Raja Ampat to understand residents' collective emotions. I facilitated men and women to form Memory Work groups in which 20 minutes of silence allowed them to recall meaningful sounds and associated memories from their childhood, and another 20 minutes allowed for sharing personal memories within the group, followed by an

[2] Training for Transformation is a set of methods and tools for critical conscientisation assembled and institutionalised by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, two anti- apartheid feminist activists in South Africa (Hope & Timmel, 1984). It is rooted in Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1996). Memory Work is originally a feminist research method developed by Frigga Haugg in 1980s. I adapted it to the local context for a group who have had almost no access to education.

intergroup discussion (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Dialogue in Numfor (photo: Wahyudin Nur).

The women's group remembered the abundant food that used to grow in the garden when they were children, and the feeling of security before food gardening practices were degraded and lost. They remembered growing up and playing almost nude without fear of being sexually abused. Today, they said, young girls are anxious about their sexuality and their safety. The men's group shared childhood memories of the sound of their parents' voices, especially their mothers'. A man shared the memory of his mother's comforting cuddles and imitated the vocalizations she used when putting him to sleep in her arms. Together the group remembered, wrote down, and sang an old song, a mother's comforting lullaby. Sharing in the men's group was led by testimonies about the security and love that a mother naturally provided to her children. The men contrasted this strongly with the eroded love and lack of compassion among the community today. "Our relationships are dominated by jealousy and competition," said one of them. As they spoke, I could not help thinking about what happens when we lack a robust skill to process our emotions, instead directing our bad feelings towards ourselves (Mellin, 2016) and our own kin (McIntosh, 2001).

Listening to these stories also helped me recognise how my own mother's stories and my living memories of my childhood have helped me understand how community plays a role in developing individual self-awareness. In the process, I learned not to judge and feel guilty about my own complex history of being both colonised and part of coloniality. As I processed my own emotions, I realised that I was growing my own capacity for activism. As Sally Timmel (2021) has said, "we start by liberating ourselves."

Self-Reclaiming and Reidentification: Our Discoveries

These experiences taught me that collective identity entails a shared conception of the world, a shared belief system and rules of the game that guide individual behaviour in relation to others; and I have learnt that human development is not only a forward moving process, but also requires rekindling one's sense of belonging to a shared past.

The core of my work as an adult educator has been to raise consciousness about social injustices and enable community organizations to emerge among indigenous Papuans whose traditional institutions have been dismantled by colonization and coloniality. In supporting communities in their process of reflecting on and analysing their reality I have supported the co-creation of a safe learning space for conversations about our lives. This has changed us as collective, helping to clarify our values, purpose, and vision and to reclaim our identity.

Some of the concrete results of the process of dialogue are that homestay owners set up an association in 2013 in which they have worked on a 50-year vision for collective re-identification, redefining their collective purpose and reclaiming what gives life. The group in Numfor eventually found meaning in defining themselves as "heirs to the land" and took the name *Fyarkin,* which means, "to guide and to unite." Fyarkin members actively work with each other to find ways to escape the debt trap by becoming more self-sufficient, for example by recultivating abandoned land and refusing to consume imported and industrialised staples. By working together, the group created new businesses producing coconut oil, virgin coconut oil, casava cake and salted fish. The size of the organization has grown from 15 to almost 30 people in less than a year. As its constituents grow in number Fyarkin is also developing a clearer sense of purpose and of the values that define it: "we sit together and tell what is right from wrong," say its members. They have also positioned themselves in opposition to the dominant and corrupt power structure of their village. In so doing, the group has learnt to be strategic and to pick its battles, actively role-modeling non-violent approaches. In a recent sharing, they said, "we do not want to react violently against the elites as we are fully aware of the consequences. Our families may be harmed so we are being strategic by asking questions and raising awareness."

The process of conscientisation, of reclaiming collective identity, that took place in Raja Ampat and in Numfor allowed us to listen to each other, understand each other, work with each other, and navigate ways to stay resilient.

Conclusion

My own learning journey has taught me that one of the many faces of dehumanisation is the loss of freedom to self-identify as an individual within a

collective. My experience in supporting homestay groups in Raja Ampat and Numfor suggests to me that radical social transformation, as a necessity for social justice, requires each one of us to know our individual self, our beliefs and our worldview. That consciousness generates power from within to act differently. To dismantle structural injustices, one must be given a chance to reflect, ask questions and generate self-motivation to act. There are so many testimonies and discussions linking critical awareness with issues of social justice that say the most powerful force to fight social injustices comes from those who experience it in real life. One of the challenges, though, is to escape the internalisation of injustice so that we can think and act differently.

Having worked with two relatively small groups, I also realise that the challenge ahead lies in how to broaden and mainstream processes of critical conscientisation across Papuan society. This will need to include examining the root causes of shame, anger and anxiety that too many of us still feel; and re-membering (in the sense of recalling and putting back together again) those aspects of our collective conscious and unconscious, including our sense of place and cultural practices, and our spirituality. These make us who we are, but they have been dismembered by our experiences of modernisation. I am also increasingly aware of the need for further, deeper, more systematic exploration and integration of approaches to Indigenous healing and collective psychotherapy.

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