

Playing quartets with Pattimura

Column by Fridus Steijlen

Published: Newsletter Moluccan Historical Museum, March 2015

At the end of February I saw the premiere of 'KRUIT! Het vergeten verhaal' (GUNPOWDER! The forgotten story) by DeltaDua about the Moluccan folk hero Pattimura. Pattimura was the nickname of Thomas Matulesia. He led an uprising on the island of Saparua in May 1817, supported by Martha Christina Tiahahu and others, against the Dutch rulers. Musical theater performance KRUIT! asks critical questions about Pattimura. He is seen as an anti-colonial hero because he fought against the Dutch, but was he? After all, in the years before his rebellion, he served in the English colonial army that then briefly ruled the Moluccas. Pattimura's action would have been motivated by the fear that the Dutch would again introduce a repressive regime. Was he pro-English, anti-Dutch, or anti-colonial?

I first heard about Pattimura in 1976 from David, a Moluccan friend. He was a member of the Gerakan Pattimura, the Pattimura movement, a progressive Moluccan youth organization in Holland that published a magazine and organized training courses. I became a member of the Gerakan Pattimura. On the first page of our magazine, the *Madjalah Pattimura*, there was a drawing of Pattimura with a poem calling on young Pattimuras to fight in his spirit. A romantic symbol in a time of international struggle and solidarity, a distant predecessor of Che Guevara in fact. Pattimura was one of the heroes of the Moluccans in Holland.

A few years later I was surprised to encounter Pattimura in Indonesia. Indonesia had also embraced Pattimura as a hero. Sukarno had even officially declared him a national hero in the 1970s. Pattimura's name not only graced a university and the airport in Ambon, but also all kinds of streets throughout Indonesia, and his image even appeared on the 1,000 rupiah bill. Pattimura, moreover, proved to be the hero of warring factions. In 1947, Indonesia established the Pattimura Battalion in Malang in which Moluccan republicans fought against the Dutch and the Moluccan KNIL soldiers. In turn, in 1950 the RMS government proclaimed May 15 as Pattimura Day. Something the Indonesian government later did as well.

Resistance heroes of the past are seemingly outlawed and can be claimed by anyone. For example, I recently read in "Polemik Kapitan Pattimura" at www.kaskus.co.id that Pattimura was actually a Muslim Moluccan. It was not Christian Thomas Matulesia who was Pattimura but Ahmad Lussy. According to the source, Pattimura's history was held hostage by Christians and de-Islamized. And let's face it, most written sources about Pattimura, his rebellion and how he was sentenced to death by the Dutch, were indeed written by Christians, Dutch ones at that.

For a piece about a folk hero, "KRUIT!" is a good title. Folk heroes are explosive: who can claim them and with what reason? This is evident in the quartet game that was created:

"From the series of Indonesian heroes, may I take from you Pattimura because he rebelled against the Dutch rulers, and there is a battalion named after him?

All right, but then may I have from you the series of Moluccan heroes Pattimura because he rebelled against the Dutch rulers on Saparua?

And may I then belong to you from the Christian heroes Pattimura because Thomas Matulesia was a Christian?

Yes, if I may then from you from the Muslim heroes Pattimura, because Pattimura was actually the Muslim Ahmad Lussy!

QUARTET!"