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Performing the state: Everyday practices, corruption and reciprocity in Middle Indonesian civil service

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Summary

This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted over the course of twelve months between 2007 and 2010 in city level government offices in the Eastern Indonesian town of Kupang. The PhD project resulting in this thesis is part of a larger KNAW-funded research program,¹¹¹ titled ‘In Search of Middle Indonesia’, which focuses on the geographical space of the provincial town, one that is particularly affected by recent post-Suharto structural changes, and that has often been neglected in favor of the commanding heights of the metropolitan city or of the small village. Kupang is a state dependent town, and had the dubious honor of being perceived as Indonesia’s most corrupt town in a 2008 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index.

Discontent with the rampant corruption surrounding president Suharto and his cronies, and cries for governmental reforms colored the Reformation protests in Indonesia in the late 1990s. Since then, a great number of structural reforms have been realized. In ‘Good Governance’ fashion, Indonesia has seen the implementation of regional autonomy and direct district head elections, and has witnessed many changes in the national legal framework aimed at decreasing corruption. Nevertheless, available ethnographic analyses have shown that structural changes aimed at curbing corruption have not unequivocally led to a decrease in corrupt practices (Choi 2004; Schulte-Nordholt 2004; Kristiansen and Ramli 2006). It seems as if along with the shift of power from center to regions, the unholy trinity of ‘KKN’ (the Indonesian acronym for corruption, collusion, and nepotism) has similarly moved downwards. It is this question of persistent corruption amidst changes in the national legal framework that this thesis hopes to shed some light on.

In many ways, this thesis provides new examples to buttress these findings. However, it also hopes to provide a new analytical viewpoint that helps explain *why* structural changes do not necessarily lead to corresponding practices and *how* such changes can, in fact, help perpetuate corrupt practices. This question concerning the persistence of corruption is part of a more general paradox that has guided this thesis, which concerns how a state image of wholeness and coherence is maintained when actual office practices often contradict this image. This research, therefore, continues recent analytic trends among social scientists focusing on state-society dynamics that distinguish a ‘state idea’/‘state image’ from a ‘state system’/‘actual practices’ (Abrams 1988; Migdal 2001). In short, instead of viewing state-society relations in terms of distinct entities of ‘state’ and ‘society’ separated by an elusive boundary, this thesis focuses on the discrepancy between a state image and contradictory social practices. In addressing this issue this thesis pays specific attention to corrupt practices

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as an example of everyday office practices that contradict a ‘state image’ of wholeness. As a part of this attention to corrupt practices this thesis, furthermore, aims to refute an assumption, popularly held in Kupang’s discourse on corruption, that ethnicity and ethnic favoring decide political-economic logics.

I focused on the ‘actual practices’ tier by conducting an ethnography of bureaucracy in city level government offices in Kupang, asking three fairly straightforward questions: how to become a civil servant, how to get a construction project, and how (not) to become governor? In answering these questions I make use of Bourdieu’s concept of various sorts of capital (Bourdieu 1986). In order to recognize how to ‘get things done’ in Kupang, it is helpful to look at the accumulation and exchange of money, connections, and education. What this dissertation hopes to show is that, first of all, the accumulation and exchange of capital that facilitates ‘getting things done’ hinges on the logic of reciprocal obligations that are implied in social networks. Although this comes to the fore most clearly in family networks, I claim this same logic is mimicked in other types of social networks. Secondly, ethnicity (a popular marker for social differences) is analytically useful only insofar as it can be transformed into social capital.

Ultimately, however, this dissertation aims to relate the ‘actual practices’ tier to the ‘state image’ one to understand how a state image of coherence and control remains in place despite practices that contradict or taint such an image. In other words, I look at the social practices that help maintain a state image of wholeness which, in turn, enables social practices that counter that image. Using Alexei Yurchak’s (2006) concept of ‘performative shift’ I argue that those efforts that uphold and maintain a coherent state image also, unintentionally, facilitate a continuation of the (corrupt) practices that contradict this image. I propose to view the various examples given throughout this thesis of adherence to office rules or maintaining a state image of coherence, such as the visual displays of hierarchy, the minutely stipulated office procedures, and the importance of proper form of documents, as examples of a performative dimension of authoritative bureaucratic discourse that has become unhinged from its constative meaning. What structural changes, in particular anti-KKN efforts, have brought about is a further emphasizing of the importance of adherence to form, while actual practices still run counter to the constative dimension of that form. Therefore, a third conclusion this dissertation draws is that ‘corrupt’ practices are actually facilitated by a well-disciplined adherence to the form of bureaucratic procedures -or perhaps in a more Migdallian fashion, adherence to ‘state image’.

In short, this thesis claims that many of the corrupt practices in Kupang’s civil service can be better understood when seeing them as part of more general reciprocal obligations which are embedded in Kupang’s local social fabric. It therefore emphasizes the importance of opening and maintaining relationships, via the exchange of various forms of capital. However, I suggest that the importance of networks and implied reciprocal obligations that

blur state-society boundaries are not something limited to Kupang, but can provide an interesting way of analyzing 'how to get things done' elsewhere as well. As such, I hope this thesis does not exoticize civil service in Kupang, but, rather, helps promote an anthropological project that, as Joel Robbins proposes, stresses a focus on the formation of relationships (Robbins 2003: 10).