



Amond, Lith.

HABIB ABDOE'RAHMAN ALZAHIR.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Anthony Reid

Foreign scholars have generally been reluctant to acknowledge the importance of personalities in Indonesian history. Even if no modern scholar would claim like Crawford to see "hardly an individual, of such prominent fortune or endowment, as to rank with the great men of other countries,"¹ the great figures which undoubtedly do punctuate the course of Indonesian history have seldom been allowed to occupy the center of the stage. For traditional colonial historians they appeared as problems for Dutch policy makers--fascinating perhaps, but essentially troublesome deviants from the broader themes. Modern social science, which has established the priorities for postwar scholarship on Indonesia, has been concerned with defining the broad patterns and categories of Indonesian society and culture rather than with exploring the individual mentality. The few serious biographical studies which have begun to appear center on figures from either the remote² or the immediate past,³ and this fact emphasizes how little we know of the way in which Indonesians of the intervening centuries looked out on their world.

If there is an exception to this neglect, it is in the area of Dutch historical romance. In the 1850's and 1860's there was a fashion for novels centered on such colorful rebels as Dipanagara, Sentot, and Surapati.⁴ Works of the same genre have appeared in this century,

-
1. John Crawford, History of the Indian Archipelago (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820), II, p. 287.
 2. Notably H. J. de Graff's two monographs, De Regering van Panembahan Sénapati Ingalaga (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut, XIII [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954]), and De Regering van Sultan Agung, Vorst van Mataram 1613-1645 en die van zijn Voorganger Panembahan Seda-ing-Krapjak 1601-1613, (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut, XXIII [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958]); and Denys Lombard, Le Sultanat d'Atjéh au temps d'Iskandar Muda, 1607-1636 (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extreme-Orient, 1967). All of these, however, are more directly interested in the structure of the state than in the personality of the ruler.
 3. Notably the biographies of Sukarno by Bernhard Dahm, Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969) and John Legge, Sukarno (Melbourne: Penguin, 1972).
 4. R. Nieuwenhuys, "De Houding van de Nederlanders in Indonesia zoals deze weerspiegeld wordt in de toenmalige letterkunde," Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden, LXXXVI, Part I (1971), p. 66.

of which one of the most faithful to fact is Mrs. Szekely-Lulofs' historical novel about the Atjehnese heroine Tjut Njak Dien.⁵ But as Rob Nieuwenhuys has recently pointed out,⁶ this literature was in many ways the product of a European-centered vision, casting its subjects in the mold of contemporary western romantic convention.

It might be argued in defense that biography is the most difficult type of history for the foreigner to attempt; that the sympathy or identification with great men, through which most of us first establish some feeling for our own history, involves too great a danger of distortion if attempted across a wide cultural divide.

If caution of this type has indeed inhibited potential biographers, it renders more urgent the need for translations of Indonesian autobiographies or close contemporary biographies. Indonesians have been as conscious as any other people of the importance of great men in shaping their destiny. Some of the most important works of traditional Javanese, Malay, and South Celebes literature are devoted to the glorification of individual rulers or military leaders. The nationalist concern to commemorate *pahlawan nasional* in the names of streets, universities, and army units, and through a series of laudatory biographies, attests to the same sense of the power of great men. They have the power to lead, to inspire, perhaps even power over nature itself.

Many prominent Indonesians have left some sort of autobiographical record. Some twentieth-century examples, such as the memoirs or letters of Kartini, Pangeran Achmad Djajadiningrat, Tan Malaka, Sjahrir, and Hamka, are fortunately well known and relatively accessible. For earlier periods, as the five examples below show, the difficulties confronting the historian wishing to use such material are considerably greater. In the first place, the problems of translation are forbidding. As far as is known, Dr. Noorduy's chronicle of Arung Singkang is the first Buginese text to be translated into English. Similarly, there are simply too few scholars capable of tackling texts like the Javanese of the *Babad Dipanagara* or the Malay of the *Tuhfat al-Nafis*.

Moreover, the combination of political leader and writer is a very rare one prior to 1900. Most of the memoirs translated below, therefore, are to some extent second hand. Dipanagara's alone may have been written by himself, if not by a *pudjangga* (court poet) of his entourage. Imam Bondjol's and Habib Abdur-Rahman's memoirs have both been filtered through a Dutch intermediary. The other two are not autobiographies but biographical sketches by compatriots and contemporaries, who knew Arung Singkang and Sultan Mahmud respectively, although they did not share all their objectives. In each case the narrative is undoubtedly affected by the hand which penned it. In particular, Imam Bondjol and Habib Abdur-Rahman might have interpreted their actions differently had they been addressing their Indonesian followers rather than their Dutch conquerors. These difficulties do not diminish the interest of the texts, but they must be borne in mind.

5. M. H. Szekely-Lulofs, Tjoet Nja Din (Amsterdam, 1948).

6. Nieuwenhuys, "De Houding van de Nederlanders."

Although scattered across one and a half centuries and five distinct cultural regions, the pieces which follow have been selected with an eye to a common theme. Their heroes each offered a serious challenge to the rising power of the Dutch, using traditional weapons of warfare and circuitous diplomacy. Four of them engaged in major wars against the Dutch, all of which were ultimately unsuccessful. The challenge of the fifth, Sultan Mahmud of Lingga, was limited by his essential powerlessness to a stubborn refusal to cooperate. Of common interest in each translation, therefore, is the way in which the author explains the process leading up to the eventual act of defiance. Were the Dutch perceived as an alien force of a different and oppressive kind, or as simply another Indonesian power to be combated by traditional means? How did the leaders interpret and explain to their followers the militant course on which they embarked?

One of the most striking points to emerge is the almost total absence of appeals to freedom or liberation from alien rule in any absolute sense. In each case, our heroes appear to see themselves driven into hostilities against the Dutch or their allies by forces beyond their control--the persistent crassness or bad faith of the Dutch in matters of detail; the obligation to defend their own injured honor; the impatience of their followers; or the inexorable demands of cosmic forces. The earliest of these figures, Arung Singkang, is, significantly, the most "modern" in this sense; only he is portrayed with anything like a positive mission of liberation. His biographer shows more optimism than the other writers not only because he is writing before the eventual defeat of Wadjo', but also because the jealously guarded autonomy of the eighteenth-century Buginese states gave immediate relevance to the notion of freedom, which no broader authority, European or Indonesian, had been able to erode.

The greatest merit of these five accounts, however, and the reason for translating them here, is that they allow Indonesians to speak from the center of the historical stage. How faithfully they record the real motives of their heroes is something that can never be known with certainty. Nevertheless, they provide the indispensable starting point for evaluating some of the great events in Indonesian history from the perspective of the participants involved. They force us to accept them as real people with real responsibilities and real decisions to make.