

Episode 4

Plantations, Making Home, and Academic Colonisation, with Eunike Gloria Setiadarma and Pepe Roswaldy

Okka: Welcome to the Ultimatum Orangutan podcast, otherwise known as Ultimatum Orangutan Radio. This is an episode that's completely in Indonesian. Hurray. Just for us. Thanks for hearing our voices. We have two guests. The first is Pepe, Perdana Roswaldi, she is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Northwestern University in the United States. She studies... plantations, plantation states and colonial extractivism. Pe, how would you translate it, according to you?

Pepe: The translation may be "plantations in Southeast Asia and extractive colonialism."

Okka: Pepe is currently studying plantations in Southeast Asia and extractive colonialism. She likes to nap under shady trees and also on park benches. That's the bio Pepe gave for herself. I didn't add anything to it. It is an authentic bio from Pepe herself. Eunike Gloria Setiadarma, or Nike, is Pepe's friend. She is currently a PhD student at Northwestern University studying ideas and feelings, emotions, around family and the concept of home in Indonesia's past. Nike and Pepe have created a zine and podcast called "Terminal Bus." Welcome, Nike and Pepe.

Nike: Thank you for inviting us, Kak Okka.

Okka: Oh, you're welcome, thank you very much. So I actually have a lot of questions for you. And, maybe first because it was mentioned in Nike's bio, what is "Terminal Bus" as a zine and what's the concept of podcast?

Nike: Go ahead, Pepe.

Pepe: We didn't have a clear concept to make—we basically wanted to make something that had no academic aspects at all. We want to create a safe space for both of us as women of colour in America together and naming it “Terminal Bus,” we didn't really think about it. It's like, hmm, what's really, what do you call it, so if people listen to it, it feels like home or feels familial.

Okka: I see. Okay, thank you. Now, is there any connection between your work on “Terminal Bus” and your research?

Nike: Hmm, actually, if you say there is, there is. If you say there isn't, there isn't.

Okka: Okay, explain that, please explain.

Nike: So, it's actually like Pepe said, because we wanted to create a safe space for us, and we also actually are very seriously concerned about how academics work. Now, in addition, Pepe is researching plantations while I'm still groping around, figuring out history. So our zine and our podcast were actually created so that we could share our frustrations with the academic world, but at the same time, they also function as spaces for us to talk about our research, our confusion about methods, stuff like that. Well, sometimes we talk about academics, but sometimes we don't. It's like mixed.

Okka: So it's a place to confide in together.

Nike: Yes.

Okka: Ah, I also know you two from *Siasat*, the site you created. Actually, I know Nike maybe from Twitter, and Pepe I knew previously, from Jakarta. Have met this Mbak Pepe in person. I also wanted to ask about *Siasat*. So, what is *siasat.id*? And, what is your involvement like?

Pepe: Actually, it was Fajri, our friend, who created *Siasat*. He is currently doing his doctorate in Amsterdam and we were invited by Fajri because Fajri seemed to see that Nike and I had the same concerns about decolonisation issues, and re-questioning colonial relations in the contemporary era, in history as well as in sociology. And Nike and I, like Fajri, also seek to dig deeper. What is meant by sciences and history in the minds

of Indonesian academics, from the words and statements and the research of Indonesians themselves.

Okka: Hm, okay. Wow, thanks, Pepe. Now, I want to dig deeper with each of you. Nike, what is your research specifically about, with regards to family and Indonesia's past? This seems very interesting.

Nike: I actually keep telling people, if for example people ask me about my research, that I was actually inspired by Pepe's research. Before that, I actually wanted to do some research on development, Kak Okka. But then, it actually touched on agriculture too. At that time, I did research on the intellectual history of agricultural sciences, and then along the way, I—

Pepe and I often talked. Pepe talks about women, about family, on plantations, and all kinds of things. Then I continued my research, and I also became interested in what exactly the ways were in which Indonesians in the past imagined family and the making of homes. Now, starting from there, I became intrigued about women working at home and also working in the fields, but also those who lived in the city. So I actually started from there, Okka, my research was because I wanted to know what home actually meant or was understood as.

Okka: The coverage is all over Indonesia or taken from only a few areas?

Nike: I'm still thinking about it, Kak Okka, because Indonesia is really, really vast, and there are a lot of publications like archives—especially, for example, for homes; most of the writing genres for it, like home economics or manual books on building homes and everything, are in Java. But actually, people-- For example. I found documents, friends who were at a church in East Nusa Tenggara in the fifties, they had publications on children attending Sunday school, for example. So, I actually wanted to reach other areas outside Java, of course, but I'm still discussing with my advisor how to access these resources.

Okka: Okay, and the time period is still being discussed, it seems.

Nike: That's right, but I plan to cover the period of 1900 to 1970. So it stops before the New Order began to consolidate its power. So before—so I stop at the year 1970. Because a lot of people have already covered what family was like in the New Order era. So I took the period before that.

Okka: Wow, that seems really interesting. So, can I ask Pepe to please explain your research?

Pepe: My research is very different from Nike's now. I talk about the history of plantations in Indonesia, especially the "inti rakyat" ["core of the people"] plantation system, meaning that people from Java or from the island of Bali or from other areas with a larger population were sent to frontier areas or "left behind" areas, of course according to Indonesia's own classification, to build plantations there. The plantations were especially for rubber and palm oil.

But I think I'm more focused on palm oil. My research question is actually simple, "What do plantations do for Indonesia?." So actually the focus of the title of my research was paraphrased from Leo Tolstoy's writing *How much land does a man need?* and I paraphrased it to *How much land does a state need?* Because plantation expansion was actually even more widespread after Indonesia's independence; whereas if we look at studies on plantations in the Caribbean or in America, for example, after the abolishment of slavery, plantations were almost done with, in the Caribbean or in American regions. Though of course, there are still legacies from the plantation system, starting from the state surveillance system, racism, and all kinds of things. So the tentative title of my dissertation is *How much land does a state need?*

Because every time there is an economic crisis, plantations are always the first engine to be revived by the State. And if we look at it, after the Dutch colonial era, plantations in Indonesia were actually more expansive than in the colonial past.

Okka: So what's the reason for that?

Pepe: Pepe My hypothesis is actually a bit dark, so I must apologize if this is a bit depressing. My hypothesis is that for a long time, plantations have been more than a mere economic system, they have become an instrument of state development. This is what I want to propose: that Indonesia is a plantation society like those that were in America or in the Caribbean. What distinguishes Indonesia is that the plantations are still very much alive today, because the nation-building project in Indonesia has not yet been completed.

Okka: Oh God, and it seems like there's no end to this exploitation.

Pepe: Yes, we don't know when the development will be finished.

Okka: But actually, I think it's really connected, listening to Nike's research, because of course so many families are affected by the plantation system. What does the survival of the concept of family look like, in the respective regional spheres that were colonised by plantations like that? Have you ever talked about the connection between the two focuses of your research like that?

Pepe: I think I once told Nike that the development unit on the plantation is the family, not the individual. It has always been the family. So, for example, if we want to move people to plantations, for example using the transmigration program, of course, the first unit that is prioritized is always heterosexual families, especially those without children. So they are expected to build families on the plantation, and if you look at the pamphlets, the most important thing is that it is a family unit. Those who are married of course, so a heterosexual couple. Number two is men with healthy bodies, with an 'abled body.' But it's never been anyone like women, and even now, it's actually quite difficult for women to get oil palm land certification, for example when the husband passes away. A woman can't immediately get ownership of the land, even when it belonged to her husband.

Okka: Nike, what were you saying, Nike?

Nike: Yes, I want to add something, Kak Okka. It was Pepe's story that actually made me think about the concept of family, what it actually is. When you talk about family, it seems like the reference is always--often, not always actually—referring to a father, a mother, and child(ren), right? That's categorized as an ideal family, right, which is criticised as what the New Order did to force the ideology on families. But then, if you go back, from the Dutch era, there were actually ways--both from the state and from the Dutch people working in the East Indies at that time, in Java or in Sumatra--there was actually already a process for consolidating what a family was. Many Dutch women only arrived in the twentieth century, right?

So that only in the 1900s did many Dutch women begin to join their civil-servant husbands. Now, the presence of white Dutch women in Java or in Sumatra became like, a starting point where finally the concept of a core family, a harmonious family, a clean house, and all that stuff started, well, to exist in more popular spaces in Java, to be specific. That is what I think. So, from Pepe's stories, I began to rethink what is meant by the formation of the core family in Indonesia, long before the New Order imposed its ideology.

Okka: This is very interesting. I want to ask further. So, the effect of these white chicks' arrival--in academic terms—how did this spark new ideas about family—perhaps it can be called a nuclear family, Nike? Did they teach Indonesian women how to think about family, what did they do?

Nike: What's interesting, this week, I'm actually reading a book written by a Dutch woman named Kantenius, Mevrouw Kantenius, and she wrote a pretty large book, three hundred pages, which did talk about that, Kak. In the book, she talked how to build a hygienic house, in the words of Rudolf Mrazek. So this is what she wrote in her book.

At the beginning of the book, she said that the book is dedicated to Dutch women who had just arrived in the East Indies, without any ideas about what was in the East Indies, what the cooking utensils were like, what kind of animals in the house there were to consider; then, she said that this was also for women of the East Indies themselves. Although the book was written in Dutch, so of course it's aimed at upper-class East Indies women, who were Dutch-speaking. So, it's from these kind of books that I think—that's why I do a lot of research using domestic manuals, home economics, because I feel that these books are some of the things that really contributed to the imagining of as well as the construction of nuclear families. Because in the end, Dutch women were very aware of, for example, the presence of nyai and servants in their homes.

Because in the end, they were the ones who created the boundary; because there were no white women in the house, the women of colour, in the end, became domestic caretakers who were not a part of the family. But they were the people who were always asked for advice on how to cook properly using tools available in the Indies.

the colonial system as a system of oppression within power orders, and also Foucault, PS, has been reported as an abuser of children. So I'll be honest; when I see dynamics like that in the political, in the politics of academia, I sometimes think, wow, even at the level of which white person we quote in a dissertation, there's a lot of politics like this. How about when we, as Indonesian women, want our ideas to be taken seriously by the academic world? What do you think is the position of Indonesian women in the world of academics abroad and at home?

Pepe: Nike and I talk about this almost every day about what it is like being academic women in Indonesia. Because I think I feel like--Nike and I feel like—how come we're fighting so much? Fighting in the sense that, it's not like we're against all theories or whatever, we're not as rebellious as people think, but it's more that I have to navigate white, imperial people on our campus; at the same time, when we go back to Indonesia,

there's also sexism. I'm in agrarian studies. It's not a secret anymore, you know. This is a very, very masculine field. And it's not just one or two people who have confided in me as a fellow agrarian researcher: why is researcher X like this? And he's a man. How come the impressions are so much like that. Because actually Nike and I are just trying to really learn.

We want to follow, we want to open up a lot of new things about Indonesia. Things that, I personally really want my research to be able help other people, especially on plantations. It seems like the longer the pandemic is going on, the more urgent it is, but there are so many obstacles. Whereas I think there are a lot of Indonesian women in academia who have a lot to say. There are models of logic that are patronising or paternalistic, that set their research to ultimately follow certain trends, even though that's not what they want. I've heard a lot of such stories from my friends in Indonesia.

Okka: If I may ask, what trends?

Pepe: For example, like, I once—this is a personal story and this is not “triggering” at all. Oh yes, by the way, I'm doing research on women post-conflict.

When I was presenting my research, there were a lot of people who said, why you didn't talk about social movements. That's what's trending. Who really cares about the working hours of women in village fields? They really said that to my face, then I was like, I was really surprised because I thought what these women think after conflict is important, you know. Because it turns out when I did my research, many things didn't change or even got worse for them. Because of climate change. And my research has given me new knowledge that just because the farmers won, doesn't mean the effects of the conflict don't continue to exist. And it's even worse for female farmers.

Okka: Well, there are two things. One is pressure to follow trends. The second is the internal feeling that okay, if that's the case, I have to follow these trends.

Actually the pressure is that--maybe outsiders can say that even if people pressure you, you can just say no. So what do you think?

Nike: I don't have an exact answer, actually, because I am still trying to navigate, for example, let's see, what kind of research... Yesterday, there was a person asking about the historiography of women's history, for example, or the history of gender. That's

actually what a lot of people are talking about. And the trend is so far, as far as I know, always to say, oh well, women contribute to ABCD like that. In the past it was like that.

But then I just kinda want to ask, okay, women contribute, but where are the tensions? After all, sometimes, for example, if an historian says, 'Oh well, women are still marginal in Indonesian history,' then I say okay, we need a lot of women figures. Women thinkers that are of course not only cis, but also non-binary or transwomen in the writing of Indonesian history. But at the same time I also think, but what imaginary do you guys have in mind about Indonesian women? Because sometimes their imaginary of Indonesian women is still very masculine. That's why it's like, sometimes that's where we're at.

On the one hand, I want to highlight female figures, but on the other hand I also feel that not all women have the "same position." We already know, for example, that white Dutch women are certainly different from Javanese women. Or even for example, Chinese Indonesian women have a different position from Javanese women, or Minang women, or those in Java, or other women in turn. So I mean okay, women, but when we write about women, women's history also has tensions there. How come sometimes I personally, and maybe Pepe also, feel that there are things that we want to talk about that are actually in line with the actual trends, but it also seems like the trends are a bit... it's like they don't fit well with what our political and intellectual work is.

Okka: Nice. This is why it's important that there are websites like siasat.id that prioritise the intellectual works of Indonesian people themselves. On the website, it's written that Siasat was started because, frankly, you were tired of the image of Indonesia dominated by outsiders' or white people's points of view. So, what are the responsibilities of those of us who are graduates of or are studying at institutions abroad? People like myself who are academics abroad, what their responsibilities are towards the academic world, which is still very saturated with whiteness' hegemony. What can be done? What are the ways we can fight?

Nike: Pepe and I might fight it with, maybe, our zine, right, Pe? Maybe it's one of our ways to say that oh well, we're both studying abroad, but we're also trying not to get swallowed up by the hegemony itself, right? Because sometimes there are discourses about Indonesian kids studying abroad, then it becomes a bit like... Oh, abroad is better than Indonesia. Yeah maybe, but there's plenty that isn't better, also. So maybe through our zine, we are also trying to create a place for reflection, but also "to laugh at" ourselves.

As a part of our criticism of the education system in the United States, in particular, which is very, very racist.

Okka: Perhaps you want to add something, Pepe?

Pepe: I've written on the issue of why I have to do research in Indonesia. There is so much research in Indonesia that are only of two types: either presenting Indonesia as a data anomaly or Indonesia as a data constellation. Just those two. So Indonesia is just like a geol-- just a spatial code, but they don't--. Maybe a lot of research doesn't, what do you call it, explore more deeply. And only if, for example, Indonesia is not an anomaly in the data or can only provide general data--

if that's the case, why does it have to be Indonesia? Perhaps what I can do as a person educated in "the first world" is to maintain a rather healthy scepticism with regards to knowledge production on Indonesia created by white people. I once asked Nike this; do these people like people like Ben Anderson, apart from the fact that they are very brilliant thinkers, do you like them, do we like them because they really have something interesting about Indonesia or are they just white people who can speak Indonesian well. Like, there is a colonial logic going on when we see the production of knowledge about Indonesia created by white people, versus whether we like these brilliant thinkers because they can speak Indonesian a little bit better compared to other white people.

I have this serious question because it seems like there is a lot of research which to me is a bit problematic, but we—a lot of it gets lauded, you see. And these people get more microphones, more podiums than for example younger academics, women, queer people, or others in academic spaces in Indonesia. And this frustrates me a little bit because I know a lot of women researchers living in Java, they have good research but they don't get the podium, you see.

Okka: Are these Indonesian researchers or non-Indonesian researchers?

Pepe: Which ones? The ones I said could speak Indonesian?

Okka: Those in Java, that you said were Javanese women researchers in Java--

Pepe: Oh sorry, researchers who don't do—women researchers who do research outside Java. Maybe they are Javanese but they don't live in Java, for example. I've met a lot of

researchers in Sumatra and they have richer data than those published in journals or by researchers with international calibre. That is my first frustration and it is my way of trying to maintain scepticism. The second is that I always prioritise local collaborators. It is like the MO for each of my research projects, in all my research, that my first acknowledgement goes to the people who helped me in the field. I've never heard of--I know that there are many young researchers in Indonesia who help with these white people's cool research in the field. I have friends who help X Y Z and they don't get credit for that at all. Just because they just work on data,

"just" in quotation marks, working on stuff that is the most—it's not low-hanging work. The most difficult thing or the first stage is to collect data. Collecting ethnographies. I want to know where these people go, what these people are doing, and I've always been more interested in people who are actually working on data in the field compared to people who, when the data is ready, it's just a matter of being analysed by these white people.

Okka: Oh Pe, your ethics are so, so good. How about Nike, do you want to chime in? You are in history, right, the history department.

Nike: Well, history is a bit arbitrary. When we talk about people in the past. Because after all that's all we can do, is to—to "peek," in quotation marks, into their lives. It's a bit of voyeurism, actually, peeking into their lives, which have actually ceased to exist.

But what later actually, actually has become a pretty lengthy discussion among Indonesian historians, is about how far we need to in quotation marks "raise" the lives of people who were actually not famous figures. Or for example people who were merely numbers, for example, in the archives. Well, there is no method that is very sophisticated or very advanced, actually, to answer that question, because there is a limitation of sources. Even though historians have also started to use oral history or memories as sources.

But because our work is mostly with text, paper, and written sources, what finally comes to my mind is more like how I can open up wider possibilities about what happened in the past. This is something I really learned from one of the writers of American history--the history of slavery in the United States, Saidiya Hartman, whom I really like and I often talk about Saidiya Hartman's book with Pepe. So Saidiya Hartman reads stories about Black women in America after the abolishment of slavery and from there had the courage to speculate and imagine that these women were not just women who didn't want to work, nor just women who were in partnerships outside the law or who had children out of wedlock, they were actually radical thinkers.

These women are in the same standing as Du Bois, who is known as a very brilliant sociologist and intellectual. And black women in New York, in Pennsylvania, have the same standing as Du Bois. And a reading of the archives that is very sensible, very imaginative, is also one of my efforts to make or to write a history of Indonesia that is not just the white imagination of the history of Indonesia, that is always the history of nationalism or the history of revolution, the history of struggle. I want to be able to use imagination, to make knowledge on Indonesian history more diverse and maybe also include stories that we never imagined existed.

Okka: Oh, thank you very much Nike. I also really love Saidiya Hartman's writing. I want to ask you a little about your hopes for other Indonesian women who might be interested in doing a PhD, and who might be listening. What is your message to those who want to do research on Indonesia, but to do it abroad? Or maybe if you met Nike and Pepe when you were about to depart for your studies, do you have any suggestions or messages to give?

Pepe: If I could give some advice to myself, when I left Indonesia four years ago, I would bring a pot, kinda material-wise. I want to say it's gonna be tough, but it's gonna be OK,

to a certain extent. Well, it will be difficult, you will be shocked by how racist this world is, especially for us, who are in the middle of it. I feel that the people in England and America, and actually those in the Netherlands understand very well, that, wow, these people are racist and very clueless when it comes to Indonesia or even countries outside their countries, perhaps. This will be a very isolating and lonely journey, but the only answer to that is solidarity. I translate solidarity as honest friendship with--especially in safe spaces with your queer women friends, your friends of colour, and especially if you are a disabled woman deciding to do her doctorate.

It's really gonna be tough because everyone seems to be talking about your disability in a policy framework that you've completely memorised just to get the crumbs of your rights. But people don't understand how it feels to be pathologised.

Okka: Pepe, I'm even... Pepe, I really have tears in my eyes. [Laughs] Oh, dear me.

Pepe: But I really did survive because my friends were there for me. Without Nike, I wouldn't know what to do.

Okka: Nike?

Nike: Well, I probably would... I'm the same as Pepe. Maybe I would tell people who want to go, hm... I really am lucky to have met Pepe before I actually left for America. Because it is actually one of the reasons I had the courage to do this PhD in a place that I didn't even know about,

at Northwestern, a campus I wouldn't even know if I didn't know Pepe. And from there, in the end, what has kept us going during doctorate studies is indeed our relationship, which is what I would call interesting, what I really treasure; like what Pepe said, I might not be here if it weren't for Pepe. So maybe my advice is more about if you can, look for honest friendships that can really be caring, not just caring for the sake of caring, but what really makes you like hold hands with each other, cry together, and go on our paths together. Because a PhD without a healthy friendship, and all that stuff, I think it's really heavy, Kak.

Okka: Thank you so much, Nike and Pepe. I'm also very happy and grateful to be in community with you, and I hope that even though we are far apart, you know that I am here for you too. So, we are running out of time, would you like to tell people how to communicate further with you, Nike or Pepe? Certain links?

Nike: Well, we can be contacted at terminalbus.co, that's our zine. I don't know if Pepe wants to share her Twitter or not, but I am on Twitter at @Eunikeglr. But terminalbus.co is the most important one if you want to contact us.

Pepe: I'm very tempted to give my Twitter, but my twitter content is a bit useless for many people and in general. So it's better not to. [Laughs.]

Okka: I don't agree, I don't agree. I find it very useful.

Pepe: Well, we can be contacted at terminalbus.co. On that page, there are actually many links, to our Instagram, and to our Twitter. So if you go to terminalbus.co, you can definitely get to all of my and Nike's social media accounts.

Okka: Your Twitter must be included in the national curriculum. [All laugh.]

Pepe: I don't think so.

Nike: I'd be sorry for the students.

Okka: They need to know what it means to have honest friendship. It's important.

Okay, thank you very much Nike and Pepe, thank you also to all listeners, thank you for joining us on this Ultimatum Orangutan Radio episode; you can find me, Khairani Barokka, at @mailbykite, m-a-l-l-b-y-k-l-t-e. See you. Thank you.