

Problematizing ‘Ethnicity’ in Informal Preferencing in Civil Service: Cases from Kupang, Eastern Indonesia

Sylvia Tidey, University of Amsterdam

Abstract *In an increasingly interconnected, globalized, world a paradoxical preoccupation with ‘belonging’ draws scholarly attention. This concern with belonging has most dramatically come to the fore in post-Suharto Indonesia in the form of various communal conflicts. Less violent in character, the importance of ‘belonging’ is also voiced in the state-dependent Eastern Indonesian town of Kupang as suspicions regarding informal favoring in local civil service. Informal preferencing in civil service is assumed to be based on ethnic favoring. Reflecting a popular social discourse for marking differences rather than a social reality, however, a focus on ethnicity is more obscuring than helpful in analyzing how informal favoring takes place. This article therefore aims to address the usefulness of ethnicity as an analytical concept. Drawing on several ethnographic examples this article argues that social capital -if necessary complemented with other forms of capital- instead of ‘ethnicity’ facilitates informal preferencing in Kupang’s service.*

Keywords: *civil service, informal favoring, ethnicity*

Introduction

During my fieldwork in city-level government offices in the Eastern Indonesian town of Kupang I often noted suspicions concerning informal favoring in civil servant recruitment. That informal selection procedures exist alongside formal ones was never questioned, but what facilitated one in getting ahead in this informal competition was subject to debate. Oftentimes it was supposed that somehow ‘ethnicity’ had something to do with it, meaning that jobs were given out informally based on ethnic favoring. It is not surprising that ‘ethnicity’(*suku*) has become the social marker of difference suspected to be at the base of informal favoring in Kupang. Although located on the island of Timor, Kupang’s almost 300.000 residents originate from

all islands of the East Nusa Tenggara Province and beyond. According to estimates by Dagang (2004), the original Timorese inhabitants only form a slight majority. Second are those that trace their origins to the nearby island of Rote, followed –at a slight distance– by those that trace their roots to the island of Savu. Other immigrant groups from East Nusa Tenggara –such as those from Flores, Alor and Sumba– are present in far fewer numbers, as are migrants from outside the province. In short, being an immigration town historically ‘ethnicity’, as implying ties to an island or region of origin, is an obvious marker of difference in social discourse.¹

Kupang’s ethnic and religious heterogeneity has not always made for a peaceful melting pot, as the ‘Kupang incident’ that took place on the 30th of November 1999 exemplifies (Human Rights Watch 1999; Tule 2000: 95). Despite contestation from researchers that happened to be in the area at the time of the incident, in Kupang it has popularly been explained as proof of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. The Kupang incident and local understandings of what happened only fuel suspicions of inter-ethnic competition in informal favoring in local civil service. When looking at Indonesia as whole, the Kupang incident was far from an isolated occurrence. In fact, Indonesia’s transitional period from New Order rule to post-Suharto era has been marked by an upsurge in conflicts that appeared to revolve around ‘communal’ identities, such as the ones that took place in Ambon, West-Kalimantan, North-Maluku and Central Kalimantan, roughly between 1997 and 2002.

In an interesting analysis of these instances of communal violence, Gerry van Klinken counters the popular conception of religious or ethnic frictions underlying these conflicts in two ways (Van Klinken 2005; 2007). Firstly he shows that that all these occurrences of violence in some way involved an opening up of opportunities connected to the state on a very local scale facilitated by recent processes

¹ For a more elaborate historical overview of migration to Kupang see Boxer (1947) or Fox (1977).

of decentralization and democratization (Van Klinken 2005: 82-99). Religion or ethnicity in short formed useful tools for local middle classes to compete for profitable local political and administrative positions that became available in the post-Suharto era. Furthermore, the towns where these conflicts took place were middle-sized outer island towns, characterized by relative high levels of deagrarianization and state-dependency. The most unstable places of 1999 had deagrarianized most rapidly, causing an influx of state-dependent migrants into towns, that –due to lack of industrialization- were dependent on state-related sources of income, which proved to lead to high susceptibility to communal conflicts (Van Klinken 2007: 38-44). By discerning structural factors that set the stage for the eruption of these occurrences of violence Van Klinken convincingly deconstructs the naturalness or self-evidence of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘religion’ in these conflicts.

Tania Li (2000) similarly shows how communal identity –in her case ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’- have risen to prominence in post-Suharto Indonesia, albeit in less violent circumstances. Li addresses the articulation of collective indigenous identity in post-Suharto Indonesia by comparing two in many respects comparable locations in Central Sulawesi in an attempt to answer why one of her communities ‘see themselves in the “indigenous peoples” slot’ (Li 2000: 151) whereas the other does. A certain historical trajectory, state programs, NGO activity and moments of opportunity all form a conjuncture at which a positioning and articulation of self-identification as tribal becomes possible. Tribal or indigenous identity is therefore not self-evident, but rather a contingent yet ambiguous outcome of various seemingly unconnected global and local flows that collide and suddenly make ‘belonging’ prominent. Both Van Klinken and Li thus show a post-Suharto preoccupation with belonging, that is nevertheless all but ‘natural’ or self-evident. This preoccupation with ‘belonging’ however is not just limited to post-Suharto Indonesia in a conjuncture of neo-liberal flows of decentralization, democratization, an opening up of opportunities connected to local state, NGO influences, media influences. This understanding of ‘local’ forms of belonging as a global

conjuncture has proven to be useful in other regions as well. Peter Geschiere (2009) for instance uses it to explain the appeal of the notion of 'autochtony' -to be 'born of the soil'- in both Cameroon and the Netherlands. Decentralization, democratization and the tenacity of the nation state converge in Western Africa in a way that makes the question of who 'really belongs' prominent, whereas historical construction and political manipulation facilitate the autochtony discourse in the Netherlands.

One paradoxical occurrence in a globalizing world of increased interconnectedness thus seems to be an increased obsession with 'belonging'. That globalization is far from being a homogenizing force from the 'West' to the 'rest' and that there are all sorts of intricate dialectics between the global and the local is a gratifying pool of research and thought for anthropologists (Robertson 1995; Cooper 2005; Xavier Inda & Rosaldo 2008). The examples described above show how belonging or identity as paradoxical outcomes of globalization have been deconstructed and contextualized by scholars. While scholars impressively discern the conjunctural nature of various forms of belonging (ethnicity, tribal, indigenous, religious), this does not mean that such forms of belonging feel any less 'real' to those to whom autochtony or ethnicity has become a crucial part of thinking about differences.

This article therefore aims to move beyond a deconstruction of ethnicity as a form of belonging and instead focuses on ethnicity as a concept and its use as a category of analysis. The main question I wish to address in this paper is whether informal favoring in Kupang's civil service is based on ethnic preferencing. This requires considering what 'ethnicity' means in Kupang, why it is such a popular social and political discourse for difference there, and in which (political) situations it plays a role. After critically considering ethnicity as an analytical concept, this paper discusses the effects of Kupang's heterogeneity on everyday ethnic joking and stereotyping. Consequently the article moves from the realms of joking into the more serious ones of local lay and scholarly presumptions of the role of ethnic preferencing in informal favoring in civil service.

Contrary to these local lay and scholarly claims I argue that social capital, if necessary complemented with other forms of capital, instead of 'ethnicity' facilitates informal preferencing in Kupang's lower-level civil service. This finding will be contrasted with a discussion of the 2008 East Nusa Tenggara gubernatorial elections, in which ethnic solidarity did seem decisive in voters' behavior. Again I claim that a focus on ethnicity is more obscuring than analytically helpful. Ethnicity is thus not a social reality, but a social-political discourse, a way of thinking and talking about differences.

Ethnicity as a Concept

The examples described previously show how in various places across the globe issues of identity and belonging have become important. One danger in analyzing such occurrences is resorting to 'identity' (ethnic or else) as natural or self-evident, something not uncommon in everyday talk or popular media. Van Klinken, Li and Geschiere among others show one approach to counter this tendency by focusing on the conjunctural nature, the convergence of various 'flows' –local and global, of belonging. The question remains however what, after all caveats and contextualization, is left of these forms of identity that often constitute such powerful popular local discourses of difference, and consequently, how to analyze such identities.

In my case of Kupang it is somewhat ironic that while 'ethnicity' has gained increased explanatory power in local lay and scholarly accounts, a growing unease has surrounded the concept in anthropology. As Gerd Baumann (1995) aptly notes, as long ago as 1912 Weber already proposed to dismiss ethnicity as a topic of analysis finding it, 'unsuitable for a really rigorous analysis' (Weber 1978: 395). However, dismissing 'ethnicity' as an analytical topic has become difficult since it has left the realms of social science and has been, 'styled into a "fact of life" ... that appeals to supposedly "natural" distinctions, such as ethnos or descent, to explain "cultural" differences' (Baumann 1995:

3). In other words, 'ethnicity' has been subjected to processes of reification, giving a guise of naturalness to social differences. A response to this popular reification in the 1990s was to de-essentialize ethnicity (see for instance Barth 1994; Sahlins 1994; Turner 1993). However, in order not to get caught up in a spiral of 'mutual reifications' in which both social scientists and their informants use ethnicity as a marker for certain collectives in relation to some Other Baumann proposes to de-essentialize ethnicity against the well-known anthropological agendas of social cohesion, collective commitments, and the comparative project (Baumann 1995: 3-4). Important to an approach to ethnicity as an analytical topic is a processual view on ethnic cohesion, recognition of the cross-cutting nature of social identities and the role of renegotiation in ethnic categorizations (Ibid.: 5).

Despite being greatly helpful in countering a conception of ethnicity as reifying social differences, the question remains if there is anything left of 'ethnicity' to carry out analytical work. This is a question Brubaker and Cooper (2000) pose as well in relation to the broader concept of identity. Similar to Baumann they caution against what they call too 'strong' or essentializing uses of the concept. However, they are also critical of too 'weak' constructivist approaches to the concepts that Baumann seems to lean towards when he emphasizes the processual and cross-cutting aspects of ethnicity. Although the concept reviewed in this article is ethnicity and not identity, insights from Brubaker and Cooper might nevertheless be useful in critically looking at ethnicity as an analytical category. Constructivists' attempts at ridding the concept of the notion that identity is something all people or groups have even when unaware of it –despite still important-, has made it into a fragmented, multivalent, contingent, constructed and so forth notion. This makes it unsure why that which is constructed is still 'identity' and furthermore renders the concept too weak for useful theoretical work (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 10). A second problem is the use of identity as both a category of practice, meaning categories of everyday social experience, and categories of analysis as used by social analysts. Even though everyday identity talk and even

identity politics are 'real' phenomena, this does not necessarily require its use as a category of analysis. In line with Baumann's cautions, Brubaker and Cooper call for analysts to account for this process of reification instead of reproducing this reification themselves by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis (Ibid.: 4-5). Due to the ambivalence of the concept of identity they propose three alternative terms that can do the work identity is supposed to do without its confusing and contradictory connotations (Ibid.: 14). First of all *identification and categorization* are processual, active terms that can focus on the process of identifying and on possible identifiers without assuming this will result in some 'identity'. Secondly, *selfunderstanding and social location* can be used to focus on particularistic understandings of self and social interests, as a situated subjectivity. Thirdly, *commonality, connectedness, and groupness* can cover the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive and bounded group, and the felt solidarity with that group and felt difference with certain outsiders (Ibid.: 14-21).

In my opinion it would be useful to translate these insights on identity to the way ethnicity is being used in Kupang for analytical purposes. Identification and categorization (ethnification?) are useful when looking at ethnic joking and stereotyping to see who is doing the ethnification, how ethnicities are shaped, without assuming this will result in or is based on actual ethnicity. A focus on self-understanding and social location might not be useful to do 'ethnic work' in Kupang but could give insights into other important identity-like terms that influence preferencing in some way, such as gender or class. Commonality, connectedness and groupness become very useful when looking at upper-level intra-office power games as well as political manipulation of ethnicity. In short, I wish to suggest that Brubaker and Cooper have offered a useful way to study 'the work that ethnicity is supposed to do' in analyzing informal preferencing in Kupang's civil service. This is especially so since attempts to study ethnicity in Kupang have led to an uncritically reification of a category of practice than to a questioning of this concept. The advantage of using suggested terms instead of 'ethnicity' is that it opens

up all sorts of other possibilities of looking at inter-group relations and specifically informal preferencing in offices.

Stereotypes and Ethnic Favoring

That 'ethnicity' is a useful analytical category is not often questioned by scholars focusing on Kupang. If anything, the outburst of 'communal' violence that took place in November 1998 following the Ketapang tragedy in Jakarta, only brought the importance of ethnicity to the fore. Years before the Kupang incident, current dean of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of Kupang's Nusa cendana University Alo Liliweri (1994) already measured the effectiveness of inter-ethnic communication in Kupang, and concluded that this inter-ethnic communication is influenced by social prejudice resulting from ethnocentrism present in all ethnic groups. Social prejudice is exemplified by the ethnic composition of neighborhoods -where there is usually a certain ethnic majority-, the concentration of particular ethnic groups in certain occupational fields, ethnically segregated boarding houses and social organizations, and finally, latent ethnic competition (especially for civil service jobs) (Liliweri 1994: 4-5). Due to social ethnic prejudices all ethnic groups have a high sense of discrimination against other groups -with the exception of the Alorese and Sumbanese who tend to incorporate all 'others' as kin or members of their social groups-. Of all ethnic groups, the Rotinese tend to be discriminated against most (ibid.: 16). Tule (2004) in contrast modifies Liliweri's view on inter-ethnic relations as problematic and frictional, by stressing the ability of local kinship cultures built up around a cult house to incorporate various people into a tolerant and harmonious society. Whereas Liliweri sees ethnocentrism negatively influencing inter-ethnic communication, Tule views kinship as a unifying force in interaction (Tule 2000: 105). Commenting on the Kupang incident a few years earlier, Tule asserts that this and other instances of communal violence in Indonesia had nothing to do with inherent social friction, because they ran counter to the 'traditionally tolerant culture of Indonesia', but were instead the result of political manipulation (ibid.: 105).

What is striking about these accounts of inter-ethnic relations (with Tule focusing more on religious differences than Liliwari) is the uncritical acceptance of problematic analytical concepts. Liliwari nowhere questions the added value of using the concept of ethnicity. His entire conclusion concerning how social prejudice stemming from ethnocentrism influences inter-ethnic communication, is based on the a-priori assumption that it is useful to use 'ethnicity' for categorization. Such an uncritical use of a concept used in everyday practice for analytical purposes is not without hazard. As Elcid Li (2000) notes, it remains unclear how the *process* of social prejudicing is shaped. Without attention to this, social prejudice becomes somewhat of a belief. Ironically, perceptions of social prejudice based on inter-group generalizations are turned into something 'true' and as a basis for communication, without any confirmation to purify this prejudice. Equally, Tule's conception of Indonesian culture as inherently tolerant and incorporating also does nothing to understand why occurrences of conflict and friction take place, how processes of social prejudice are shaped, and –specific to this article- what underlies suspicions that ethnic favoring takes place within Kupang's civil service. As Brubaker and Cooper noted in relation to 'identity', the use of ethnicity generates more confusion than analytical clarity.

The appeal of ethnicity however not only seduces scholars focusing on Kupang but also by Kupangese themselves, judging from the many ethnic jokes and stereotypes I encountered during fieldwork. For instance, while trying to access political parties' campaign teams during the 2008 East Nusa Tenggara's gubernatorial elections I hung out one afternoon at one of political party PDIP's offices from which they coordinated their grass-root campaigning. Discussing the various candidates for the positions of governor and vice-governor, the conversation quickly turned to the ethnic backgrounds of the candidates. Chris, the head of this campaign team, asked me if I knew what to do when walking in a forest and suddenly encountering both a snake and a Rotenese: who or what would I kill? Having heard this joke many times before I

knew the answer: of course I would kill the Rotenese, because they are far more *licik* (tricky, sneaky, slimy) than snakes! Chris then asked me if I knew why this joke about Rotenese existed, which I did not. He explained this to me through what he called a 'folk story', telling about how the Rotenese managed to get so much land in Timor, especially along the coast:

At a certain point after the Rotenese had begun to arrive in Timor, the Timorese got fed up with this Rotenese immigration, and requested the Rotenese to put a halt to their migration to Timor. In response, the Rotenese came up with the following suggestion: the land of Timor should belong to whomever had the capacity to dry up the land. They proposed to meet up at the beach the following day, where they would both try to dry up the land. The Timorese agreed and returned to the beach the next day. A few of them –those with natural magical powers- sat down in the sand and attempted to force back the sea by making big and impressive gestures. Unfortunately high tide was just beginning to set in, something the Timorese were unaware of since they weren't sea people. Despite their pompous gestures, the Timorese could not stop the waves from coming in, and ran back up the mountains scared. In the afternoon a Rotenese sat down on the beach. In a relaxed and slow manner he made some hand movements, signaling the sea to move back. Indeed the sea receded, because low tides were setting in. Impressed with the Rotenese ability to dry up the land, the Timorese agreed that the Rotenese could stay.

Chris told me that although this was just a folk story, the cleverness of the Rotenese should not be underestimated. Before the existence of official certified property borders, Rotenese would mark off their area's by using *kapuk* trees. Since these trees' seeds spread far and wide and new trees would grow wherever the seeds landed, the land owned by the Rotenese expanded inconspicuously. This is why one has to kill the Rotenese instead of the snake, when suddenly encountering them in the forest. Chris himself was Rotenese.

The snake comparison is one often heard when asking about people from Rote, as is their knack for politics and pretty girls, 'they are trickier than snakes.' 'They are so much like snakes: they never get to the point, but just keep on sliding around and around it.' 'Rotenese, yeah they are talkative.' 'They always say "yes, but..." They are real politicians.' 'Sneaky in politics.' 'Hard-working people those Rotenese.' 'They have a good-working brain.' Furthermore, 'Rotenese girls are the prettiest of East Nusa Tenggara!' The Timorese are stuck with less flattering stereotypes: backwards, lazy, rude, stupid, weak, not brave, afraid, shameful, black. The Timorese tend to be typified as honest, straightforward, but hopelessly stupid and easily aroused in anger. 'They are stupid, but honest.' 'They are rude and have "high emotions", but a good heart.' 'Timorese are easy to fool.' 'They always say yes, even when they think differently.' The Savunese are known for their famous, conflict-solving kisses, girls that outshine the Rotinese in beauty, fondness of family relations, work ethic, funny ways of speaking and love of cock-fights. 'You know why Savunese girls are so pretty? Savunese descend from Indian people, that is why they are so good-looking.' Good looks are not traits associated with Alor, 'they are very black, with curly hair.' Their many languages and magic prowess are known far and wide however, 'in Alor, every two hundred meters a different language is spoken!' 'There are many *suanggi* (black magicians) in Alor. They can even fly.' 'Alor people do not live in one world, like you and I. They live in two worlds at the same time. They are known for their magic.' When asking about 'ethnic traits' in relation to people from Flores, non-Florenese will immediately claim that Florenese have very 'high feelings of ethnicity'. 'People from Flores are really fanatic about ethnicity and religion.' Florenese however, will immediately point out that there is no such thing as a 'Florenese ethnicity', 'Flores consists of many ethnic groups: Manggarai, Ende, Sikka, East-Flores and so forth.' 'Manggarai people eat a lot.' Florenese might not be known to be great warriors but they are very smart and good at politics. I did not often hear about the Sumbanese except that they give livestock as bridewealth, are talkative, and 'eat a lot, especially meat.' Ethnic groups from outside the province that are sometimes mentioned are the Javanese

and the Buginese. On the whole they seem to be perceived similarly: they are both 'newcomers', excellent traders, and Muslims. A group that deserves special attention, but never seem to pop up in 'ethnic joking' are the Chinese, 'the Chinese are businesspeople.' 'They are very stingy.' 'Chinese? They keep to themselves, they do not mix with locals (*pribumi*). And locals not with them.' 'They like to marry their own kind. I want nothing to do with them', said a young male civil servant who deeply wanted to marry his Chinese ex-girlfriend, but was refused by her family.

Such jokes, stereotypes and folk stories are not mere laughing matters or means for an anthropologist to show off her localized comedy routine. Joking becomes serious when a young woman claims she will never marry her Timorese suitor, because Timorese are too black and too stupid for a Savunese like herself and that she could never have 'ugly' Timorese kids. It becomes serious when the eldest son of the last ruler of Kupang laments the inherent laziness of 'his (Timorese) people' in trying to climb in local and provincial power structures as opposed to the Florenese who are by nature hard-working and clever. It becomes serious when conflicts, such as the Kupang incident of 1998, are labeled as 'ethnic' conflicts. It becomes serious when scholars write about inter-ethnic frictions and differences, without realizing the reifying effects its uncritical use has. When 'ethnicity' affects people's practices or scholars' analyses of those practices, ethnic jokes and stereotypes are more than just comedy. Certainly, some of these stereotypes can be traced to an actual reality in Kupang: there are quite a number of Rotenese in the civil service. Until the current vice-governor there has never been a Timorese regional leader, while Florenese have been abundantly represented in provincial leadership positions.

This does not mean however, that inter-ethnic joking and stereotyping easily translates to inter-ethnic prejudices, as Liliwari sketches in his article. In everyday talk and thinking about ethnicity a crude dividing of people in certain categories with certain character traits and behaviors is generally readily scrutinized. As one head of a department put it, 'my father is born in Sumbawa in West Nusa

Tenggara, but he is originally (*asli*) from Sulawesi and my mom is from Kupang. What am I then? Ethnicity (*suku*) is not always clear for people.' Or as another civil servant explained, 'you must understand that these are just jokes you know. Basically all East Nusa Tenggara people are all the same. We can marry each other, though we might have to make some adaptations in bridewealth. We can also marry people from other religions if the families agree.' Ethnicity as an explanation -for the occurrence of the Kupang incident or to typify informal favoring in accessing and climbing in civil service- becomes even more obviously problematic when there are many other kinds of distinctions that can be made: Islam versus Catholicism or Protestantism. Those from within the province of East Nusa Tenggara versus from outside. This island versus the other islands. The district of Manggarai versus that of Ende. This 'clan' (*marga*) versus that one. This family versus that family. Even though 'ethnicity' and also 'religion' have a deadly serious side and there are undoubtedly people who view certain characteristics as inherent to an ethnic or religious group, everyday stereotyping and perceptions on ethnic differences should not thoughtlessly be transferred to 'categories of analysis' when wanting to analyze how favoring in civil service is played out. Unfortunately, 'ethnicity' appears to be a too readily accepted explanation for analyzing this.

Informal Favoring: It is an Ethnic Thing

The main posed here is whether Kupang's ethnic heterogeneity makes for ethnic preferencing in the civil service. Thomas Didimus Dagang (2004) tries to make a case asserting this assumption. He uses detailed and lengthy information about the educational and ethnic background of higher-level bureaucrats and newly recruited employees in the early 2000's. Dagang's main topic of interest is if Kupang's city level civil service is indeed as neutral and free from political influences and 'group-influences', as is propagated by for instance Good Governance ideology or law

no 43/1999. His conclusion is that it is not, and that primordialist sentiments are decisive in civil servant recruiting and giving out higher level positions. Dagang characterized Kupang's civil service as a patrimonial bureaucracy, in which hierarchy is based on familiar or private relations as in father-child relations. Higher level (*jabatan*) positions are used for private interests related to family and group, and promotion systems are not based on meritocracy, seniority or competency tests (Dagang 2004: 25-27). An interesting and to me recognizable case is made for the importance of closeness and relations: Dagang claims bureaucracy is based on personality, 'like-dislike relations', and family connections (Ibid: 24). Recruitment is not an open process, rather, higher level civil servants tend to fill positions with people with whom they have something in common, be it a close friendship or a school connection (Ibid.: 65-66). What puts people in their civil service positions is the influence of closeness (*pengaruh kedekatan*), such as ethnicity, descent (*keturunan*), language, religion and so forth (idem: 73).

Dagang prefers to view this importance of closeness and connections as an ethnic influencing of the neutrality of bureaucracy. His main arguments supporting this claim are an overview of the ethnic composition of the higher level bureaucrats and of that of the newly recruited civil servants. Of all of the 527 upper level bureaucrats (*pejabat*), a third is Rotenese, 17.10% is Florenese, a sixth is Savunese, 13.4% are Timorese (3.04% Atonimeto, 10.1% Dawan), 5.5% Sumbanese, 3.8% Javanese, 3.04% Alorese, and 8.2% of other ethnic background (Ibid.: 40). In his analysis, the Rotenese thus outnumber all other ethnicities in higher level civil service positions. Dagang sees this same pattern when looking at the newly recruited civil servants for 2003: 40% of the 110 new civil servants were Rotenese, followed by Savunese (26.3%) (Ibid.: 68-69). Coincidentally, the two people in charge of accepting new recruits, the head of Personnel and the Regional Secretary, also happened to be of Rotenese descent. According to Dagang, primordialism and instrumentalism shape Kupang's recruitment and promotion systems: jobs are given out purely because of a sharing of blood, region of origin or customs (but also apparently

because of sharing a religion, school, and close friendship), or because ethnicity is easily manipulated politically.

Whereas Dagang does a great job sketching an image of Kupang's civil service as a patrimonial bureaucracy in which connections and closeness matter, his justification of why this is 'ethnic' remains unclear. When looking at the 'ethnic' composition of the city of Kupang it is not surprising that Rotenese will comprise a sizeable part of bureaucracy, since they are a significant presence in Kupang. Furthermore, when taking into account the historical advantageous position the Rotenese have had in education and civil service (Fox 1977) their 'accumulated capital' also helps explaining their current dominant position in bureaucracy. I suggest instead that the importance of relations and closeness which Dagang also recognizes explains far more clearly how neutrality is influenced than does 'ethnicity'. In this case of understanding how jobs and promotions are obtained, I contend that the use of 'ethnicity' as an analytical useful concept obscures more than it enlightens. Firstly the concept is too ambiguous to do any clear analytical work. Is ethnicity family, language, customs or also other forms of 'closeness' (*kedekatan*)? Secondly, the concept masks the way in which favoring in civil service actually takes place. Thirdly, as Elcid Li warned, using ethnicity as a means to analyze preferencing unjustly supports existing stereotypes and jokes, and therefore reifies them. Based on my own fieldwork in lower-level civil service, I claim that a balancing of different types of capital is what constitutes informal favoring. Ethnicity in this respect is solely useful insofar it can be transformed into social capital. To support my claim, I want to present three cases to exemplify this.

Informal Favoring: Balancing Capital

The important role of relations and closeness that Dagang noticed, also came to the fore in my own fieldwork. Therefore it pays to be attentive to the role of capital when wanting to know how preferencing is played out in Kupang's civil service. Bourdieu (1983) defines capital as: 'accumulated labor (in its materialized form or in its "incorporated", embodied form) which when appropriated on

a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor' (Bourdieu 1983: 241). Although he asserts that all types of capital are essentially derived from economic capital and can eventually be converted back to economic capital, he also distinguishes cultural capital and social capital. In what follows I will describe three cases on the strategic use of various forms of capital. The first entails the story of a young woman trying to get a job at the local branch of the national radio channel. The second case concerns how an 'office extra', the owner of the canteen next to the mayor's office, managed to get her job. The third case discusses documents confirming a young woman's acceptance as a temporary worker in a department while the young woman in question was actually still in high school, which is against regulations. The assumption underlying these stories is that if ethnic favoring is common practice, an 'ethnic connection' will be most clearly visible in giving out positions, in particular the last two, where there is no official testing procedure that can get in the way of informal favoring.

Case 1: Sinta on the radio

Sinta is a 24 year old young woman from Kupang. She refers to herself as Savunese. She graduated from a university in Yogyakarta, Java, in 2007 with a degree in International Relations. Due to this major her English is remarkably good for someone from Kupang. Her mother works as a civil servant and her father has a job at the local branch of *Radio Republik Indonesia* (RRI). RRI is not quite a government institution yet not wholly independent either. It is a public body owned by the state (*Badan Umum Milik Negara*). In general, the job requirements for such an institution are said to be tougher, the work itself to be more demanding, and the wages per salary scale higher than for civil servants. Still, RRI is more or less a government-related institution and the application process seems to be similar to that of regular civil servants. Sinta had been looking for a job for some time, when job openings were announced for RRI. Sinta hoped to find employment in civil service, because then she would be assured of a steady monthly salary and a

pension after retirement. Additionally, the work was not too demanding. Although an RRI job was not exactly the civil service job she hoped for, it had been some time since new civil servants had been accepted into city, regency or provincial government, therefore Sinta decided to apply for an RRI job. Along with 88 others, she signed up for 6 available positions. After a first administrative selection, all applicants had to take a general knowledge and English language skills test. In the end –after all tests and interviews- the boss decided which applicants would be joining RRI. These are not necessarily those applicants that passed the test with the best results, which is why according to Sinta one never sees the test scores on the lists with names of those that passed. Sinta claims that in contrast to Java, where you always read the applicant's number, name and test score, in Kupang only the numbers and names of applicants are stated. In Kupang the boss' decision is indisputable. Upon entering the testing procedure, Sinta had different forms of capital in her possession. First of all she had valuable cultural capital, namely her Bachelor's degree from a Javanese university and a good command of English. Secondly she had strong social capital, since her father already worked at RRI. Moreover, her father happened to be good friends with the boss and someone with whom he used to share stories with about Sinta and her brothers when growing up. Thirdly, since both her parents had steady employment there was the possibility of using economic capital as 'smoothing money'. After the testing procedure Sinta got the happy news that out of all the applicants she was one of the six lucky ones to get hired. Reflecting on what facilitated her success Sinta couldn't quite point out what type of 'capital' was decisive in her hiring. If it would merely have been cultural capital the test results would have been published along with the names and numbers. Many of the other applicants also had family members or close acquaintances working at RRI, but they failed to pass, therefore social capital wasn't the most vital element either. Sinta's father had forbidden Sinta's mother to give any money to the boss or hiring committee, thus apparently economic capital did not play a role at all. Sinta did comment that all new broadcasters hired were fluent in English. Cultural capital seemed to be most valued in RRI

positions, but it is difficult to assess if Sinta would have gotten her job had her dad not been so close to the head. Judging from previous experiences at job applications it can also be wondered if giving some 'smoothing money' would have been unnecessary if Sinta would not have had such an abundance of social capital. I was not the only one wondering to what extent Sinta's connections had helped her. During a conversation with Sinta's mother, she urged me to visit Sinta soon at work and speak English with her so all of her colleagues could see that Sinta got hired because of her command of English and not because of her father's connections.

Case 2: Mrs. Nur's cafeteria

For years the three-storey mayor's office that houses several governmental department and a few hundred civil servants did not have a proper cafeteria. There was a small kitchen located on the second floor but this was not large enough to provide all employees with lunches or midday snacks. Therefore the department of General Affairs decided that a new bigger cafeteria should be build. This task was left to the civil servants' wives association *Dharma Wanita*. The wife of the Regional Secretary, who is second in ranking after the mayor, was in charge of finding someone to run this cafeteria. Mrs. Nur heard about this from her younger sister, whose husband happened to have a friend in the department of General Affairs, and offered to run the cafeteria. She got accepted and now gets up at 05:30 every day to go to the market with her assistant to do the necessary daily grocery shopping, then prepares various dishes and opens up the cafeteria around 10:00. The Regional Secretary and his wife are Rotenese and Protestant. If ethnic favoring would take place, one would expect Mrs. Nur to be Rotenese, and perhaps share their religion as well. Mrs. Nur however clearly is not a Protestant, as her *jilbab* shows. Furthermore she is born in Surabaya and has lived all over Java, before ending up in East Nusa Tenggara. The reason she manages the cafeteria is not because of ethnic favoring, but by seizing an opportunity that was available through word-of-mouth information from family and friends. Again, connections matter.

Case 3: a high-school girl in the office

In the office of local anti-corruption agency PIAR I had an interesting talk about informal ways of giving out jobs in the civil service. Apart from steady civil service jobs that last until retirement government offices sometimes also hire temporary (*honorer*) workers. Working as a 'temp' is often viewed as a stepping stone to a 'real' civil servant position, and at every new civil service recruitment phase at least some temps have to be hired as 'full' civil servants. Since the admission procedure for temps is less elaborate and less strictly checked than that for civil servants, this trajectory poses the best opportunities for preferential hiring, as was shown to me at PIAR. I received a copy of a certificate that stated that in 2003 young Lina was hired as a temp at a certain government department. Requirements for temps are –depending on their task description- that they at least have to have finished senior high school. Another form was presented to me, namely Miss Lina's senior high school diploma. This diploma was dated in 2004. As it turned out young Lina was a niece of the Regional Secretary, who conveniently arranged this temp position for her. Although Lina probably never set a foot in the department's office while she was still in school and most likely also did not receive any wages, having been registered as a temp did ensure her of steady employment as soon as she finished high school and gave her excellent chances of obtaining a full civil servant position.

As mentioned previously, the civil servants I encountered generally assumed not all jobs and promotions are given out in accordance with official rules and regulations. When inquiring how this informal system of giving out jobs works however, examples like Sinta's are given: *knowing* somebody is what is important. Having connections facilitates access. Furthermore, depending on how close relations are, social capital at times needs to be complemented with economic capital. Offering 'thank you money' or 'smoothing money' to very close relations however is considered to be very offensive, which is why Sinta's father forbade Sinta's mother to offer money to the boss of RRI.

Social capital can consist of all sorts of connections: family relations, neighbors, alumni from the same high school or university, fellow church members or friends. With a certain dose of imagination some kind of connection can be made to anyone in Kupang. In this sense it matters less that your father's friend who is in a position to make decisions on hiring new staff is Florenese like you. What matters instead, is that he is a friend of your father and thus a connection that can be used. What Sinta and Lina's case also show is that cultural capital –a good command of English and a high school diploma- also cannot be overlooked. With regards to ethnic preferencing I therefore disagree with Dagang's conclusion that, since a large part of the newly recruited civil servants are Rotenese as are the head of the Human Resources Department and Regional Secretary, recruitment must be colored by ethnic favoring. My second case most clearly refutes an 'ethnic' connection. In short I contend that when wanting to understand how informal preferencing is played out, a focus on relations or social capital –balanced with other forms of capital- is far more helpful than the concept of 'ethnicity'.

Ethnicity and Direct District Head Elections

There is one sidenote I wish to make in relation to ethnicity and preferencing in Kupang's civil service. So far I have argued that 'ethnicity' instead of being helpful in analyzing informal favoring, tends to reify existing categories of practice. Viewing informal favoring as a balancing of various forms of capital has a greater explanatory value than ethnicity as far as the lower-level civil service is concerned: getting a first steady job, a temporary position, or the position to run a cafeteria. When looking at obtaining positions and promotions in upper-level civil service however, 'commonality, connectedness and groupness' as well as identity politics come into play. This became especially clear during the 2008 first direct gubernatorial elections.

When looking at these elections, it is difficult to deny that a sense of commonality connected to region of origin dictated the results of the elections. A quick glance at all candidate couples makes it clear that the couples consisted

of strategically chosen men, one Protestant and one Catholic, from two different large islands in East Nusa Tenggara. Golkar Party's couple *Tulus* was represented by Agustinus Medah from Rote and Paulus Moa from Sikka, Flores. Political party PDIP's *Fren* consisted of Frans Lebu Raya from East Flores and Esthon Foenay from Timor. Finally, coalition party *Gaul's* couple was formed by Gaspar Parang Ehok from Flores Manggarai and Yulius Bobo from West Sumba. Strategically presenting a couple from different large islands was hoped to create a large constituency in those islands and among people that trace their descent to those islands. This effort was not futile. The election results show that candidates tended to win in their 'regions of origin'. The most noteworthy exceptions are the regencies of Kupang and Timor Tengah Selatan, where *Tulus* instead of *Fren* won. *Tulus*-candidate Agustinus Medah however had been the district head of the Kupang regency for a few years and had gained popularity in these regions because of that.

Combining candidates from different big islands as a strategy to appeal to voters' was thus one way in which 'commonality' was played with. If connectedness to island of origin is too heavily emphasized however, candidates run the risk of distancing voters from other islands. In melting pot Kupang, where people from all islands of East Nusa Tenggara and beyond reside, stressing an island connection was not always the most fruitful strategy. This was exemplified during *Tulus'* campaign in Kupang. Candidate Medah spoke to the audience first in local Kupang language, then added some jokes in a Timorese language, and furthermore spoke Rotenese. The MC meanwhile continually stressed Medah's connection to all ethnicities in East Nusa Tenggara and made sure to introduce all campaign managers present on stage, who formed a nice mix of men, women, Muslims (judging from the *jilbab*) and ethnicity.

Ethnicity understood as a sense of commonality, connectedness and groupness was thus used as a means to attract voters whether by stressing candidates belonging to a certain island of origin or by showing how candidates were affiliated to other islands. The 'people' (*masyarakat*) were expected to vote based on primordialist sentiments. Often

explained to me by campaign team' members was that, 'people from East Nusa Tenggara are stupid, they are not yet ready for direct elections. They do not understand politics and just vote for their own people.' Political parties' responsibility for reification of 'stupid' primordialist sentiments through creating 'ethnically strategic' candidate couples was never acknowledged. By reifying ethnic categories however, candidate couples did create the expectation that once elected they would give something back to members of their 'group' or solidarity. If there is one thing *masyarakat* knows is that the best way to get something is being owed something. Reciprocal obligations are deeply embedded in the social fabric of Kupang. Giving something, and thereby opening up a social relation, creates the expectation that something will be returned. Contributing to a cousin's wedding creates the expectation that the cousin in turn will contribute something to your wedding. Giving money to the local court at time of job openings creates the expectation that your child will get hired. Without wanting to elaborate too much on this, in elections giving something –a vote- ought to lead to a return as well. When in elections island groupness is reified by candidate-couples, the expectation arises that something will be returned to people connected to that island. The easiest way of 'giving back to the group' is by promoting civil servants from certain island of origin to desirable upper-level positions.

Promoting members of an ethnic group is thus a way to reciprocate votes from an ethnic group. It is nevertheless important to note that this kind of ethnic favoring in upper-level civil service has less to do with a deep desire to fill civil service with people of a certain ethnicity. Rather, it is a means to reciprocate a favor to a constituency created by attempts to make solidarities based on island of origin. I urge to look at this reciprocal morality underlying informal favoring, because there are many other examples of 'returning favors' (*balas jasa*) during elections that are not based on strategic use of island of origin solidarity: rich businessmen being allocated projects in return for sponsoring campaigns; or influential department heads receiving promotions in return for given support during elections.

Conclusion

This paper tried to answer the question whether Kupang's ethnic heterogeneity explains informal preferencing in civil service. Since the concept of ethnicity takes such a prominent position in many scholarly writing on Kupang, I considered it necessary to specifically address the possibility that ethnic favoring colored much of this informal preferencing. A large part of this paper was thus also focused on ethnicity as an analytical concept. With regards to this, I have tried to explain that the way ethnicity tends to be used by scholars focusing on Kupang is unnecessarily reifying, and I have suggested other ways in which 'ethnicity' can be studied. With regards to my main question, I am not convinced that ethnicity, whether as identification, self-understanding or groupness (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) is useful in understanding how lower-level civil servants obtain their jobs. Instead contend social capital, at times balanced with other forms of capital, facilitates informal favoring. Commonality, connectedness and groupness are however useful when analyzing upper-level civil service and politics dynamics that take place during elections. Candidates use a sense of groupness based on island of origin solidarity as a means to create a constituency. Voters appear to vote based on this solidarity. However, as 'ethnicity' in lower-level civil service is solely useful insofar it can be transformed into social capital, 'ethnicity' in elections is only useful insofar it can suggest an expectation of reciprocal return. There are many ways to create social capital, as there are many ways to create reciprocal obligations. To explain informal preferencing in terms of 'ethnicity' in either lower- or upper-level civil service, is missing out on many intricacies that take place behind the guise of ethnicity.

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