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The Long Way Home

When descendants of Dutch colonists were forced to leave Indonesia, California was the logical destination

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The late evangelist Reverend Ike, actor Mark-Paul Gosselaar and musicians Eddie and Alex Van Halen, Michelle Branch and James Intveld share something: Indo roots. So do Joyce Luther Kennard, an associate justice of the California Supreme Court, and Santa Barbara city councilman Das Williams.

If you have no idea who the Indos—or Dutch Indos, as they're sometimes called—are, you are not alone. But their story is compelling: Beginning in the late 1950s, tens of thousands emigrated to the U.S. from the Netherlands, part of a post-WWII migration that went into the late '60s. The majority moved quietly to Southern California and became a part of our mosaic of life. Now Los Angeles is home to the largest Dutch Indo

community, with some 100,000 people.

The California dream represented a myriad of personal and professional opportunities for the Indo diaspora. More than a few followed family and friends who had already arrived on the West Coast. Some traveled coach across America in bumpy railcars from the East Coast, tired of the same chilly climate they'd so disliked in the Netherlands. For a few, collecting fan cards of favorite actors and memorizing lyrics to big-band songbooks had made the Golden State a beacon since childhood. And for all practical purposes, it was a logical choice: The postwar economy boomed, jobs and housing were plentiful, schools were good and, much like in Indonesia, the weather was glorious year-round. They may have longed for home, but they knew they could belong here.

Why did the Indos have to leave their homeland? For those who have forgotten their 17th- and 18th-century world history, the Netherlands and its maritime merchants once dominated

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international trade and established colonial rule from the East Coast to the East Indies. (New York was once New Amsterdam, after all.) The Dutch spent more than 350 years in what is now Indonesia, trading in coffee, sugar, spices and indigo.

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The trajectory of the descendants of these traders is bound up in sweeping historical events and contains elements usually found in James Clavell novels and David Lean movies. Dutch and other European settlers married into an already diverse Indonesian population. They wed settlers from Africa, the Middle East and China, and over the centuries, they became a distinct ethnic group. With European surnames, Dutch fluency, Dutch educations and Dutch citizenship, the group thrived and, until World War II, were comfortably situated between the Europeans and the Indonesians in social strata.

Then came World War II. The Japanese invasion and the murderous Bersiap era of Indonesian independence that followed marked a permanent disruption. During a chaotic, nearly 20-year postwar period, the Dutch relinquished all of their territories in the region.

The new Indonesian government wanted no part of its colonial legacy and, between 1945 and 1965, both forced and forcefully encouraged Indos to leave. Staying meant renouncing their Dutch heritage. Gathering what little was left of their belongings, approximately 300,000 Indos climbed on boats and sailed back through time to the Netherlands, where few had ever set foot.

I meet Frans Krajenbrink for coffee at Mimi's Cafe in Thousand Oaks. A 79-year-old retired physicist for Hughes, he emigrated to the U.S. in 1962. Krajenbrink brings a red three-ring binder with a personal history so acutely rendered that while reading it, I can practically feel the cool mountain air at his grandfather's Nongkojajar retreat in East Java.

"The Krajenbrink family came to Indonesia in the 1700s," he says. "It began with two brothers in Holland. One went to Indonesia. He was an engineer involved with building rice fields." Krajenbrink, who appears more Asian than Dutch, smiles. "That was the beginning of the brown side of the family. We have the brown Krajenbrinks and the white Krajenbrinks. We even have a Krajenbrink family crest."

He empties a leather satchel filled with family photographs—an intimate peek into a world that has disappeared. There is a sense of merriment about him, and I get a glimpse of the mischievous boy in the old pictures.

Krajenbrink shows me a 100-year-old-plus image of his grandfather at work in Sumatra, where he was in charge of building railroads, and a wedding photo of his impossibly beautiful parents. There are photos of children at play in lush surroundings; of him and his younger sister, Meis, in costume; a third grade class that resembles a U.N. assembly in miniature; and a requisite naked baby photo so darling we can't help but laugh. Even knowing how much his story would continue to change, the photos are far more vibrantly alive than bittersweet.

Rudolf Goutier is a retired marine machinist and assembler. I join him and his daughter Irene at a weekly outdoor Indonesian food court at the Duarte

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Inn. The place is as much social event as dining experience, and everyone seems to know one another. People greet Goutier, ask if I'm Dutch and offer oatmeal cookies. © 2011 L

Over plates from the Balinese stand, he tells me his French last name has mysterious origins but that he has deep pride for the Dutch roots on his father's side and the African and Ambonese roots on his mother's. His great-great grandfather was a Mossi warrior named Najoersie, who had been enslaved in Ghana. In the 1830s, the Dutch military, desperate to find soldiers to reinforce their ranks in the restive East Indies, purchased Najoersie's freedom with an advance on his army salary.

During WWII, Goutier's Dutch father would perish in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, as a slave laborer on Japan's Burma railway. When the war ended, the family would flee their home, just ahead of attacking Indonesians. As they prepared to leave, his mother sewed up a floor mat and filled it with family photographs and artifacts. Young Rudolf was entrusted to carry it.

"We lost a lot," he says simply, "but whatever we saved was enough to bring back memories."

By 1947, Goutier's mother, ill and exhausted by the loss of her husband and the trauma of war, packed up her five sons and left the country for the Netherlands. It wasn't a happy homecoming for the mixed-race Dutch cousins. The Netherlands had its own troubles. Still weighed down by the destruction of WWII, a postwar economic slump and a severe housing shortage, people there were ill-prepared for and less than hospitable to the influx.

Ben and Cornelia Apon invite me to their Whittier home. Their adult children, Robert and Jennifer, join us, too. Ben, a big man with a deep, mellifluous voice and a smile that starts in his eyes, is an award-winning chemical engineer. "My father's side, Apon, is French from the Huguenots," he says. "They were Protestant. His family came to Indonesia around 1850. My mother's family was native Indonesian but culturally Dutch. She was fluent in the language. I grew up in a complete Dutch environment."

They pull out a colonial-era map of Indonesia to illustrate how far they've traveled. Cornelia, a sparkling storyteller, points out her birthplace of Jogjakarta in central Java and traces the path she took during WWII, when her grandfather spirited her, her mother and her sisters to safety in Jakarta in West Java.

"My family came to Indonesia in the late 1800s," she says. "We went to Holland in 1947. We went back to Indonesia in 1949, and then back to Holland in 1952. My father had been to Holland many times since he was a child, and this is what he chose for us."

While the Apons are conciliatory, they're honest in their assessment of the repatriated Indo experience in the Netherlands. Ben, who served in the Dutch Royal Navy and comes from a distinguished military family, seems particularly pained. "The Dutch government didn't inform their population about the colonials. There just weren't enough houses after the war, and people were suffering."

"We experienced racism," says Cornelia. "In those days, there were only white people living in Holland. They called us names in school. 'Pinda Chang' means *peanut Chinese*. We had contract pensions. [The government] decided where we would live and how much we could have. We had no choices and were allowed the minimum. It was winter in Holland, and we had the thinnest blankets and lived in the coldest rooms. Then we had to pay for everything they had 'given' us."



Seeing no solution to the social and economic stresses, the Dutch government encouraged further emigration. Indos were tired of the lack of respect, the limited opportunities and the shortages. They welcomed a new beginning in the United States.

“Life is a mystery—how we get from one world to here,” says George van Braam Morris, a blond, blue-eyed, 72-year-old machinist of Portuguese, Indonesian and Dutch descent.”

Exact U.S. immigration numbers vary widely. Some sources quote as low as 25,000, others as high as 60,000. Facilitating the Indo immigration were the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 and the World Refugee Year Law of 1960.

“Life is a mystery—how we get from one world to here,” says George van Braam Morris, a trim, blond, blue-eyed, 72-year-old retired machinist of Portuguese, Indonesian and Dutch descent.

He, wife Jenny and daughter Cheryl have asked me to dinner in their light, flower-filled home in Apple Valley. Lemongrass, garlic and spices fill the air. They have a well-deserved retirement that’s filled with family gatherings, travel and good friends. They also both have histories that can be described as epic.

As a child, George survived the most notorious of the Japanese concentration camps, where nearly 3,000 women and children entered and fewer than 800 walked out; a postwar attack by Indonesian insurgents; an Indo rock ‘n’ roll youth in Holland; and

immigration to the U.S. as a single man in 1961, with only a thin suitcase, a couple of dollars and a useful trade to his name.

He started out in Baltimore, where he alienated his Church of the Brethren sponsor by daring to read Mickey Spillane and drinking beer. It was an auspicious beginning. In an interesting twist of historical fate, he left Baltimore for New Jersey.

“I can trace my family back to the early 1600s,” he says. “The name van Braam is Dutch, and then there’s Morris, which isn’t. The story goes that a merchant named Morris married a van Braam in New York/New Jersey when that territory was Dutch. Like a lot of wealthy people at the time, they put their names together. Later on, the van Braam Morris continued their trade in the East Indies.”

The van Braam Morris story came full circle when George met and married Jenny Perret in 1964 in New Jersey. Jenny’s family fled Indonesia at the start of the Bersiap period and, with six children, began anew in the Netherlands. The Perrets wanted a better future for their children, now numbered eight. The whole family attended night school to learn English in preparation for immigration to the U.S. in 1960. “They had tremendous faith in the Lord,” Jenny says. “My dad was 45, and the kids were 2 to 21. He and mom were fearless.”

The Perrets and van Braam Morris continued their reinvention; Jenny and George moved to California in 1972. Two years later, the entire family, save a brother who went to Hawaii, followed them out West. Like Frans Krajenbrink, Rudolf Goutier and Ben and Cornelia Apon, the van Braam Morris were repeating a pattern of moves across oceans and continents, of establishing and invigorating roots planted before their ancestors set foot in Indonesia. It will continue to transform for their children and grandchildren.



Over the past five years, as Indos with memories of colonial childhoods, WWII and the upheaval of Indonesian independence get older, there's been a renewed, urgent interest in this profoundly unique culture.

Bianca Dias-Halpert, who was born in the Netherlands and raised in the U.S., has spearheaded the Indo Project, one of the few English-language cultural resources. "The Indo Project has been a work in progress since 2005," she says. "There's a wealth of information about us in Dutch, and the community in the Netherlands is well connected, but there's almost nothing here. After a visit back to Holland, I saw how disconnected we were from our culture."

As with many immigrants, the struggle to maintain what is intrinsically their own can be daunting in the face of intermarriage and Americanization. The Indo Project serves as a living cultural bridge for immigrants to past and new generations. "We've gotten a tremendous response," says Dias-Halpert. "It's particularly profound in the English-speaking world, where Indos need a resource. We're also inclusive. You don't have to be Indo to be interested."

Social networking has been instrumental. There is an Indo Project fan page on Facebook, as well as a Dutch-Indonesian Community page and a Dutch-Indonesian Kitchen page, where memories and Oma's (grandma's) recipes are recorded.

Irene Scott, Rudolf Goutier's daughter, is 42. As a girl, she struggled to fit in and says the Internet, as well as hearing her parents' stories, was helpful in defining her heritage. "When you're a teenager," Scott says, "you want to be part of a group. No one knew who we were. When I was a kid, people would say 'Indo what? Who?' They'd ask if I was Puerto Rican or Hawaiian. Finding my identity was hard. I had to explain myself. We always used to say, 'We're the last of the Mohicans.'"

The community had been so quiet in the United States that younger Indos rarely connected beyond their families. Plus, because of frequently wide diversity in their physical appearance, it can be hard to casually identify one another.

"I rode horses with a girlfriend for two years," says Scott, "and it wasn't until I showed her photos from my mother's funeral and she said my uncles looked Dutch Indonesian that I found out she was, too. We had never talked about our backgrounds."

Robert Apon, also 42, never felt adrift as a youngster but was aware of a difference. He has been characterized as just about everything but what he really is. "I was born in Holland and have kind of a European perspective, but I had the American experience growing up: diverse friends, football, etc. As an adult, I experienced Indonesian culture, too, and feel a real mix of influences. L.A. is home, America is home, but I still long for the other."

Before I leave the Apon home, Jennifer packs me some snacks. In the box are *lemper*, Indonesian sticky-rice buns filled with lemongrass-infused chicken, and a flaky Dutch pastry with a sausage filling. This small kindness says so much about the breadth and depth of the Indo story.

The survival of people who traverse continents and multiple cultures while managing to maintain an identity, often under duress, is a thing of wonderment. The Indos were multicultural before there was a term for it. They are flexible, resilient and have a desire to honor the past but not live in it. The Indos are very much alive—and living in Southern California.

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