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Usi Lan Ai: the raja who died by fire
The death of Raja Bil Nope in Netherlands Timor, 1910

Introduction

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Dutch administration in the Netherlands Indies adopted a policy of ‘abstention’ or non-interference with the many native domains throughout the archipelago. In Netherlands Timor this meant in effect that the majority of the territory was under complete Timorese control. In the early twentieth century, however, this policy was overturned and the Dutch actively set out to confirm their authority throughout the Netherlands Indies. This change in policy had dire consequences for many of the indigenous rulers in Netherlands Timor and led to the virtual destruction of the once great Sonbai kingdom during the ensuing pacificatie or pacification campaigns. Other rulers, however, found that by allying themselves with the Dutch they could strengthen their positions and rid themselves of rivals, both from within and outside their kingdoms. Such was the case of the keizer of Amanuban, Hau Sufa Leu, also known as Raja Bil Nope, who welcomed the Dutch into his kingdom in 1906. By 1910, however, Bil Nope was totally disenchanted with the Dutch administration and rose in revolt, vowing that he would rather die in battle than continue to suffer the humiliations brought on him by Dutch rule. In October 1910 Bil Nope and a handful of loyal followers barricaded themselves in the raja’s sonaf (palace) and engaged the Dutch forces outside in a gun battle. Bil Nope and all who remained with him were killed when the palace was set on fire and burnt to the ground.

What follows is an overview of the situation in Netherlands Timor before the pacification campaigns, and a discussion of the Dutch change in policy in the early twentieth century. Then, in order to place in context the later revolt of Bil Nope, a brief description is given of the revolt of Sonbai and the Dutch response. This is followed by an account of Bil Nope’s interactions with the Dutch administration that resulted in his fatal revolt. The paper concludes...

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with the conjecture that Dutch authorities later tried to cover up the affair and remove it from outside scrutiny.

**Background to the Dutch pacification of Netherlands Timor**

During the first Dutch expedition to Timor in 1613 the commander Apollonius Scotte made an agreement with the Helon ruler of the Kupang area. This agreement allowed the Dutch to establish a settlement at Kupang Bay and to participate in the local sandalwood trade. However, it was not until 1653 that the Dutch finally established themselves in Kupang, where they built a fortress named Concordia that was to be their stronghold in Netherlands Timor for nearly 300 years. In the early nineteenth century the Dutch also established a settlement at Atapupu on the north coast near the present central border, but outside of these two ‘Government Territories’ the Dutch had no control and rarely entered the interior. A number of punitive expeditions were made against kingdoms such as Sonbai and Amanuban in retaliation for raids made on settlers in the outlying districts of Kupang or for warlike actions against other kingdoms friendly with the Dutch administration. By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a policy of non-interference, aimed at limiting administrative costs, was put into effect throughout the Netherlands Indies, resulting in further restraints on Dutch activity outside of the directly governed territories.

In the early twentieth century the Dutch overturned this policy and began the pacification campaigns in Netherlands Timor to confirm their authority and bring an end to headhunting and warfare between the indigenous states. Andrew McWilliam (1999:129) has characterized the indigenous Timorese domains as being of ‘considerable complexity and variability’. These domains were not static entities and there had been a marked tendency for them to fuse and integrate into larger federations and an equal counter-tendency for them to divide into smaller, independent territories. As McWilliam describes it, the process was dependent on the ‘relative capacity of competing political

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1 Schulte Nordholt 1971:167. A detailed account based on Dutch records of the seventeenth-century sandalwood trade can be found in De Roever 2002.
2 For example, in 1814 forces from Amanuban made an incursion into Amabi, a kingdom considered to be one of the most loyal allies of the Dutch. This was during the British interregnum in Netherlands Timor, but nevertheless, the punitive expedition sent to Amanuban was accompanied by the former Dutch resident, J.A. Hazaart. The expedition was inconclusive, as were a series of campaigns against Amanuban that Hazaart led after the return of Dutch rule (Heijmering 1847:217; Farram 2007:471). There were further Dutch expeditions against Amanuban and Sonbai in 1847, 1849 and 1857 (Ormeling 1956:147).
centres to attract and maintain networks of alliances’. The Dutch intervention in the early twentieth century brought an end to this process by defining the boundaries of the indigenous states and the powers of their rulers. By entering into contracts agreeing to support these rulers the Dutch also ended the likelihood of successful internal revolt.

The Dutch effort to impose *rust en orde* (peace and order) in their territory was not confined to Timor. Military campaigns to impose formal Dutch control were carried out in various parts of the archipelago, including Jambi (1901-1907) and Kerinci (1902-1903) on Sumatra, Seram in Maluku (1904), Banjarmasin in Kalimantan (1904-1906), Bone and elsewhere in Sulawesi (1905-1907), and Bali (1906 and 1908) (Locher-Scholten 1994:95). Other European powers at the time were similarly keen to extend the territory under their control and the years 1870 to 1914 have often been designated as the period of ‘new imperialism’. While the Dutch were consolidating their position in Netherlands Timor, the Portuguese were doing the same in their half of the island and expanding their control in Africa as well. In the same period, the long-standing imperial powers Britain and France were extending their territories and new players appeared on the scene, such as Belgium, Germany and Italy.

Dutch policy on territorial expansion was affected by the conduct of the Aceh War. Pepper-rich Aceh in northern Sumatra had had reason to fear Dutch expansion, but the Dutch in turn had feared that Aceh would pre-empt Dutch action by seeking the intervention of other powers, such as Turkey,

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3 McWilliam (1999:129, 131) describes the ideal Timorese domain as being made up of four sub-districts surrounding a fifth sacral ruling centre. The sub-districts supplied the ruling centre with harvest tribute and in return received ritual services to ensure the prosperity and fertility of the land. In this system the ruling centre relied on the support of the independent sub-district rulers. As Schulte Nordholt (1971:307-10) explains it, the situation was somewhat different in Amanuban, as the Nope clan had to a great extent managed to gain control of the whole domain. Such a situation could not last indefinitely, and when a number of Bil Nope’s subordinates began to revolt against his rule he made the fatal decision to seek assistance from the Dutch.

4 Some useful works on this topic are Owen and Sutcliffe 1972 and Fieldhouse 1982. Fieldhouse 1983 gives a succinct explanation of the issues.

5 The Portuguese had to control a number of revolts in their half of the island in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A major revolt began in 1911, ostensibly led by the ruler of Manufahi, Dom Boaventura, and was only crushed after two years of fighting. After 1913 the position of the Portuguese as the supreme ruling power in East Timor went virtually unchallenged. The violent methods used to establish Portuguese rule did not go unnoticed, and in 1914 a former *resident* of Netherlands Timor, F. Fokkens (1914:644-5), wrote that the Portuguese in Timor had been accused of ‘bestial cruelty’ and ‘atrocities’. With disarming frankness, Fokkens said that similar accusations had been levelled at the Dutch in various parts of the Indies, but concluded that such acts were understandable when turning ‘pretended claims’ into ‘real claims’. For more on the consolidation of colonial rule in Portuguese Timor, see Davidson 1994; Pélissier 1996; Schliccher 1996.
France or America. Such intervention did not occur and in the early 1870s the Dutch attacked Aceh and occupied the capital Kota Radja (Banda Aceh). The Acehnese, however, would not surrender, and resistance continued for decades (Ricklefs 1990:136-7). Military resources destined for other areas were reassigned to Aceh. The monetary and human costs made the Dutch wary of any other imperial venture in case it should turn into ‘a second Aceh’. Such fears began to dissipate in 1894 when a clear victory was achieved on Lombok after a short campaign. This was followed by a successful change in military policy in Aceh which allowed the Dutch to claim that they had finally established their authority there also (Locher-Scholten 1994:95).

In 1898 General Joannes Benedictus van Heutsz, then in charge of affairs in Aceh, joined policy adviser Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje to inaugurate the *Korte Verklaring* (Short Declaration) as the means of formalizing Dutch authority in Aceh. The new-style contract, containing only the minimum of detail necessary to establish Dutch suzerainty, was adopted throughout the Indies. The new contracts allowed increased Dutch involvement in administration, but gave indigenous rulers an administrative function also. This obviated the need for vastly increased personnel to administer new territories (Van Hulstijn 1926:24). In 1904 Van Heutsz, the ‘Hero of Aceh’, was appointed governor-general of the Netherlands Indies. The scene was then set for the imposition of a *Pax Neerlandica* in the Indies. This necessitated greater expansion in the outer islands, including Timor. One of the first native domains in Timor to experience the effects of this Dutch initiative was the influential state of Sonbai.

**The campaign against Sonbai**

Sonbai had been a major power in Netherlands Timor; with several other domains under its sway it was considered an ‘empire’. Following the death of Keizer Sonbai in 1885, however, the ‘empire’ collapsed. Several states strove to assert their independence and no less than 17 pretenders vied for the *keizer*’s crown. The eventual winner of that struggle was Sobe Sonbai III, and although he was not accepted by all other Timorese rulers, he was viewed by the Dutch as a serious threat to their authority (Van Hulstijn 1926:129-30; Lamster 1945:168).

Since the early nineteenth century numbers of mainly Rotenese immigrants had settled around Kupang Bay and alienated much land that had previously

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6 The Sonbai ‘empire’ was called ‘Sonnebait’ in many Dutch reports, whereas the Timorese often referred to it as the kingdom of OEnam.
been Sonbai territory. Sobe Sonbai III had been suspected of being behind troubles in the area in 1903, but there was no doubting his involvement in events in 1905. On the night of 19 August 1905 Sonbai’s forces attacked the settler-villages of Bipolo and Nunkurus in the Government Territory, killing 32 of the inhabitants and kidnapping another 62. Resident J.F.A. de Rooy was determined not only to punish Sobe Sonbai III for this incursion, but to extinguish his authority completely, send him into exile and take over all his hereditary rights.7

The force sent to chastise Sonbai was commanded by Lieutenant Rijnders, accompanied by Controleur R.L.A. Hellwig. A separate column from Java was commanded by Captain A. Franssen Herderschee. They first came into contact with the Sonbai forces on 18 September.8 Fierce fighting followed and many Timorese were killed. Although major opposition was expected at the Sonbai capital, Kauniki, it was found deserted when reached on 3 October. The fleeing Sonbai had, however, left behind a grisly reminder of the cause of the whole affair. A special house was found to contain 14 human heads, still recognizable as belonging to people killed at Bipolo and Nunkurus. On 2 November 1905 Lieutenant Rijnders and Controleur Hellwig returned to Kupang with a number of prisoners. The task of tracking down the remaining principal fugitives was handed over to Captain Franssen Herderschee. The captain was also given provisional civil authority in the ‘turbulent’ districts.9

Captain Franssen Herderschee became a *civiel gezaghebber* (civil administrator). He was one of many military officers used to run the civil administration in Netherlands Timor.10 The captain was ordered to introduce new regulations designed to bring peace and order to the district. These included: abolition of headhunting and slave trading; a prohibition on the possession

7 J.F.A. de Rooy, ‘Aan Zyne Excellentie den Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlandsch-Indie’, 7 September 1905, in *Politieke verslagen*. This letter elicited a revealing reply in which the government secretary noted that it could not be discovered whether Sobe Sonbai III’s claim had any value and thus it was unknown if he had any ‘rights’ to surrender. Because of the government’s non-interference in Timor affairs, he continued, there was no reliable information available about the rajas, their rights or other matters. This lack of knowledge created many difficulties for the Dutch authorities; see Gouvernments-Secretaris Hulshoff Pol, ‘Aan den Resident van Timor en Onderhoorigheden’, 30 October 1905, in *Politieke verslagen*.
10 The use of military officers as civil administrators had a long history in Netherlands Indies, but became institutionalized during the latter phases of the Aceh War. Van Heutsz as governor-general used military officers in civil positions throughout the newly ‘pacified’ territories. In Timor a number of officers became *gezaghebbers*, but some were placed in higher positions, such as Assistant-Resident Captain H. Gramberg and Resident Colonel C.H. van Rietschoten. For more examples, see Van den Doel 1994.
of firearms; registration of the people; assignation of fixed dwelling places; a pass system for Chinese and other foreigners who wished to enter the interior; establishment of markets (pasar) to introduce competitive trading and end the Chinese-run monopoly barter system; establishment of regulated ‘native administrations’; the building of connecting roads; and the assignment of fixed grazing areas for wandering stock, as reprisals for stolen livestock were seen as being at the root of all the wars, headhunting and kidnapping in the region.11 This was no small order, and implementation of these measures caused much resentment and occasioned more ‘revolts’, but the measures were enforced and the pacification of Netherlands Timor could be said to have truly begun. In the meantime Sonbai was still on the run, and although a number of rulers who had not supported his claim were now helping the Dutch, he could not be found.

Throughout November and December 1905 the search continued for Sobe Sonbai III. Various groups of ‘rebels’ were encountered by patrols led by Lieutenant De Vries, sometimes in groups as large as 100 people. Scores of Sonbai supporters were killed and captured. Casualties on the Dutch side were slight, with one ‘native infantryman’ killed and a few riflemen wounded.12 Many people who had abandoned their villages at the start of the ‘war’ began to return. Life was returning to normal and peace seemed assured when on 6 February 1906 Sonbai was persuaded to surrender to the civiel gezaghebber by the fettor (district head) of Besiana, in whose district he was hiding.13 The Sonbai territory was then divided up and given to other kingdoms and Sonbai was sent into exile, eventually dying in Kupang in 1922.14

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13 J.F.A. de Rooy, ‘Politiek Verslag der residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden over de maanden Januari en Februari 1906’, in Politieke verslagen. While the Dutch source makes it clear that Sonbai surrendered voluntarily, the Timorese version is that he was tricked or betrayed. Doko states that Sonbai was invited by the district head of Besiana to negotiate with the gezaghebber at Kauniki. He proceeded there with full ceremony and was shocked on arrival to be encircled and captured. This version has an obvious parallel with the capture of Diponegoro in Java in 1830. In other versions Sonbai’s hiding-place was revealed to the Dutch for material reward; see Doko 1981:28-9; Sejarah 1983:28-9; Fobia 1984:102.
14 Sonbai was sent in exile to the island of Sumba, where he remained for one or two years. He was then allowed to return to Timor and settled in Camplong, where he was kept under surveillance. Finally, as an old man in his eighties, he was permitted to return to his birthplace Kauniki in June 1921. After only a short time, however, reports reached the Dutch that Sonbai was once again preaching revolt and he was immediately taken away to Kupang. He died there in exile in August 1922. See A. Couvreur, ‘Memorie van overgave van de residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden, 1924, Juni’, in Indonesie: memories 1981. See also Resident E.G.Th. Maier, ‘Politiek Gedeelte van het Kort Verslag der residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden over de maand Juni 1913’; Secretaris
Bil Nope meets the Dutch

The destruction of the Sonbai kingdom was not an auspicious sign for the other indigenous domains in Netherlands Timor, but the actions of the Dutch were not condemned by all Timorese. As already stated, Sobe Sonbai III’s claim as keizer was not supported by all local rulers and many were willing to help the Dutch. Amanuban prided itself on never having been subject to Sonbai and had often been at war with Sonbai. Thus, when the son of the keizer of Amanuban came in September 1905 with a large retinue to the area where the Dutch forces were fighting those of Sonbai, it was not to offer assistance to Sonbai, but to pay respect to the representatives of the Dutch government, despite the fact that Amanuban had often been in conflict with the Dutch government in Kupang in the past. In March 1906 the crown prince of Amanuban, Koko Sufa Leu, came again to meet the Dutch at Tefnai and told them that 34 of his father’s subordinate chiefs had rejected his summons. The Dutch told Koko Sufa Leu to return to Amanuban and prepare for the arrival of a Dutch force, as they planned to visit him soon.

The Dutch pacification of Netherlands Timor could not proceed in all districts at once, but once Sonbai had been subdued the road to the interior was wide open. After some ‘mopping-up’ operations in the Sonbai territory were completed, Civiel Gezaghebber Captain Franssen Herderschee set out with a force of infantry and police for Amanuban. They arrived at the border on 12 June 1906 and were met by a team of 50 packhorses provided for their use by Koko Sufa Leu. On 14 June they arrived in the capital, Niki Niki. They were greeted by the keizer of Amanuban, Hau Sufa Leu, or Raja Bil Nope as he was also known, and shown the barracks and dwellings built for the troops and officers to use during their stay in Amanuban.

The old and ailing Bil Nope was keen to get Dutch support to prop up his rule. The Dutch too wished to see Bil Nope’s authority enhanced as it would...
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make their task of running Netherlands Timor through indirect rule all the easier if they had a powerful, sympathetic ruler in Amanuban. The Dutch were willing to punish local leaders who did not obey Bil Nope, but they had their own agenda also and one of their first actions was to arrange a meeting between Bil Nope and his chiefs where they ‘investigated’ the setting-up of a ‘native administration’ for the kingdom. Clearly, the proposed model was provided by the Dutch.20 The Dutch then moved against a number of Chinese who had lived in Amanuban ‘illegally’ (that is, without Dutch permission) for years, including one who ran an ‘important business in gunpowder’. The Chinese were expelled and forced to report to Kupang.21 What Bil Nope thought of this is unknown, but he had his rewards also, as many of his recalcitrant subordinates had been summoned and had already submitted.

The Dutch aid Bil Nope at Babuin

The district head of Babuin, ‘Atoe Soit’ (Atu Sae), had answered a previous summons with a threat to Bil Nope and the Dutch government, so he was not summoned again. Instead, the Dutch column, accompanied by Bil Nope and his followers, marched on Babuin on 22 June 1906.22 The Sae clan in Babuin were closely related to the Nopes, but in the old Timorese tradition they had wished to establish their own authority (Doko 1981:33).

Babuin is situated between blocks of stone at a height of 900 metres. Despite the apparent defensive advantages held by Babuin, the district head was not interested in prolonged battle with the Dutch; as soon as the Dutch forces let off their first salvo the Babuin defenders showed a white flag and Atu Sae announced he would submit. He declared, however, that he would submit to the Dutch government, but not to Bil Nope. This was not accepted and he was forced to submit to both. There was little other resistance, and peace settled on Amanuban as all its inhabitants acknowledged the supremacy of Bil Nope. One of the consequences of this was that it called a halt to the plans of the Nabuasa clan of south Amanuban, which had sided with the rebels. The Nabuasa, like the Sae, had been trying to break free of the Nopes for some con-

20 The ‘native administrations’ established by the Dutch gave the kingdoms the appearance of autonomy. They were responsible for the collection of taxes, the performance of corvée, the settling of disputes and the administration of justice at the local level, amongst other matters. They were heavily reliant on the input of Dutch ‘advisers’.
usiderable time, but it was not to be.\textsuperscript{23} The establishment of the Pax Neerlandica in Netherlands Timor retarded the process of evolution which had until then been continually at work within the Timorese political system.

Twelve months after the Dutch abandoned the policy of non-interference they had wrought major changes in Netherlands Timor. Sonbai was forced to submit and Dutch forces campaigned from west to east throughout the territory. There had been opposition, but the Dutch actions had been largely successful. A permanent Dutch presence was established in new administrative centres, such as Kapan in Central Timor, but the forces available for the pacification campaigns were limited and they travelled from one district to another and then back again to enforce the new regulations and to proceed with the registration and surrender of rifles. Road works were commenced using corvée labour, and plans were made for a cash head tax to replace the traditional annual tribute to the rajas. The Timorese, however, were not

\textsuperscript{23} For more on the Nabuasa clan’s struggle for independence, see McWilliam 1989:41-4. (This study has since been made into a book; see McWilliam 2002.) See also McWilliam 1999.
completely subdued and the enforcement of the new regulations was a matter of much resentment. Dutch reports show that they tried to keep abreast of Timorese feelings so as to pre-empt any trouble, but what occurred in Kolbano in late 1907 caught the Dutch completely off guard.

The massacre at Kolbano

The Dutch should have had no trouble in the Amanuban village Kolbano as Bil Nope had been most willing to accommodate the Europeans. However, Kolbano, like Babuin, was one of the south Amanuban villages which had rejected its keizer and sought to go it alone.24 The revolt in Kolbano was led by Temukung (village head) Boi Boimau, also known as Kapitan Boimau, or Boi Kapitan. He was helped by two warriors (meo), Esa Taneo and Pehe Neolaka.25 Boi Boimau was subordinate to the district head of Pana, but had long since stopped listening to his instructions.26 Five neighbouring villages had similarly decided no longer to listen to the Dutch government, or their keizer, Bil Nope.27

According to Timorese sources Boi Boimau’s main grievance was the new taxes introduced by the Dutch. These were too high to pay and the people of Kolbano fell into debt. After repeated demands the Dutch sent a military force to collect the taxes.28 The need to provide corvée labour for road building and the compulsory surrender of weapons are also stated as major grievances (Sejarah 1983:42-5). Dutch sources that quote Boimau himself make no mention of taxes (which in general were not collected in cash in the interior of Netherlands Timor until 1909), but say the revolt was caused by the order to hand in rifles, a fine imposed for slowness in handing in rifles, an order to build a road, and most of all because of enmity and resentment towards the keizer of Amanuban.29

Sergeant M. Schiphorst, who had been involved in the disarmament elsewhere in Amanuban, commanded a patrol to Kolbano to collect rifles and obtain payment of a fine placed on Boi Boimau for previous recalcitrance in surrendering weapons. The patrol included one other European, Corporal

28 Interview with Yusof Boimau, Niki Niki, 23 June 2000.
F.M. Schwung, Javanese Corporal Semeroe and 16 riflemen. The patrol was accompanied by a Timorese guide-interpreter and at least two convicts, probably porters.30

On 26 October 1907 the patrol stopped at Pana, a few hours’ march from Kolbano, where the district head warned Schiphorst that his patrol was too weak, as Boimau was likely to resist. Schiphorst ignored this advice and continued on to Kolbano, where he arrived in the early afternoon. The patrol then retired to the bivouac built for them by the local people.31 There are a number of versions of what happened next. According to some versions the soldiers were offered a cool drink, but while they drank they had ground-up chilli blown into their eyes, while Kolbano’s warriors slashed their throats.32 In official reports Schiphorst was posthumously accused of ‘extraordinary imprudence’,33 of being ‘not suitable for the task [...] in every respect’ 34 and the whole patrol was accused of being drunk on sopi (locally distilled liquor) given to them by the Kolbano people.35 The patrol’s Timorese guide reported that the soldiers were dozing in their bivouac when he noticed over 600 armed men lurking in the scrub. He warned Schiphorst, who replied offhandedly: ‘Oh, those are the rifles they have come to hand in.’ A Timorese man then approached Schiphorst with a coin, offered by Boimau as partial payment of the fine. Schiphorst refused the coin and asked to speak with the temukung himself. The man then produced a knife and ran the blade deep into the chest of the unsuspecting sergeant. Corporal Schwung got the same treatment and the two Europeans fell down dead. That was the signal for the rest of the Kolbano ‘rebels’ to attack the soldiers in the bivouac using guns, knives and klewang (machetes). Most of the still-groggy Javanese soldiers were killed immediately, but three managed to grab their rifles and started firing in all directions, killing a number of their attackers. The soldiers, two of whom were heavily wounded, made off into the scrub to join the two wounded con-

34 J.L. Engel, ‘Politiek verslag der residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden over het tydvak September tot en met October 1907’, in Politieke verslagen.
35 ‘Militaire memorie van Timor, omvattende de afdeeling Timor en eilanden, 1930, maart’, in Indonesie: memories 1981. It was claimed also that the drink must have contained some drug as the soldiers went to sleep straight after taking the ‘refreshments’; see J.F.A. de Rooy, Telegram, ‘Aan Zyne Excellentie den Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlandsch-Indie’, 4 November 1907, in Politieke verslagen.
Dutch monument, Kolbano (photograph Steven Farram)
Plaque on Dutch monument, Kolbano (photograph Steven Farram)
victims and the guide, whose only injury was a bullet-hole through his sarong. The group made their way to Pana, where they were given assistance, and then on to Niki Niki. The two Europeans and 14 of the Javanese soldiers of the patrol died in the attack. The dead were decapitated. Apart from the heads, 15 klewang, 15 rifles and about 300 cartridges made up the victors’ booty. Up to 1,200 men were said to have been involved in the Kolbano resistance movement, and women were said to have taken part also, dressed in men’s clothing and fitted out with belts and rifles. Great celebrations were said to have been held in Kolbano after the battle with screaming, beating of gongs and shooting of rifles. The celebrations did not last long.

The news was soon heard in Kupang; Resident de Rooy felt that ‘a powerful and exemplary punishment’ was necessary, so he contacted the army requesting reinforcements be sent to Central Timor. A force of over 80 soldiers left Kapan for Kolbano on 9 November. On 11 November a group led by Lieutenant van Temmen fared badly after clashing with some of the Kolbano resistance. The ‘native fusilier’ Lono was killed and others badly wounded. Van Temmen himself was hit in the thigh and the same bullet then wounded the thigh of his attendant. On the Timorese side one warrior and his son were wounded, while another warrior, who had nothing to do with the battle, was killed by a stray bullet while preparing a meal some distance away. Otherwise, the people of Kolbano avoided the Dutch force, and the village itself was found deserted. A head belonging to one of Schiphorst’s patrol was found on a stake on the beach nearby.

39 J.F.A. de Rooy, Telegram, ‘Aan Zyne Excellentie den Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlandsch-Indie’, 4 November 1907, in Politieke verslagen. Women were often indicated as being together with their men as they fought the Dutch forces, but it is usually unclear if they were actively involved. There was at least one case, however, during the hunt for Sonbai in 1905 where a Timorese woman was killed with a rifle in her hands, ‘taken for a man’; see Kort overzicht 1906:86.
41 J.L. Engel, Telegram to ‘G.G. Buitenzorg’, 13 November 1907, in Politieke verslagen.
43 J.L. Engel, Telegram to ‘G.G. Buitenzorg’, 13 November 1907, in Politieke verslagen.
The people of Kolbano were thought to be hiding in the mountains, but it was considered that Boimau was probably still close by. On 16 November Lieutenant De Borst arrived in Kolbano aboard the government ship Pelikaan with two brigades of police and replacements for the soldiers of the Schiphorst patrol. Convicts were sent from Kupang and Kapan to help, and there were plans for more to be sent from Java. De Borst brought results and after making contact with the people of Kolbano 12 of the stolen rifles, 43 cartridges, 4 klewang, 9 packhorses and 8 stolen heads were surrendered. On 25 November a hiding place of the fugitives was attacked and six were killed. On 4 December Lieutenant Kunst arrived in Kolbano on the Pelikaan with two more brigades of constables and 80 convicts. By then, most of those implicated in the revolt had already been captured, including Boi Boimau, who was caught in a surprise night attack led by Sergeant Droog. In the same action the last three stolen rifles were recovered along with four klewang and six cartridges. At Oibubur Schiphorst’s head was discovered and taken back to Kolbano, where it was buried in a common grave along with the remains of his men. Following these events the Dutch felt they had the upper hand. With the stolen weapons returned and the fugitives captive, they could proceed with the work that Schiphorst had originally been sent to do: collect rifles and register the people. Nevertheless, it was considered prudent to maintain continuous patrols in the district to ensure the peace.

According to Timorese sources the Dutch used a terror campaign to achieve their aims in Kolbano; the village was attacked from both land and sea, scores of houses were torched, and livestock was confiscated. After being first taken to Kupang, Boi Boimau and his warriors were sent into exile and never returned. Esa Taneo, ‘who could not be killed with bullets’, was said to have been beaten to death and buried on Flores (Sejarah 1983:51). Such a fate for one involved in the Kolbano revolt is not beyond the realm of possibility as the Dutch were outraged by the whole affair. To commemorate their losses they erected a large monument at Kolbano, which can still be seen.

There were many other disturbances led by warriors and other subordinate figures who refused to obey the orders of their rajas or the government. In such instances the Dutch were prone to support the leader, whom they saw

46 J.L. Engel, Telegram to ‘G.G. Buitenzorg’, 4 December 1907, in Politieke verslagen.
47 J.L. Engel, Telegram to ‘G.G. Buitenzorg’, 7 December 1907, in Politieke verslagen.
49 J.L. Engel, Telegram to ‘G.G. Buitenzorg’, 7 December 1907, in Politieke verslagen.
50 Interview with Yusof Boimau, Niki Niki, 23 June 2000.
51 Personal visit to Kolbano, 20 June 2000.
as the legitimate ruler, in exchange for cooperation and acknowledgement of their own superior position. Such had been the case when the Dutch had acted in Babuin in 1906 to prop up the rule of Bil Nope. By 1910, however, Bil Nope had grievous doubts that he had made a good bargain.

The battle of Niki Niki

Bil Nope is described in Dutch reports as a ruler ‘of the old stamp’. He was a stern and even cruel ruler whose authority was based on fear as much as respect. One of his more notable forms of punishment was to have offenders turned into human sate by forcing sharp sticks up their rectums until they came out through their heads. Their bodies were then hung in trees as a warning to others. The keizer's very name was a reflection of the fear he inspired in his subjects, Bil being short for ta'-bil, meaning ‘closed eyes’, as no one was allowed to look at his face, even when talking to him (Doko 1981:32).

Bil Nope was born in 1844 and became keizer of Amanuban in 1870. He was a large, strong man. This, combined with his forceful personality, was enough for him to maintain a tight grip on the reins in Amanuban (Doko 1981:32). By 1906, however, he was a shadow of his former self. Then in his sixties, he had led a somewhat dissolute life. He suffered from syphilis and had recently lost the use of his legs. To get around he had to be carried or pushed in a trolley. Under these circumstances many of his subordinate heads made bids for independence. Bil Nope, however, was proud of his authority and sent his son to the Dutch to seek assistance. As recounted above, the Dutch crushed two major revolts in his realm: Babuin in 1906 and Kolbano in 1907. Bil Nope was thankful and offered the Dutch what assistance he could, and often sent the troops encamped in his realm presents of fruit and meat. When the Dutch took action against neighbouring Amanatun, Bil Nope offered them help, sent them refreshments and, despite his bad health, came a number of times to visit the troops as well.

The Dutch established a permanent presence in Amanuban and when Bil Nope signed the Korte Verklaring on 1 July 1908 he acknowledged Dutch

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52 For example, see H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
53 Interview with Markus Banamtuan, SoE, 26 June 2000. It is certain that practices such as this would not have been tolerated by the Dutch authorities and must have ceased by the time they established their presence in Amanuban.
54 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
suzerainty over his kingdom. On the basis of this treaty the Dutch felt secure in Amanuban. It seems that Bil Nope sought to strengthen the bond further when he had one of his nieces married off to a sergeant of the Dutch forces and built them a house in Niki Niki. H.G. Schulte Nordholt (1971:457) argues convincingly that Bil Nope would have seen this marriage in terms of Timorese adat (custom) where he, as the bride-giver, was in a superior position vis-à-vis the ‘Company’. It is likely that neither the sergeant nor his superiors knew of this implication. This differing interpretation of the parties’ positions seems to have caused no immediate problems, and the relationship between the Dutch and Bil Nope was reported as very amicable. This changed towards the end of 1909 when Civiel Gezaghebber Lieutenant Hoff arrived to take over the administration of Amanuban.

Timorese sources state that Bil Nope soon became dissatisfied with Dutch demands for the surrender of rifles, the need to perform corvée labour, and the requirement to pay taxes. Long-term plans were then made for a revolt (Doko 1981:32; Sejarah 1983:54-5). Lieutenant Hoff reported that the revolt in Niki Niki in October 1910 had been led by the crown prince, Koko Sufa Leo, who was tired of the ‘Company’ giving orders; the old keizer had been left with little choice but to participate. A later Dutch investigation, however, made it clear that the revolt was led by Bil Nope and his motivation was to put a stop to the actions of Lieutenant Hoff.

Hoff spoke the local language, Dawan, and must have understood enough of local adat to know that his actions would cause great offence. One of these actions was to marry a daughter of Temukung Niti Bani of Pene. It was from this quarter that the rulers of Amanuban always obtained their brides. Hoff’s marriage meant not only that the keizer was denied a bride, but implied that Niti Bani thought there was more to be gained from an alliance with Hoff than with the keizer. Bil Nope was furious, but even more so as Hoff proceeded to discriminate against the keizer and gave preferential treatment to his father-in-law. Hoff treated Bil Nope with contempt, gave him only short hearings, turned his back on his requests, and spat on the ground in his presence – a great insult.

Hoff also interfered in Bil Nope’s court life. About 100 people who lived

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56 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
57 Although the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company) had ceased to exist by the end of the eighteenth century, many Timorese continued to refer to the Dutch government as the ‘Company’.
58 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
59 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
60 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
in the palace were returned to their villages. The mafefa, the keizer's spokesman and his most important minister, was refused access to the palace (sonaf), where he had been a daily guest. A number of young women who lived in the palace, including some destined to marry the keizer, were removed. One young woman from the same family as Hoff's wife fled the palace and sought shelter at Hoff's house. Not only did Hoff take her in, but he refused Bil Nope's request that she be returned. Instead, she was married to a Chinese man named Oeij Tjoe Oean. This event occurred four or five months before the final revolt. According to another report (Krayer van Aalst 1924:61), the young woman who married Oeij Tjoe Oean was named Bi Nona Besa and was Bil Nope's favourite wife. Moreover, she had not fled the palace, but was forcibly removed by Lieutenant Hoff, which makes his actions even more reprehensible. This event left Bil Nope feeling humiliated, but this feeling soon gave way to rage.

All this seems to have happened without the knowledge of Hoff's superiors. There was no one available to countermand Hoff's actions and the local people were probably too cowed to report him to the government in Kupang. That same government was negligent in allowing this state of affairs to develop, but, as pointed out by Schulte Nordholt (1971:457-9), they were still largely ignorant of the intricacies of the Timorese social and political systems. At the same time, Bil Nope and his supporters were also in a cultural bind. Hoff had manipulated the Timorese system for his own ends, but his actions must often have been inexplicable to Bil Nope, as well as being humiliating (Schulte Nordholt 1971:459). With little understanding of how the European system operated, Bil Nope opted for a Timorese solution: war.

Initially, Bil Nope may have felt a revolt against Hoff would succeed. Help was sought from the Portuguese enclave state Noemuti, but Raja da Costa would not participate; his kingdom was virtually independent of the Portuguese and he did not wish to risk the wrath of the Dutch. Bil Nope seems then to have come to the conclusion that there could be no general revolt, and that to oppose the Dutch otherwise would be suicidal. He proceeded anyway, vowing that he preferred death to the humiliation meted out to him by Lieutenant Hoff.

The revolt staged by Bil Nope was unique on two grounds. His decision to die in battle rather than surrender to the Dutch was an unusual action for a Timorese raja; even the great Sonbai had eventually submitted to superior forces. Also, Bil Nope fortified his palace, which was not so unusual, but he added a unique underground chamber which he planned to use in his last

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61 H. Gramberg, 'Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang', 1 October 1913, in Memories. The marriage of the young woman to Oeij Tjoe Oean is mentioned also in Doko (1981:35).
62 H. Gramberg, 'Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang', 1 October 1913, in Memories.
stand. In the period leading up to the fatal revolt Bil Nope distanced himself from Lieutenant Hoff. All meetings with the Dutch representative were attended by crown prince Koko Sufa Leu instead, who reported directly to his father (Doko 1981:34-5). There is no mention in the monthly resident’s reports of irregularities in Niki Niki at the time, although Hoff reported immediately after the revolt that there had been local dissatisfaction with demands for compulsory labour for road-building and farming projects. A much later Dutch report claimed that there had been widespread refusal to pay taxes and perform corvée (Reijntjes 1948). Such matters were reported as a matter of course, so it is unusual that nothing was said at the time.

What actually happened at Niki Niki during Bil Nope’s last days is difficult to say. In his report for October 1910 the resident noted that the cause of the resistance was unknown, but that it had lasted several days before Bil Nope was killed when his palace was stormed by Dutch troops. According to a later Dutch report the resistance was in the open at least one week before Bil Nope was killed, as on 3 October the wives of three soldiers from the Dutch force were murdered in their beds (Reijntjes 1948; see also Krayer van Aalst 1924:61). Later a large number of armed horsemen approached Hoff’s house, but were driven away. Bil Nope then hid in his palace and the Dutch forces were shot at from within (Reijntjes 1948). According to Timorese sources there was indeed an attempt made to kill Hoff by a mounted warrior named Sufa Selan, but he was shot down. Attacks were then made on the army barracks, and the telephone lines to the posts at Kapan and Noeltoko were cut. Bil Nope, his family, servants and a number of warriors took refuge inside the palace, while other warriors took up strategic positions in its environs.

Despite the telephone lines being cut, the Dutch managed to have extra forces sent from Kapan by sending a messenger there with news of the recent events. The siege of the palace began. As the siege progressed, Bil Nope’s forces were diminished rapidly. Finally, with only a handful of warriors left in the palace, Bil Nope decided the moment had come to honour his oath to die. He ordered his son Koko Sufa Leu and the remaining warriors to flee, but to set fire to the palace before their retreat. Bil Nope, his wives and loyal servants (ex-slaves) then climbed down into the underground chamber.

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63 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
64 E.F.J. Loriaux, ‘Politiek-Gedeelte van het Kort-Verslag der residentie Timor en Onderhoo-
righeden over de maand October 1910’, in Politieke verslagen.
65 Doko 1981:36-7; Sejarah 1983:58-60. According to Gramberg there had been no attack on the army barracks, but there had been an attack on the complex where Hoff lived. This, he said, was more proof that the revolt was aimed against Hoff and not the ‘Company’; see H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
this way the old ruler of Amanuban ended his life with honour. He is now remembered as Usi Lan Ai: the raja who died by fire.67

The palace burnt for days and no bodies were ever found, only some badly burnt bones.68 A Dutch report put the death toll at 14, while a monument to Bil Nope in the royal graveyard at Niki Niki indicates that 22 people perished in the blaze.69 Dutch sources are silent on their own casualties, but Timorese sources mention two or three soldiers of the Dutch force being killed during the siege of the palace (Doko 1981:37; Sejarah 1983:59-61). Lieutenant Hoff reported Koko Sufa Leu among those killed on the Timorese side and offered as proof a pair of silver leg rings which Koko Sufa Leu was known to have worn and which were found by Hoff under the still smouldering rubble. Captain H. Gramberg investigated the incident in 1913 and pointed out that if the fire was of such intensity that it left extant only a few badly damaged bones, how was it possible that the silver rings had suffered no damage at all? He also noted the testimony of a Niki Niki woman who saw Koko Sufa Leu change into women’s clothing and flee from the scene. Gramberg included in his report the statements of a number of other Timorese who claimed to have met or seen Koko Sufa Leu after his supposed death.70

Peace returned to Amanuban almost immediately with the death of the old keizer. Noni Nope, a younger brother of Bil Nope, was installed as raja and the Dutch were satisfied that they would have no further trouble. However, there were rumours for years that Koko Sufa Leu was still living in the vicinity. In 1912 there were a number of arson attacks in Niki Niki. The targets included the school that had recently been established in Koko Sufa Leu’s former dwelling. There was also an attempt to burn the house of Oeij Tjoe Oean, the Chinese who had married the escapee (or abductee) from the palace.71 In March 1914 the Dutch received reports that Koko Sufa Leu was living in Noemuti and had recently had discussions with Raja da Costa of Oecusse

68 For those familiar with the relatively simple nature of Timorese architecture, it may seem unlikely that the palace was of sufficient size to burn for days. According to one report, however, over 100 people had resided there. See H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories. Although not stated in the sources, it is likely that the palace was actually a complex of connected buildings.
70 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
71 De Civiel en Militaire Resident Van Rietschoten, ‘Politiek Gedeelte van het Kort Verslag over de maand October 1912 van der residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden’; and ‘Politieke gedeelde van het Kort Verslag over de maand November 1912 van het Gewest Timor en Onderhoorigheden’, both in Politieke verslagen. See also H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
about a possible revolt in Dutch territory.72 The revolt did not occur and Koko Sufa Leo was neither heard of nor seen again.

Was there a cover-up?

The fate of Koko Sufa Leu is one of the great mysteries of Netherlands Timor. If he did survive the 1910 Niki Niki fire, he then effectively disappeared. There is, however, something mysterious about the whole episode. Lieutenant Hoff’s reports were incomplete and inconsistent. This is understandable as he was deeply involved in the case personally and he no doubt sought to protect his own interests. He would appear to have been successful in this, as he was promoted to captain when he was transferred out of Amanuban following the abortive revolt. There is a sense though that Hoff was not so much rewarded as ‘kicked upstairs’. In the resident’s monthly reports the revolt was covered only briefly. In his October 1910 report Resident E.F.J. Loriaux refers to a secret letter in which he had outlined his ideas about the matter.73 This secret letter, and other information relating to the case, is not included with the collection of monthly reports, although secret letters relating to other matters are. The feeling that there had been a cover-up is strengthened by a 1930 military report on Netherlands Timor. In that report it is stated briefly that Bil Nope had revolted against the government and that all the occupants of his fortified house were slain. The report writer concludes with: ‘Further particulars about this event cannot be found in the archives’.74

There are three reports, however, which throw some light on what happened in Niki Niki in 1910. The first is Gramberg’s 1913 report, cited above. Gramberg is scathing in his criticism of Hoff and implicitly blames him for causing the revolt.75 The second is the report by the Protestant missionary H. Krayer van Aalst (1924), based on information given to him by the Controleur of South Central Timor who was stationed in Niki Niki in 1921. The most important information contained in that report is probably the assertion that the woman whom Gramberg refers to as an escapee from the palace was actually Bil Nope’s favourite wife, and that she had been forcibly removed by Hoff, thus triggering the raja’s fatal revolt. The third document is the report


75 H. Gramberg, ‘Koko Soefa Leo, radja moedah van Amanoebang’, 1 October 1913, in Memories.
on South Central Timor written by W.H.G. Reijntjes in 1948. Although written decades later, the information in the report relating to events in Niki Niki in 1910 is quite detailed. This information may have come from the testimony of local witnesses or the report may have been based on an older document. The report suggests that the Dutch were more responsible for the death of the old *keizer* than is otherwise admitted. Bil Nope is considered a hero in Timor today; his determination to resist the Dutch and his willingness to die rather than submit are presented in glowing terms in Indonesian histories. His death is more glorious because it was of his own making, as it was he who had ordered that his palace be set ablaze. Reijntjes appears to contradict this. In his report he states that ‘the sonaf was encircled and set on fire’. He goes on to say that the raja then hid in a cave or grotto behind the palace and refused to heed repeated orders for him to appear. Finally, states Reijntjes, Bil Nope and his companions were killed after ‘a mass of burning material was thrown into the cave’ (Reijntjes 1948). Did the Dutch forces deliberately kill Bil Nope? Reijntjes seems to be saying so.

It seems that the major Dutch response to Hoff’s actions in Niki Niki was to remove it from outside scrutiny. By 1910 the major work of achieving a Pax Neerlandica in the Netherlands Indies had already been completed. That some rulers would resent the Dutch attempt to enforce their suzerainty and would revolt against them was to be expected, but it was not accepted that this should result in major casualties. The Dutch became particularly sensitive to this issue after the bloody suicide-attacks (*puputan*) in Bali which had greeted the Dutch attempt to introduce their rule to that island. In 1906 the Dutch had attacked Badung in south Bali in response to the alleged mistreatment of a ship flying the Dutch flag. The rajas of Badung denied that there had been any wrongdoing, and in answer to what they saw as determined efforts to destroy their rule the rajas had staged suicide-attacks, or *puputan*. Dressed in white, the rajas and their families marched from their palaces to face the Dutch guns. Those who survived the first salvoes stopped to finish off the wounded and then continued to march into the blazing guns until nearly all had been massacred. In 1908 in Klungkung the scene was repeated, and with the death of this last defiant raja the Dutch could claim to be the supreme ruling power in Bali. The scenes of death and destruction in Bali were widely reported and shocked many Europeans, including numerous Dutch commentators. The full extent of the tragedy was realized as it became clear that the rajas of Badung had indeed probably been wrongly accused.76 There are parallels between the cases of Bil Nope and those of the Bali rajas, and it is conceivable that the Dutch tried to minimize the impact of Bil Nope’s death and prevent further adverse comment.

76 For more on Dutch actions in Bali, see Farram 1998.
Conclusion

The Dutch administration brought major changes to Netherlands Timor when it abandoned its policy of non-interference in the early twentieth century and sought instead to bring the entire territory firmly under its control. There were many casualties in the ensuing pacification, but some Timorese rulers saw it as an opportunity to bolster their own positions and rid themselves of rivals. Such was the case with Raja Bil Nope of Amanuban, who invited the Dutch into his kingdom in 1906. Bil Nope appears to have been quite satisfied initially with the support he received from the Dutch, as it was with their assistance that two major revolts were extinguished in Amanuban and numerous rebellious chiefs were forced to submit to his rule. In 1909, however, a new Dutch administrator, Lieutenant Hoff, arrived in Amanuban and Bil Nope grew increasingly dissatisfied with his actions. Ultimately, Bil Nope chose to revolt against the Dutch administration, even though he knew he had little chance of success. According to Timorese tradition, Bil Nope and his retinue died when he ordered his palace burnt to the ground at the end of his revolt. Today, Bil Nope is considered a hero in Timor for his stand against the Dutch and his heroic death. Some Dutch records, however, suggest that Bil Nope’s death was due directly to Dutch actions and that there was later a concerted effort to cover up the whole affair. Future research will hopefully reveal more conclusive evidence from the missing Dutch reports and correspondence on the matter.

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