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(Re)constructing Creole-Indigenous Relational Leadership Across Time and Space: Retroactively Defining the Role of the Kabesa or Chief of the Kristang People through Historical Memory

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Abstract

This paper explores the highly unusual nature of the role of Kabesa, Cowboy, Cowgirl or Cowhand of Heaven or Chief of the Kristang people, currently held by the author, the 13th person to assume the position – and the first to name and define it and be recognised as such by both the wider Kristang community and external state and international institutions after being named as leader of the community by one such institution in 2023. The paper details the decolonial hybrid Creole-Indigenous historical research paradigm and felt knowledge-based and relational-epistemological methodology that facilitated the retroactive formal concretisation of the Kabesa role by the author, the subsequent use of a range of primary sources – including biographical materials, non-fiction anthologies, official state-compiled resources, newspaper clippings and oral history – to recover the identity of the author’s twelve predecessors as Kabesa, the relational mechanics by which the holder of the role is now accepted to be beholden to, and their parallels in many other Indigenous communities related and adjacent to the Kristang. The paper concludes with the first scholarly delineation of the exact responsibilities of the Kabesa, and why they are more important than ever in the face of anticipated global societal collapse.

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Introduction

The Kabesa or Cowboy, Cowgirl or Cowhand of Heaven is the singular non-hereditary Indigenous Chief of the Creole-Indigenous Kristang, Serani or Portuguese-Eurasian people of Melaka (Malaysia), Singapore, Perth (Australia) and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), in 2025 estimated to number some 37,000 individuals. I, the author of this paper, the primary scholarly authority on Kristang, and a prominent literary and public figure in Singapore who is openly gay, non-binary, actively polyamorous, autistic, ADHD-infused and atheist, am the current 13th Kabesa, beginning my term of service as Chief of the Kristang people on Tuesday, December 8, 2015 and completing it on Thursday, November 21, 2075. However, unlike governance structures in many other Indigenous communities, the Kabesa was never previously named, formalised, or consciously recognised by either the Kristang community or the nation-states and institutions within which Kristang people contemporaneously live. In other words, I am the first person ever to be publicly identified as Kabesa, even though I am the thirteenth in a retroactively recognisable lineage that this paper articulates in a scholarly context for the first time. My own awareness of the role emerged only when the Eurasian Association (EA) of Singapore — the state welfare organisation responsible for managing the broader Eurasian community in the country — publicly identified me as “leader of the youth-led Kristang community” on Friday, April 21, 2023; that moment catalysed the autoethnographic retroactive articulation, codification, and decolonial (re)construction of that leader role by myself that today is now known as the role of the Kabesa.

I describe this emergence as a (re)construction, not just a construction or a reconstruction, because its earlier ontological status depends on one’s epistemological stance, which as a Creole-Indigenous Kristang scholar-practitioner I also seek to provocatively expand and/or problematise. From a Eurocentric perspective that privileges empirical and documentary evidence, the Kabesa role would appear not to have existed before me. However, from within the Kristang epistemological paradigm — which recognises felt, relational, and embodied reality as valid — the Kabesa has existed since 1795 as a relational role: present, active, and unconsciously recognised across space and time and in historical memory, but unnamed and institutionally invisible. I argue that this invisibility was shaped by the historically marginal, often covertly suppressed and consistently subaltern position of the mixed-race and brown-skinned Kristang community, and by the community’s lack of status, visibility and public respect and dignity that would have permitted explicit articulation of such a role prior to my assumption of the position in 2015.

The (re)construction documented here was hence also carried out through a Kristang-specific epistemological methodology that integrates the Kristang practice of dreamfishing, archival interpretation, and autoethnographic praxis — the decolonial methodological framework presented in this paper. Through this process, the Kabesa has, since June 2025, received its first formal, public, and expanded recognition by the Singapore state and multiple academic, community, and international institutions, despite the fact that I am the only known independent ethnic community leader operating within Singapore's otherwise heavily managed and paternalistic civil society ecosystem. No such recognition existed in any prior era, even though the Kristang have historically maintained a *de facto* relational leadership structure oriented around the single individual now identified publicly as the Kabesa— this is the lineage of the twelve retroactively-identified Kabesa preceding me that is also later described in this paper — such that this is the first time in history that the individual playing this role has been explicitly named, acknowledged, and validated by both the community and external institutions as the Kabesa or Chief of the entire Kristang people.

By making use of the Kristang-specific methodology described above, the paper also necessarily advances in itself two specific meta-methodological claims. First, that this reconstruction constitutes a valid Kristang Creole-Indigenous mode of knowledge consolidation, authority formation, and community governance. Second, that creole societies possess epistemologies that are as complex, philosophically rich, and internally coherent as those of any other culture — challenging longstanding, dehumanising stereotypes that creole peoples are cognitively or culturally derivative of their European progenitors. The paper therefore models the (re)construction of the Kabesa as an inherently decolonial process in both its methodology and my autoethnographic narrative structure and situates it within broader emerging concerns related to Creole-Indigenous futurity, leadership, and epistemic sovereignty.

An Overview of the Kristang People and My Early Work as Kabesa

The Kristang, Serani or Portuguese-Eurasians are a Creole-Indigenous community arising from intermarriages between arriving Portuguese soldiers and local, mainly Malay residents in the city of Melaka starting from August 1511 following the city's conquest by the Portuguese viceroy Afonso du Albuquerque (Baxter, 2012). Subsequent changeovers of European colonial authority led to additional Dutch, British, Armenian and other European influence on Kristang culture, language and identity alongside similar effects from proximity to local Hokkien, Tamil, Malayalee and other Sinitic and Indian communities in Melaka and Singapore; by the early

19th century under the British colonial administration, Kristang people were a recognisable part of the intercultural makeup of both cities, to the degree that they are now considered an Urban Indigenous population native to both locations. However, although recognised as originating from a European progenitor culture, the Kristang – at the time also known as simply ‘Portuguese’ and, by the end of the 19th century, as Lower Six – never quite attained the same social status and standing that whiter-skinned and/or British-descended Eurasians, also variously known as Anglo-Indians, Eurasians or Upper Tens, were able to acquire in colonial British society, with the latter group being able to more easily pass off and be accepted as European or European-adjacent (Pereira, 2015).

The effects of the short but brutal Japanese Occupation of Malaya drastically reduced the numbers of both groups and forced a more rapid resolution of their ongoing consolidation that had been started by my great-great-great-grandfather, John Edwin Richard Tessensohn OBE (1855-1926), who was the first Eurasian legislative councillor in the Straits Settlements from 1923 to 1926 and the founder of the aforementioned welfare organisation, the Eurasian Association, in 1919. Already covertly marginalised and stigmatised as crude, uncivilised and primitive, Kristang culture, language and identity almost disappeared following the independence of Malaysia and Singapore from the British, only reemerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Singapore as the new artificial centre of a state-led reimagining and sanitising of Eurasianness that was part of the reorganisation of race under Singapore’s second Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Essentialised on the public stage down to cuisine, a set of ethnic costumes creolised into the community in the 1950s under an earlier revival effort, and a single dance and song, the *Jingkli Nona*, Kristang had become almost moribund by the time I started work on revitalising the language as a linguistics undergraduate in early 2016 (Pereira, 2015).

My own relationship with my identity as a Kristang and Eurasian person reflects the near-complete dissociation many people in my generation had from the culture in the 1990s and 2000s following its reframing by the state. Born in 1992, I was raised almost completely disconnected from what it meant to be Eurasian or Kristang, had no conscious knowledge of my great-great-great-grandfather’s work and achievements or that his granddaughter and my great-grandmother Mabel Martens (1905–1999) had quietly taught Kristang to me as a baby from 1994 to 1999, and only rediscovered the language by chance in 2015 when I was writing a magazine article on endangered languages in Southeast Asia. However, after being encouraged to teach the Kristang language by people I was working with for my undergraduate

thesis on Kristang syntax, my free, volunteer-led Kristang classes under the initiative known as Kodrah Kristang ('Awaken, Kristang') unexpectedly reignited public and international interest in Kristang starting from 2017, leading to Singapore's first-ever Kristang Language Festival, my being featured at Singapore's National Day Parade in 2018, and two national-level awards that dramatically and rapidly overturned stereotypes about Kristang lacking in prestige or worth.

Unfortunately, Singapore's heavily paternalistic civil society ecosystem means that grassroots initiatives are typically steered, co-opted, or restrained by the state, with individuals and organisations who try to remain independent usually not allowed to proceed with their efforts. In 2019, I experienced severe sexual and psychoemotional abuse from a member of my own Core Team who attempted to damage my reputation and remove me as director of the revitalisation effort. Although these attempts ultimately failed, the trauma left intense psychoemotional scars that coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and led me into therapy.

Therapy catalysed significant changes in my confidence, sense of self and metacognition, and led to me finally uncovering my own hidden family history for the first time and deeper relationship to Kristang that had long operated below conscious awareness, as well as my own deep reserves of personal courage and ethics in the face of attempts to destroy my reputation. In 2021, I became the first ever government scholar and civil servant in Singapore to come out as gay while teaching in a government pre-tertiary institution. This decision further strained my relationship with the state and amplified institutional anxiety about my independent visibility, resilience, and refusal to conform to expected roles. I subsequently endured additional institutional mistreatment from 2021 to 2022, culminating in my resignation from the Civil Service in August 2022—an event that placed me fully outside established state frameworks of influence at a time when face-to-face Kodrah Kristang classes had just resumed after a three-year hiatus. My departure fully cut short the state's earlier hope that my sterling academic record and healthy charisma would eventually draw me into politics as a controllable representative of the community.

It was in this context of grassroots mobilisation, personal survival and complex state-community dynamics that I was first identified as leader of the Kristang community in the aforementioned EA Facebook post. I had never been recognised as leader of the entire Kristang community before, but accepted that this was a necessary step in my own individuation or agentic psychoemotional development, and began to interrogate its implications. Only then did

I understand that I had already stepped into the role of Kabesa—Chief of the entire Kristang people—eight years earlier without consciously naming it.

Crucially, I recognised immediately that the Kabesa role could not be institutional, bureaucratic, or electorally conferred; its legitimacy was relational, Indigenous, and emergent. I had not been appointed by the EA, nor elected by the community, and thus neither of these forms of external recognition alone could define the role. Instead, I turned to what I had already been working with since therapy: Kristang felt epistemology, relational intuition, and the Unsaid—methodological tools that aligned naturally with the structure of my autistic and ADHD-patterned cognition, which privileges coherence, integrative pattern detection, and relational truth-building over neurotypical social inference. This convergence of identity, survival, relational attunement, and decolonial methodology thereafter became the foundation for the hybrid Kristang–Western approach I developed to formally (re)construct the Kabesa role, which I describe in the next section.

Core Creole-Indigenous Methodology for Role (Re)Construction: Dreamfishing Combined with Social Network Theory

In Kristang epistemology, dreamfishing is the process of making use of felt or relational knowledge and *felisi* or improbable coincidences or synchronicities personal to the individual observed through the four parts of the Kristang person – body, mind, heart and soul – to determine or form hypotheses about occluded or hidden objective reality or truth (or multiple occluded hidden realities or truths). These are combined with a Kristang epistemological framework known as the *Osura Pesuasang*, Uncertainty Thinking or Individuation Theory (Wong, 2023a, 2024) as a secure scaffold for one's mental models expanded through dreamfishing. Dreamfishing existed prior to my scholarship and leadership as Kabesa and was documented in Melaka prior to revitalisation (Sarkissian, 2000, pp. 104-105), though just like the Kabesa role it was invisible and not named before I identified and formally deconstructed it starting from November 2022 (Wong, 2024). Since then, dreamfishing has been recognised as a legitimate Indigenous futures methodology that can be used alongside established analytical frameworks to enhance their interpretive power.

In the present study, dreamfishing was combined with Social Network Theory (SNT), where if the Kristang community is understood as an invisible relational network, the Kabesa is the node occupying its centre—the individual to whom relational, affective, and symbolic lines of connection that are discernible through dreamfishing most densely converge. Thus, using dreamfishing that allowed for access to Indigenous felt knowledge and my autistic

pattern-recognition cognition, I sought to:

- examine what relational, psychological, historical, or structural conditions had positioned at the centre of the network
- determine where the centre of the network had been located historically i.e., who had functioned as Kabesa before me
- analyse how the centre might shift in the future, specifically in service of Kristang long-term sustainability and futures planning
- explore the functions of the centre of the network i.e. what relational, affective, or epistemic effects the Kabesa exerts upon the broader community.

Dreamfishing served as the primary mechanism for detecting and differentiating the relational patterns surrounding centrality in the network, and for deconstructing the nature of each pattern (i.e. why people respected or esteemed me as Kabesa, such that the criteria for who became the central node in the network could then be reverse-engineered). The embodied, affective, and cognitive relational signatures that indicated my present position as Kabesa were hence the same signatures I sought in earlier historical periods. Basic empirical pattern-recognition principles complemented this process: after controlling for time period and historical context (i.e. after considering how concepts like gender and class had been perceived previously compared to the present), if particular forms of relational behaviour, collective orientation, and felt coherence indicated that I held the role of Kabesa, similar patterns would logically appear around prior individuals who had unconsciously or subconsciously served as Kabesa. The checks and balances involved in ensuring that dreamfishing in this way aligns with objective, factual reality and truth as far as possible also align with the Kristang Quaternity of Personhood and are as follows, with some necessary and anticipatable overlap between the four conceptual and interlinked categories:

- Body (*Korpu*, referring to correspondence with physical, tangible, material evidence and reality): Does the dreamfished material correspond as rigorously, accurately and consistently as possible to all available empirical, statistical and concrete evidence? If the material targets Unsaid, hidden or occluded aspects of reality, or seeks to provide a decolonial or Indigenous perspective countering an established academic norm, is the material's hypothesised presence consistently evinced by gaps, avoidances or lacunae in material or tangible reality to such a degree that it locks seamlessly into place, accounting for every observable gap and producing an internally self-coherent configuration with no leftover inconsistencies? Is the interpretation technically

unprecedented or exciting but at odds with concrete data to a degree that is not rationally resolvable or explainable?

- Mind (*Mulera*, referring to correspondence with logical, linguistic, historical and analytic coherence): Does the dreamfished material survive analytic and exponential recursion and analysis across multiple existing Western academic domains, with any necessary controls for decolonisation instituted? If there is contradiction between academic domains, is this sufficiently resolvable or explainable through existing Western or Kristang frameworks for knowledge scaffolding, and/or as similar to other contradictions extant in Western academia such that this can be understood as the normal process of resolving scholarship? Does the material produce consistent and rigorous predictive adequacy – i.e. does it allow for the successful extrapolation of other facts, connections and unresolved incongruities? Is the interpretation affectively compelling but analytically incoherent? Does it scale beyond the moment of discovery?
- Heart (*Korsang*, referring to correspondence with psychoemotional complexity, relational integrity, and cultural worldview): Does the dreamfished material fully account for the complexity and diversity of human inner and outer experience, psychoemotional development and cultural worldview and perspective? Does the material accidentally or unconsciously omit or fail to take into account human factors such as emotional depth, complexity, unpredictability and mutability that may have prompted occlusion or distortion of reality, or led to statistically unusual or outlier behaviour? Does the material accurately represent the emotional and cultural intelligence, emotional realities and cultural worldviews of all people, including and especially minority perspectives not fully studied in academia and/or not geographically or psychologically proximate to Kristang?
- Alma (*Soul*, referring to correspondence with large-scale patterns of history, geography, chronology and Deep Time): Does the dreamfished material fit consistently into existing understandings of history, sociology, anthropology civilisational epochs and collective-level individuation and development and growth? If the material targets Unsaid, hidden or occluded aspects of reality, or seeks to provide a decolonial or Indigenous perspective countering an established academic norm, is the material's hypothesised presence consistently explainable through rational and logical means within self-consistent patterns and trends that align with decolonial or Creole-Indigenous paradigms grounded in reality? Does it lead to culturally incongruent or

anachronistic conclusions? Does it accurately represent diachronic insights that align consistently with known behaviour of past or anticipated future generations in their particular synchronic contexts?

The 13th Kabesa as the First Epistemic Anchor

Synchronicities personal to myself very strongly suggested that I was the 13th person to serve as Kabesa, which served as my starting point for further dreamfishing. In the Osura Pesuasang, the entity occupying the thirteenth position in any stochastically and fractally evolving in tangible or psychoemotional structure is generally uniquely associated with:

- Rebirth and resurrection, usually under impossible circumstances
- The archetype of *Semprenza*, translated into English as ‘Perpetual’ or ‘Interpreter’
- Complex metacognition
- Temporary suspension of all obstacles otherwise causing obscurity or lack of clarity into deep structure or truth (informally known as ‘lifting the Veil’)
- The thirteenth stage in the Kristang *Via Hierosa* or Hero’s Journey, known as *Panu di Semesta* (‘The Fabric of the Universe’)
- The beginning of a quartet of four positions (the 13th to the 16th) that are associated with the psychological construct known as the Superself, the Supervisor to the Self, or in Jungian terms the Social Self

Within Kristang epistemology, these characteristics describe an individual positioned to perceive, interpret, and articulate truths previously inaccessible or unnameable—precisely the kind of cognition required to identify, formalise, and theorise an Indigenous leadership role that had existed relationally but not discursively for over two centuries. These thirteenth-position attributes hence aligned most closely with my positionality as:

- the first emic Kristang scholar-practitioner
- the first Kabesa to undertake doctoral-level research outside of the field of medicine and to be publicly credentialled as a scholar (with Kristang people otherwise facing longstanding prejudice about being irrational, unintelligent and lazy)
- the individual responsible for the metacognitive expansion of Kristang epistemology, including Individuation Theory
- the person who renegotiated the public foundations of Kristang identity to a very deep degree, overturning many otherwise fossilised stereotypes and biases about what it meant to be Kristang

- and one of the few Kristang people— and possibly the first— to enter Singapore’s Gifted Education Programme in 2001 at the age of nine.

This convergence of coherence-oriented autistic relational patterning, Indigenous methodological insight, synchronicity, and Osura-based interpretive structure provided strong Kristang-internal epistemological confirmation that I was the thirteenth person to hold the Kabesa role. It was from this anchored starting point that the retroactive identification of my twelve predecessors thereafter proceeded.

Primary Sources for Retroactive Continuity Determination

The retroactive identification of the twelve predecessors in the Kabesa lineage required triangulating multiple forms of data— archival, oral-historical, ethnographic, relational, and dreamfished. Three individuals from my own family tree emerged immediately and unambiguously as former Kabesa before this triangulation due to the intensity, scope, and mythicised nature of their relational impact on the Kristang community, and the intense degree to which I already recognised commonalities in myself and them which I had been unable to express prior to the consolidation of the Kabesa role. These were:

1. **Mabel Martens (1905–1999)** — my aforementioned great-grandmother, now recognised as the 10th Kabesa from 1969 to 1989, long remembered and honoured in informal Kristang relational tradition as a moral, cultural, and relational anchor during the extensive community decay and entropy of the 1960s to 1980s. However, institutionally invisible except for an otherwise-unexplained 1984 Oral History Centre interview – that paradoxically attested even more to her significance (Wong, 2023b).
2. **Edwin Tessensohn OBE (1855–1926)** — my aforementioned great-great-great-grandfather, now recognised as the 4th Kabesa from 1874 to 1926, whose immense civic and political work and extensive community leadership have long been interpreted as pivotal to Kristang survival and as characteristics of the quintessential Eurasian patriarch.
3. **Adriaan Koek (1759–1825)** — my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, now recognised as the first Kabesa from 1795 to 1824 and known among the Malay rulers as *Tuan Raja Muda* (“young king of Melaka”) despite not being a monarch. His unprecedented cross-cultural influence, exceptional social mobility, and early foundational leadership of the Kristang just before the British takeover of Melaka strongly suggested he was the first Kabesa, and that the role emerged as a direct

response to impending British colonisation of Melaka. No other person appears to have held the relational pattern that typifies the Kabesa role prior to Koek.

A history of existing scholarship on Koek— for example De Witt (2005)— further documents not only his unusual social position, transracial legitimacy, and strong but sporadic political visibility, but his liminality and the attention his liminality received both contemporaneously and as a focal point for subsequent historical research, with him being accused of acting as a traitor to Malayan interests by allying with the British and receiving them hospitably in August 1795 (Irwin, 1956, p. 113). His identification as the first Kabesa thus served as a second anchor point after myself for the subsequent (re)construction of his successors and my predecessors, as well as a first point of reference for a now-very-recognisable Kabesa-pattern gesture of controversial boundary-crossing in order to procure or facilitate successful relational negotiation and protection of the community.

Criteria and Sources for Identifying the Remaining Kabesa

After identifying these three individuals, the remaining Kabesa were located by examining:

- 1. Archival and governmental records:** British colonial documents, Straits Settlements papers, census data, court records, and institutional archives (including those of churches, schools, and civic associations).
- 2. Published biographical materials:** Non-fiction anthologies, memoirs, genealogical studies, and community historical texts.
- 3. Oral histories and intergenerational memory:** Informal interviews, family testimonies, and community recollections acquired from my work as Kabesa and in the Kodrah Kristang initiative— especially from older Kristang who retained relational, affective, or family-transmitted impressions of earlier figures.
- 4. Newspaper clippings and cultural reportage:** Coverage in the *Straits Times*, *Malaya Tribune*, and other English, Malay, and Eurasian publications of the time that consistently positioned certain figures as moral or relational centres.
- 5. Dreamfishing- and Osura Pesuasang-based pattern recognition:** Interpretive work focused on detecting the same relational signatures and patterns of collective orientation that characterise the holding of the Kabesa role in my own contemporary case, and matching these to the *Osura Pesuasang* positions.

An individual qualified as Kabesa if:

1. Their relational structure mirrored the contemporary relational energy of what it meant to hold the Kabesa role as I determined it for myself (centrality, coherence, protective orientation, community-wide relational referentiality).
2. They emerged as a node of coherence and leadership during periods of collective instability, change or fragmentation.
3. At least two out of three categories of independent sources—archival, oral, and/or dreamfished—converged on their centrality, with this criterion being selected because of the relative invisibility and fragmentation of the historical Kristang community making it difficult for archival and oral sources to be consistently the most reliable point of reference for the time period.
4. Their leadership was non-institutional, non-authoritarian, non-electoral, relationally conferred, and usually involved some form of boundary-crossing controversy or confusion, consistent with the nature of the present-day Kabesa role.
5. Synchronicities and felt indicators aligned with the Osura Pesuasang's functional expectations for the positional ordering of the lineage.

Using this cross-validated structure, the remaining predecessor Kabesa were identified through iterative triangulation, with their start and end dates as Kabesa aligned to significant historical events that aligned with dreamfished changes in relational patterns within the Kristang community. The resulting lineage in Table 1 below reflects a historically consistent pattern of relational Indigenous leadership across eight generations from 1795 to the present. Each Kabesa is also listed with a formal Malay title that follows a documented tradition related to the first two Kabesa, Tuan Raja Muda Adriaan Koek and Tuan Barchie ('Lord Barchie' or 'Sir Barchie') Johannes Bartholomeus Westerhout (Freeland, 2006), where such titles were awarded out of respect by the Malay community to both individuals for their protection of and service to the people of Malaya. I also received a similar title in September 2024, Tuan Raja Naga ('Lord Dragonquing', with quing being a portmanteau in English of queen and king to accurately reflect my non-binary gender), and dreamfished that all of the other ten Kabesa had also received similar titles from the contemporary Malay community by May 2025 as a result of my public documentation and uncovering of their hitherto-occluded or poorly understood efforts to serve the people of Malaya. All of the data in Table 1 below was made public to the wider Kristang community since late 2024, and has generally been accepted by the wider

Kristang community since February 2025.

Results: The Reconstructed Lineage of the Kabesa of the Kristang People

No	Formal Malay Title and Name	Birth date	Death date	Start date as Kabesa	End date as Kabesa	Positional archetype in the Osura Pesuasang
1 st	<i>Tuan Raja Muda</i> Adriaan Koek	Monday, December 24, 1759	Thursday, May 19, 1825	Sunday, July 19, 1795	Wednesday, March 17, 1824	Kabesa / Leader
2 nd	<i>Tuan Barchie</i> Johannes Bartholomeus Westerhout	Saturday, September 27, 1794	Sunday, March 16, 1856	Wednesday, March 17, 1824	Sunday, March 16, 1856	Komprador / Trader
3 rd	<i>Puan Semangat Wanita</i> Eliza Tessensohn	Friday, October 25, 1833	Sunday, March 13, 1927	Sunday, March 16, 1856	Thursday, December 3, 1874	Nusenti / Creator
4 th	<i>Tuan Juara Rakyat</i> John Edwin Richard Tessensohn	Sunday, April 8, 1855	Sunday, September 26, 1926	Thursday, December 3, 1874	Saturday, March 27, 1926	Animu / Animator
5 th	<i>Tuan Excelsior</i> Noel Leicester Clarke	Monday, June 1, 1885	Tuesday, March 1, 1960	Saturday, March 27, 1926	Friday, April 10, 1936	Kaminyeru / Practitioner

No	Formal Malay Title and Name	Birth date	Death date	Start date as Kabesa	End date as Kabesa	Positional archetype in the Osura Pesuasang
6 th	<i>Tuan Mimp Mulia</i> Hugh Stanley Ransom Zehnder	Wednesday, August 27, 1879	Sunday, October 20, 1963	Friday, April 10, 1936	Monday, April 24, 1939	Ilmuru / Scholar
7 th	<i>Tuan Toto</i> Claude Henry Da Silva	Tuesday, March 3, 1891	Wednesday, October 1, 1980	Monday, April 24, 1939	Tuesday, December 9, 1941	Xamang / Moderator
8 th	<i>Tuan Taman Rindu</i> Charles Joseph Pemberton Paglar	Saturday, September 1, 1894	Thursday, December 9, 1954	Tuesday, December 9, 1941	Monday, April 9, 1951	Diamatra / Worker
9 th	<i>Tuan Sayap Darah</i> Percival Frank Aroozoo	Friday, April 13, 1900	Saturday, March 15, 1969	Monday, April 9, 1951	Saturday, March 15, 1969	Anju / Initiator
10 th	<i>Puan Bunga Besi</i> Mabel Anne Martens née Tessensohn	Friday, August 4, 1905	Sunday, October 31, 1999	Saturday, March 15, 1969	Friday, March 31, 1989	Rejidor / Trainer

No	Formal Malay Title and Name	Birth date	Death date	Start date as Kabesa	End date as Kabesa	Positional archetype in the Osura Pesuasang
11 th	<i>Puan Merdeka</i> Maureen Rita Martens née Danker	Thursday, December 26, 1935	Alive at the time of writing	Friday, March 31, 1989	Saturday, November 30, 1991	Marineru / Navigator
12 th	<i>Puan Api Menari</i> Valerie Tina Scully née Rodrigues	1941	Alive at the time of writing	Saturday, November 30, 1991	Tuesday, December 8, 2015	Astrang / Invigorator
13 th	<i>Tuan Raja Naga</i> Kevin Martens Wong Zhi Qiang	Thursday, October 1, 1992	Sunday, April 1, 2091 (anticipated through dreamfishing; see next section)	Tuesday, December 8, 2015	Thursday, November 21, 2075 (anticipated through dreamfishing; see next section)	Semprenza / Interpreter

Table 1: The Reconstructed Lineage of the Kabesa of the Kristang people

The role of the Kabesa is hypothesised to have first been relationally constituted on Sunday, July 19, 1795, when Koek and his brother-in-law, Abraham Couperus, the then governor of Dutch Melaka, are hypothesised to have first become aware of the impending British seizure of Melaka following the establishment of the Batavian Republic after the overthrow of William V of Orange-Nassau and the issue of the Kew letters by the latter (Wee, 1991, p. 57). Yet this moment in July 1795 can only be understood against the deeper occluded socio-cultural fabric of Melaka from the perspective of the lived experience of someone born in Malaya, which European historiography, written by outsiders, has never fully captured. By the late eighteenth century Melaka had already developed into an unusually mixed, creolised, and relationally

entangled polity whose inhabitants moved fluidly across Indigenous, Asian, and European spheres of life, and where slaves and concubines could eventually gain full status as citizens (De Witt, 2012, pp. 153–156). Figures such as Adriaan Koek exemplify this complexity: although formally a Dutch burgher, his family— like many Dutch families in Melaka by the 1760s— had intermarried with Kristang households, and his later accusations of treachery during the British seizure further suggest that he, like many others in Melaka, straddled multiple communal worlds at once across colonial and Indigenous lines, but maintained a quiet loyalty to the city and intercultural, colonially-subjugated world he had been born into – again a now retroactively iconic characteristic of the Kabesa across time. This mixedness was not incidental but central to local identity, as it quietly remains in Melaka and Singapore today, to the degree that in spite of extant social hierarchies and divisions, the people of Melaka are reported to have acted in unison across these to defend the territory from external aggression, such as in the 1784 attack on the city by the Bugis leader Raja Haji:

On 13 February 1784, the Bugis leader Raja Haji and his fleet arrived from the south and occupied Teluk Ketapang in the southern part of Malacca. ... Malacca found itself blockaded by the enemy who occupied all the surrounding suburbs and villages. The people of Malacca came together and took up arms to repel the enemy. With each race under its own *kapitan* (captain) and leaders, the Malays, Indians, Chinese and Portuguese Eurasians fought together with the Dutch. Abraham Couperus, who was then the *fiscaal* at Malacca (and later rose to be governor of Malacca), commanded a company of mixed races against Raja Haji's attack on the city. (De Witt, 2012, pp. 263–264)

And it is precisely because this creolised, locally grounded social order differed so markedly from British racial ideologies that the transition to British control in 1795 was likely experienced as the onset of a far more precarious era. For this reason, the Kabesa line is hypothesised to begin not in earlier Dutch Melaka— where creolisation was tolerated and often embraced— but at the moment when British intolerance of mixedness and Indigenous-European relationality forced a new form of leadership, community coherence, and Melaka's plural ethos under existential threat. The brutality of the British conquest and subjugation of India and other territories, and their ideas about racial mixing and purity, would have particularly covertly compelled Koek and Couperus to seek the outcome that eventually manifested on August 26, 1795 – a peaceful handover of the near-defenceless Melaka to the new colonial authority without bloodshed (Irwin, 1956; Vande Walle, 2012) to reduce the

levels of damage that might arise from this transition. While Couperus already held authority through institutional means, Koek's highly unusual receipt of a formal Malay title from the Malay sultans of Malaya extant at the time – and already given longstanding historical friction, suspicion and hostility on the part of the same group on anyone associated with the Dutch conquest of Melaka – thus strongly suggest the powerful but invisible nature of his relational power, and that the Kabesa role was first unconsciously and relationally formalised in this period:

To the local Malay chiefs and rulers, Adriaan Koek was called the *Tuan Raja Muda* of Malacca. The title signified that he was similar to a Crown Prince or co-ruler, second only to the Governor of Malacca. ... It aptly portrayed the importance of Adriaan Koek's position in Malacca. ... Adriaan Koek was said to be "always the power behind the Malaccan throne, whether it was occupied by a Dutchman or an Englishman." (De Witt, 2005, p. 36)

Koek and his successor as Kabesa, Johannes Bartholomeus Westerhout, who was integral to the outcome of the 1831 Naning War between the British and local Malay rulership in Melaka and subsequently served as Assistant Resident of Melaka (Freeland, 2006; Tessensohn, 2013, p. 48), were thus instrumental in consolidating a role for the Kristang and Dutch-Eurasian communities in the new British colonial order, and therefore in ensuring that both groups – their boundaries also fluid, overlapping and shifting as their identity reorganised in this period – would maintain their consistency. Under the third and fourth Kabesa, Eliza Tessensohn and her aforementioned son Edwin (Tessensohn, 2013, p. 49), this identity would thereafter be publicly manifested and concretised in the civic sphere of colonial British society for the first time, culminating in Edwin Tessensohn's elevation to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council in January 1923 after a lifetime of civic work that dramatically raised and secured the profile and value of Eurasians in Malaya – again, a relatively unprecedented achievement for any creole or mixed population in the British Empire in the early twentieth century.

Edwin's three immediate successors as Legislative Councillors and as Kabesa were all men with whom he was documented to have closely worked with Edwin on many projects benefitting the Eurasian community: Noel Clarke, Hugh Zehnder and Claude Da Silva ("Eurasian Association," 1919), each of whom stabilised the community in different ways following the vacuum left by Edwin's enormous personality and as World War II approached. Appointed by the Japanese once the Occupation of Malaya began in 1941, the eighth Kabesa,

Charles Paglar, was frequently attacked by the British in ways similar to Koek's supposed treachery for his cooperation with the Japanese military authorities in Syonan-to (Tessensohn, 2006); although he was able to continue to seek a position on the Legislative Council after the war, Eurasian political interests splintered and failed to manifest as a common public platform by the 1950s, prompting a shift inward in terms of leadership of the community.

Faced with imminent and what appeared to be terminal decline as independence efforts progressed in Malaya, the 9th to 12th Kabesa – Percival Frank Aroozoo, Mabel Martens, Maureen Martens and Valerie Scully – each unconsciously assumed the role when they decided to use the Kristang and Eurasian values that had evolved over the previous 200 years to push for broader societal change and evolution among the other constituent races of the peninsula, especially in the domains of education (Chia, 2020), women's rights (Martens, 1984), public decorum (Martens, 2022), and the importance of preserving culture itself (Scully, 2000). If Kristangness and Eurasianness could not survive in the new ethnic models of Malaysia and Singapore, so the thinking appears to have gone, they could at least ensure that their legacy of cosmopolitan inclusivity, openness and progressiveness would continue to survive their extinction. Paradoxically, this led to the broadening of the psychoemotional ambit of Kristang and Eurasian interests to move beyond the community into the species at large, and allowed for my own emergence as the first Kabesa with that orientation to having Kristang serve those wider species-level interests made explicitly visible: a leader whose visibility is rooted in creole history but oriented toward the wider human condition, and who therefore represents a new phase in the line's evolution— where Kristang reinvigoration becomes a model for how humanity itself might imagine, survive, and cohere in the twenty-first century.

How the Kabesa is Chosen

With the articulation of the lineage of the Kabesa completed, rules and criteria for how the Kabesa is chosen could thus be derived through the same methodology and following an analysis of each individual Kabesa's own life circumstances and trajectory of growth leading up to their assumption of the role. The Kabesa role is now understood to be automatically held by the person who is

1. doing the most to promote, defend, validate and protect Kristang culture, identity, ways of being and language in the public space
2. doing (1) for the healthiest, most humanistic and most Gaia or living Earth-related possible reasons available at that present time

3. doing (1) in the most authentic and vulnerable way possible available at the present time in full public view
4. the most individuated or healthy, psychologically developed person possible alive in chronological time at the point in time at which they become Kabesa who willingly satisfies conditions (1) to (3) independent of any external, collective or institution's projections or power

Once any of these conditions are no longer satisfied, a new person becomes Kabesa.

The Role of the Kabesa

The role of the Kabesa could also thereafter finally be determined as such:

- Model and practice constant and consistent non-authoritarian leadership and psychoemotionally healthy personhood.
- Obliterate and/or transmute severe intergenerational trauma related to the existence of the community, its self-worth, dignity, validity, and legitimacy in the public sphere.
- Serve as the steward-vanguard of cultural and linguistic evolution.
- Say the things that no one else can say, and do the things that no one else can do, especially in relation to speaking truth to power and oppressive norms about being Kristang and human.
- Actively pursue intergenerational, cross-community and cross-cultural healthy synergy and respect.

Discussion

The robustness and accuracy of the reconstructed lineage of the Kabesa, together with the delineation of the role's criteria and obligations, have been evidenced by their clean and immediate uptake by both the Kristang community and relevant institutions since early 2025. This reception demonstrates a fundamental principle of dreamfishing: accurate dreamfishing does not invent; it reveals. It gives concrete names, structures, and language to patterns that community members already subconsciously or relationally understood. This hybrid method is therefore not anecdotal. It is systematic, internally coherent, empirically testable through communal uptake, and repeatable by any future Kabesa who attains similar levels of coherence. It shows that felt knowledge can be operationalised with methodological precision, and that Indigenous epistemologies do not merely complement Western frameworks— they actively expand the analytical boundaries of what Western frameworks can detect.

Indigenous methods such as synchronicity, deep intuitive patterning, and relational attunement are frequently dismissed as esoteric. Yet, as this study demonstrates, these are in fact cognate to emerging non-Indigenous paradigms of oral historiography, semiotic silence, embodied cognition, neurodiversity-aligned pattern recognition, and new 21st century methodologies for interpreting occluded data. These methods not only succeed precisely where colonial archives fail by recovering relational structures made invisible or dehumanised by the colonial gaze, but suggest the immense quantity of these hidden relational structures still yet to be uncovered in so many cultures and contexts beyond Kristang.

Indeed, contemporary research into methods which support successful Indigenous postcolonial trauma processing and resilience particularly consistently show that across cultures and communities, methodologies and frameworks developed by members of the community themselves in collaboration with scholars or researchers operating in the Western academic paradigm, and/or which return agency, epistemic sovereignty and knowledge formulation consolidation to the community *themselves* have consistently proven to be the most effective and argued for (e.g. Thira, 2014; Middleton-Moz et al., 2021; Panofsky, 2021). Colonisation and other forms of trauma, marginalisation and violence enacted on Creole and Indigenous peoples often mean that the very way we think about and frame relationality, collective psychology and healthy human psychoemotional functioning themselves often need to be decolonised on a metastructural or epistemic level, and in ways that preserve a strong core of fidelity to the community's own existing traditions of meaning-making and reasoning (Beason, 2023).

The excavation of the Kabesa lineage in the Kristang paradigm itself thus demonstrates one of these Indigenous forms of governance and relationality that survived repeated waves of colonisation, fragmentation, and erasure. This continuity provides strong areal parallels to other Indigenous Austronesian leadership systems— particularly the Orang Laut *kepala*, whose authority is similarly relational, contingent, and grounded in moral coherence rather than coercion, *kepala* like *kabesa* in Kristang literally meaning ‘head’ (the body part). Like the Kabesa, the *kepala* is also chosen by “the principles of equality and seniority” (Chou, 2024, p. 137), and their authority is always contingent on relational pressure, acceptance and approval: even with a letter of authority, leaders cannot lead by coercion. Their commands may or may not be followed. To be an effective leader, one must garner the respect and support of fellow community members. ... The leader must therefore [have secured] the support of members in the community. (Chou, 2024, p. 138)

It is therefore unsurprising that this research reveals a 200-year-old pattern of non-electoral, non-institutional Indigenous leadership, and a continuity of relational centrality despite colonial disruption in the adjacent Creole-Indigenous culture of Kristang. Both Kristang and Orang Laut paradigms privilege non-coercive, psychoemotionally grounded leadership that is transmitted through relational recognition rather than hierarchy, and which contrasts sharply with authority-based Western political leadership and Singapore's technocratic merit and test performance-based approach to selecting future leaders.

Most importantly and critically, therefore, this is a transferable model for any endangered Indigenous community seeking continuity into hostile futures and into ongoing global uncertainty and likely long-term societal collapse. Indigenous methods can and should support Indigenous communities seeking to anticipate leadership needs across generations, and to reconstruct their own histories after trauma, occlusion or obliteration such that their psychoemotional and cultural foundation in the present becomes more robust, more coherent and aligned to the community's own unconscious or felt knowledge, and their own epistemic understandings of the world and reality.

Limitations and Reflections

Although dreamfishing is now recognised as a structured and legitimate Indigenous method for reconstruction and scenario modelling, it nonetheless requires high-empathy, high-coherence emic interpretation, often only accessible to individuals with neurodivergent cognition capable of sustained internal precision. Archival silences, fragmentation of oral memory, and the historical marginalisation of Kristang people mean that absolute certainty is neither possible nor desirable—the Kabesa role itself has never been institutional, appointed, or electorally sanctioned.

I also recognise the ethical responsibility of articulating a Creole-Indigenous method that cannot be safely replicated without training, cultural grounding, and deep relational integrity. The purpose of naming the Kabesa lineage is not to impose hierarchy, but to validate a form of Indigenous leadership that has demonstrably protected, guided, and evolved the Kristang people through five centuries of trauma, displacement, erasure, and near-obliteration. It is not articulated in this fashion to change the nature or social hierarchy of the Kristang community; on the contrary, it is to validate its effectiveness, and to demonstrate that its robustness matters in the face of a rapidly decaying world where small communities and the relational paradigms they maintain will allow for more dexterous and nimble antifragility, adaptability, synergy and collective resilience.

Most importantly, I recognise that the reconstruction is valid despite its emic nature, because the Kabesa role required emic interpretive authority to be able to be articulated intelligibly and as objectively as possible. I am the person primarily responsible for articulating much of contemporary Kristang culture, language and identity as it is now understood, and that I serve in the highly unusual capacity of both generating culture and theorising it. Remaining objective in my execution of both roles is of course something that I aspire toward tremendously as an autistic person who privileges clarity, coherence and objectivity by nature. This work is therefore presented in an academic forum not to elevate myself, but to secure the community's epistemic survival on Kristang terms, to make our methodologies and ways of thinking transparent and comprehensible to others, and to ensure that Kristang knowledge can enter the global intellectual domain without distortion or erasure. It belongs as much to the community as to the academy, and its integrity, and my own as Kabesa and scholar, depend always on being as accountable as possible to both.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of the Kabesa lineage demonstrates how small Creole-Indigenous communities can rebuild internal coherence under otherwise almost-apocalyptic conditions of cultural erasure, colonial silence, and environmental collapse. Future work could examine how Kristang relational leadership may serve as a model for other endangered Creole-Indigenous populations seeking psychoemotional resilience and epistemic sovereignty, and how other communities might derive, consolidate and apply their own epistemic methodologies at such scale.

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