

# GLASS HOUSE, TAKASHI SHIRAISHI, AND INDONESIAN STUDIES IN MOTION

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Here the merry festive mood of the rally and the sense of power and solidarity felt by the SI members are recreated by the visual image of tens of andong with the SI flag, the sound of music—probably “Het Wilhelmus” (the Dutch national anthem)—and by Marco’s frequent use of the word “all.” This was the rally, the occasion of merry, pleasant festivity. And here every speech was greeted with great applause. But this was not an ordinary festivity to which the Javanese were accustomed. For one thing, the rally was distinctly modern. Music and not gamelan sounded. Photographs were taken. People came to the place dressed as they liked—Javanese, European, and “Turkish” (Arabic).

(Takashi Shiraishi on a meeting of early Sarekat Islam; p.65.)

The new book by Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926*,<sup>1</sup> covers a period beginning with the founding of Sarekat Islam, usually labeled the first large-scale modern Indonesian political organization, and ending, fourteen years later, with what by broad and superficial consensus is categorized as the first in a series of uprisings of the Indonesian Communist Party. The geographical focus of the study is on the principality of Surakarta. Yet, the book can hardly be categorized as merely a new and well-researched study of the early Indonesian nationalist movement, nor can it be mistaken for just another regional history of Central Java. Shiraishi’s study first of all is a methodological breakthrough. It is based on a recognition of the crucial importance to a historian of listening and sensing changing ideologies, as well as changes of landscapes, volume of voices, or fashions. Shiraishi challenges generally accepted constructs by writing evocatively and by keeping his eyes open. The study, by what may appear to be almost an aesthetic quality, has become, in the past few years, the most powerful statement not only on modern Indonesian history but also on the people who try to understand it.

The opening sentence of the book lists the forms, in which, according to Shiraishi, the popular movement in the Dutch East Indies between 1912 and 1926 expressed itself:

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<sup>1</sup> Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

“newspapers and journals, rallies and meetings, trade unions and strikes, associations and parties, novels, songs, theaters, and revolts.” (p. xi)

There is a gradation implied in the list. It has always been a well-known fact, of course, that early modern politics in Java were being articulated in a number of different languages—in high and low Javanese, in Malay, in Dutch. Now, Shiraishi makes us hear the tongues spoken. He notices a difference between the shouting voice, the soft voice, and the loud voice. The movement, as he presents it, was a “war of voices.” He analyzes the melodies of printed statements—as if they were speeches given on an imagined stage. The reader is advised to listen. “The power of writing,” Shiraishi suggests, “can be best appreciated when it is read aloud.” Voice defines the movement. As the *pergerakan*—the period of politics Shiraishi studies—nears the mid-1920s, “parties start to suppress first-person voices in the name of organization and discipline” (p. xiii).

Care for detail is another way in which Shiraishi’s book is so innovative. The tiniest specifics are noticed. The study, indeed, seems programmatically built out of fragmented particles. “Trivialities” are studied, which usually remain outside the range of view of a political historian: the number of days it takes sugarcane to dry; the size of a stamp for making batik cloth in Surakarta’s workshops—10x15 square centimeters in the 1870s, 1x2 square centimeters in the 1910s. . . .

The texture of Shiraishi’s book is dense. In this way, each fact is placed in context—is culturally meaningful—and we are enabled to read the many languages and even the wordless signs:

“[in early Sarekat Islam] a piece of black paper put up at an easily visible place, such as on trees or buildings, signified that someone had been robbed and needed help (. . .). A piece of yellow paper meant that someone was in difficulty. A piece of red paper signified that two members had quarreled and that someone was needed to mediate between them (. . .) a piece of brown paper meant that someone had to be boycotted.” (p. 44)

Costumes become readable as well as newspapers. The politics of the hair-cuts of young Chinese in Java are thoroughly explained. Hadji Misbach’s white jacket, white trousers, black shoes, and his shifting from “Turkish” to Javanese headcloth, are messages decoded, and we are shown to how great an extent they held the movement together.

For me, the most impressive feature of Shiraishi’s writing is the way in which he integrates the Javanese landscape into the history of the Indies. We have George Larson’s book for a possible comparison, a monograph dealing, as far as its title goes, with almost the same place and time as Shiraishi’s.<sup>2</sup> There is some landscape in Larson, too. Yet, and with all respect to Larson’s carefully researched monograph, that landscape is plain throughout. It is initially defined by the power of courts radiating towards rather unidentified edges. As the courts’ power weakens, through the early twentieth century, the landscape—and the sense of landscape—becomes almost wholly barren.

In Shiraishi, in contrast, the courts are dynamic and uncertain centers, split identities as deep as memory goes, divided by petty rivalries, ambiguous even as to how far they are real and how far they are inventions of Dutch Javanologists, bureaucrats, and nostalgia. Surakarta, the central city as the courts’ influence wanes, is shown by Shiraishi as composed of

<sup>2</sup> George D. Larson. *Prelude to Revolution: Palaces and Politics in Surakarta, 1912–1942* (Dordrecht and Providence: KITLV, 1987).

segments equally dynamic, uncertain, ambiguous and mutually combative—the Chinese of *Pasar Gede*, the batik-makers of the inner city and of the periphery, the newspaper offices, the movie theaters, the police stations, the “politically impotent” courts, the Dutch Resident’s office. . . .

This is a landscape alive. Images of trains are evoked in the same paragraph as images of the most revered poet of the courts:

“In Ranggawarsita’s final years, the engine of new changes had already been set in motion (. . .) the transportation of goods by water on the Solo River virtually died out (. . .). By 1875 the railway carried 899,000 passengers and 124,000 tons of merchandise (. . .) in 1895 the East and West line (. . .) carried 5,759,000 passengers and earned 3,054,000 guilders from passenger fares and 6,588,000 from merchandise transportation.” (p. 8)

Shiraishi describes the modern map emerging—the sharp lines of the railways and telegraph networks, which make Surakarta, Surabaya, Semarang, Batavia, and Bandung into a new whole and into a part of the new Indies. He is keenly aware of the map, but he never forgets the real landscape. Because he reads the costumes of the trains’ passengers, his landscape moves as if observed from behind the trains’ windows.

It is not surprising that the author of *An Age in Motion* acknowledges Pramoedya Ananta Toer as his major inspiration. Pramoedya’s recent impact on Indonesian studies should be a topic for a serious monograph. Even if Pramoedya were not the great writer he is, the story of the man would be disturbing. Pramoedya’s warning, prominent in his latest historical novels—regarding how fine the line is separating solidarity from sentimental compassion, understanding from watching, studying from policing—seems to be hitting historians of modern and contemporary Indonesia particularly hard.

Shiraishi’s keen awareness of details, his willingness to listen and to move with his story, is, in fact, an incessant debate with the detachment and false vividness Pramoedya warns against. Shiraishi, evoking Pramoedya, calls this detachment and false vividness a historiography of “The Glass House.”<sup>3</sup> The Dutch Indies and Indonesia, Shiraishi argues, as Pramoedya does, have been for decades “encased,” studied “as if looking at fish in an aquarium.”

This is not an aging writer wrestling with shadows of the past, nor a young historian challenging dead authorities. The state files—where the hero of Pramoedya’s Glass House, the compassionate policeman, read his reports on the “native movement” eighty years ago—are still with us. The mess of the colony, filtered up through the colonial offices, is still available, “organized,” “categorized,” packaged in the colonial archives if we want to have it that way. Still with us is Petrus Blumberger, for Shiraishi the most typical representative of Glass House historiography; as recently as the early 1980s a scholarly treatise called him the most perceptive observer there has ever been.<sup>4</sup>

Shiraishi does not neglect the colonial archives. But he studies them as he studies voices, landscape, and costumes. He traces the path, along which information about each significant

<sup>3</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Rumah Kaca* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Shiraishi writes about Blumberger’s most influential “trilogy,” e.g., on p. xi. (J. Th. Petrus Blumberger, *De Communistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Haarlem: Willink 1928); J. Th. Petrus Blumberger, *De Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Haarlem: Willink, 1931); J. Th. Petrus Blumberger, *De Indo-Europeesche Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Haarlem: Willink, 1939).

event in the Indies had to travel—up through the police offices, offices of residents and of governors—through the official colonial hierarchy of perception. And Shiraishi cares most, it seems, for those facts which did not complete the journey. A particular official might be looking the other way at the moment, or the language used at the actual event might resist an official translation. The reader enjoys, as much as Shiraishi appears to enjoy, the historian's most serious job of listening for moments of silence and of unsticking labels.

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For years to come, *An Age in Motion* by Takashi Shiraishi will remain the most influential reading for the origins of modern Indonesian nationalism. It certainly will be an inspiration for the answers it gives as much as for the questions it raises.

The Dutch are the problem. They are brought into the picture in the very first sentence of the book:

The rise of a popular movement, expressed in such forms as newspapers and journals, rallies and meetings, trade unions and strikes, associations and parties, novels, songs, theaters, and revolts, is the phenomenon that most vividly struck the Dutch as the 'native' awakening in the Indies in the first quarter of the twentieth century. (p. xi)

Throughout the book, the Dutch remain predominantly observers.

Shiraishi is very much aware of the substantial extent to which the Dutch presence in Java—Dutch power, Dutch language, Dutch concepts of the colony and of themselves—was responsible for the actual make-up of Java and of the Indies in the period he is studying; to what extent the Dutch, indeed, influenced the Javanese and Indonesian notions of "native awakening" and "nationalism." Shiraishi argues at length that even what he calls the "post-independence Indonesia-centric perspective" is in many ways a product of the Dutch colonial vision of history—that Pramoedya's Glass House metaphor may, indeed, apply to both, the colonial Dutch as well as the post-colonial Indonesian ordering of the past.

Shiraishi describes Dutch-Indonesian relations between 1912 and 1926 variously as "juxtaposition," "translation," "translation and appropriation"; once he uses a term "dynamic process of translation." His book itself, however, suggests much less a bipolar model than—to keep to the metaphor of language—a polyphonic, disharmonious or just noisy world of multilingualism.<sup>5</sup>

Was the movement at this early stage—for which Shiraishi uses the Indonesian word "*pergerakan*"—not rather the Indonesian/Dutch "*pergerakan/beweging*"? Were the Dutch—some Dutch of course, as some Javanese, some Chinese, and some Eurasians—rather than being "the other," the watchers, not in fact essential segments of the movement? Is the dividing line, across which the "translation" was supposedly happening, not something that to a large extent only appeared so at that time, having been reported and filed that way, and thus fearfully anticipated, and now remembered as real and fully fledged from the false perspective of what actually developed only later?

One would like biographies of Messrs. Dommering and Bijl—two enigmatic Dutchmen, who helped Tjokroaminoto to draw up the new statutes of Sarekat Islam in 1912 and in 1913 (pp. 48 and 70)—to match the marvellous biographies in Shiraishi of such *pergerakan* leaders

<sup>5</sup> See unpublished proceedings of the Conference on Multilingualism organized by Social Science Research Council in Pacet, Indonesia, August 1981. Shiraishi read a paper at this conference, which was later published as "The Dispute between Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo and Soetarmo Soeriokoesoemo: Satria vs. Pandita," *Indonesia* 32 (October 1981): 93–108. This paper clearly was one of the preparatory texts for *An Age in Motion*.

as Tjipto, Marco, or Misbach. One may wish that the bureaucratic Dutch of the statutes was read by Shiraishi with the same infectious pleasure that he reads Tjipto's speeches, Marco's prison letters, or Misbach's exile diaries. One may wish Shiraishi to elaborate on what he merely touches upon—the idea that biographies of *pergerakan* leaders might be more true and perhaps wholesome, if conceived as biographies-in-pairs; one may wish for a biography of Tjokroaminoto/Rinkes, a biography of Tjipto/ Hazeu, a biography of Semaun/Sneevliet.

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*An Age in Motion* contains probably the best portrait ever written in English of Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo—a passionate crusader against the Solonese aristocracy and a founder of the avant-garde nationalist *Indische Partij*.<sup>6</sup> Tjipto is presented by Shiraishi as a man at the center of the Dutch-Indonesian discourse. His language and the language of his group is, according to Shiraishi, the utmost “reversal” of “ethical” Dutch. Tjipto's exile, more than any other single event in the book, is shown as marking the collapse of the dreamed-of bridge between “progressive natives” and “progressive Dutch.” In Shiraishi's *An Age in Motion* Tjipto is central. Yet it is not Tjipto but Hadji Misbach who emerges most vividly.

The book “traces its conception,” Shiraishi writes in the introduction, to an encounter, years previously, in the library of Jakarta's Central Museum, with Hadji Misbach's serialized article on “Islamism and Communism.” “Unable to make sense of it,” Shiraishi writes, “I looked for and tried to reconstruct a meaningful historical context in which to locate and read the article” (p. xv).

The biography of Hadji Misbach is perhaps the only biography in *An Age of Motion*, which is wholly unimaginable as being written as one of a pair. Even Marco Kartodikromo—a man eccentric to most *pergerakan* leaders as he was “gek” (crazy) to the majority of Dutchmen—could have been paired with some theosophist. Misbach, according to Shiraishi, “read no Dutch,” “had no Dutch friends.” In an era of a landscapes defined by courts and railways, and colonial museums and movie theaters, Misbach, the Moslem and the Communist, recognized a universe made of a one-path, one-dimensional journey to the almighty Allah and Mr Marx (p. 274). Misbach was even able to misspell the most charged of colonial words—Volksraad was “Volksch raad” to this extraordinary man (p. 294).

Ruth McVey has written recently that common man in Indonesia might have lost politically, but that, so far, he has won historiographically.<sup>7</sup> Even the historiographical victory, however, may be questioned. There has, indeed, been a great number of scholarly works published and devoted to the Indonesian common man. Still, in most cases the common man emerges strangely, a *deus ex machina* of sorts, a hardly-known stranger in well-built, well-documented, well-oiled analyses of elites. The strangeness of the Indonesian common man, the strangeness of the way he appears—and disappears again—seems to be crucial in academic studies and in real history as well. As yet, the strangeness has rarely been studied.

From Shiraishi, one knows why Surakarta was more volatile than Yogyakarta, how administrative systems were creaking, breaking, point by point, how traditional forms of peasant disquiet, *nggogols*, *prapats*, *mogoks*, and *rondas* were being transformed—or merely renamed—into demonstrations, strikes, and parties.

<sup>6</sup> The second-best portrait of Tjipto without doubt is Savitri Prastiti Scherer's “Harmony and Dissonance: Early Nationalist Thought in Java” (MA thesis, Cornell University, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Ruth T. McVey in a review of Larson's *Prelude to Revolution* (*Pacific Affairs* 62 [Spring 1989]: 140). It should be noted that Shiraishi justly acknowledged McVey's classic, *The Rise of the Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1965) as the one scholarly work which opened a way for his *An Age in Motion*.

Shiraishi has a cold appreciation of power, and there seems to be no danger of him becoming sentimental. Yet, one senses sadness in his story. The book is a quiet dialogue between Shiraishi and Pramoedya. Shiraishi studies the strangeness. He conveys the brightness of the limelight, the excitement of unreality, the theatricality, which was, as he shows us, so prominent throughout the early history of the movement. Party meetings in *An Age in Motion* read as (slightly amateurish) theater performances. Membership cards were sold as tickets in advance or at the gate. Police agents, trying to control the visitors, worked as ushers, and after the performances began, seated in the front row, were a clumsy part of the audience. Leaders had chairs on the stage, and people “stood, watched and listened.” As popular radicalism towards the mid-1920s “unleashed” got “beyond control,” “people finished watching *wayang*” (p. 77). But, also, by implication, the limelights went off.

A squeaking wheel may be a fitting metaphor for Shiraishi’s age in motion—we can hear the wheel, and certainly the wheel revolves. There are stories, particularly towards the final section of the book, which seem chillingly familiar. They appear to be happening all over again, they appear eternal. The political mainstream (Sarekat Islam central leaders in that case) decides that the militants in the movement have become “clearly a dispensable liability” (p. 224). The militants (Communist leaders in this case) publish a suicidal editorial in the very last issue of their press organ—“Since nothing further was to be gained by legal revolutionary action, the party must attempt to revolt. . .” (p. 313).

How does evolution work for Shiraishi? As the movement approached the mid-1920s, so Shiraishi writes, the “time of voice” passed into the “time of action.” (p. 85) This meant, it is explained, that “party discipline” grew at the expense of “first-person voice.” A biological metaphor is introduced and reintroduced frequently. By the mid-1920s, “the *pergerakan* was dying” (p.230); “Marco clearly saw the death of the *pergerakan* in the C[entral] S[arekat] I[sлам] split” (p. 302). “The *pergerakan* as a mass movement was dying, leaving behind only the most active and militant remnants committed to the revolutionary case” (p.243). What has happened to the voice? As for the voice of the “most active and militant remnants,” Shiraishi writes,

The language ran amok and passed the threshold beyond which no one could tell for sure what was rhetorical and what was really meant. (p. 313)

Does this kind of death imply a rebirth? How final, in Shiraishi’s analysis, really is the end of the *pergerakan*? Shiraishi writes about the non-metaphorical deaths, the irrevocable deaths of Marco, and especially again of Misbach, with a great strength and, clearly, with emotion. The leaders who were to follow immediately, the great names of the nationalist movement of the classical period, are passed over quickly. There is a single mention of Perhimpunan Indonesia in the book, and only three brief mentions of Sukarno. The most extensive of the three is less than a half-page comment on Sukarno at a meeting of Sarekat Islam defending Tjokroaminoto against Misbach. The story, thus Shiraishi, “is often told, sometimes as if it were the only event worth mentioning Misbach’s name” (p. 263).

The period of 1926-1927—the glorious nationalist time of Study Clubs, the Indonesian National Party, Sukarno—to Shiraishi marks “the end of *pergerakan*” (p. xi). It also is, as the book concludes, the beginning of a new era:

With the Indies government’s extensive and effective surveillance apparatus ever watchful of and ready to crush any “subversive” movement, and the fearful image of Boven Digul in faraway western New Guinea dangling about popular fantasies of liberation, the popular movement did not rise again in Indonesia until after World War II. (p. 339)

By the "rising again," nothing else could possibly be meant by Shiraishi, but the *pemuda* revolution of 1945—a movement, again, made up of "newspapers and journals, rallies and meetings, trade unions and strikes, associations and parties, novels, songs, theaters, and revolts," a militancy to be disposed of, *again*, by the mainstream; popular radicalism, again, dying another death before having an opportunity to be truly born.

Misbach may have been the first modern Indonesian leader, who was exiled not abroad, but to a distant place inside his own country. Misbach, thus, may have been the first man to map a new type of Indonesian landscape, an Indonesian landscape of exile. The journal, which Misbach wrote on his way to Manokwari and to his death, a journal which his newspaper in Surakarta promptly published, is in a way the true culmination of Shiraishi's story.

Misbach's new landscape of exile may remind us of a traditional Javanese landscape of sorts—a moonscape, almost that of the nineteenth century *gek* classic, *Suluk Gatholoco*—shapes appeared grotesque and voices sounded as in a jest—a landscape which signaled an end of time.<sup>8</sup> Misbach also heard voices, and the voices made his moonscape livable—or theatrical, unreal, and thus perhaps bearable. The ship carrying Misbach to the end of the Indies stopped seventeen times on its way. At each port, and whenever he was allowed to go ashore, Misbach wrote a one-line entry in his journal. Thus the landscape was built. Real and imagined fellow militants, conceived, born, dreamed of, had populated and defined the space Misbach was being taken through. In a monotonous song-like way, seventeen times it was repeated: they had been "evident," "already there," "not yet evident," "already there," "not yet evident. . ." (p. 284).

This essentially is a tragic story. Yet, it gives one great pleasure to read, perhaps because Shiraishi successfully resisted the most tempting of a historian's professional dreams—to make history meaningful by making it evolve, to make history move by chopping it into watersheds and milestones. Shiraishi's story hesitates, and then it flows through a "time of rallies," "time of strikes," "time of action," "time of voice," "age of the world upside down," a time when the "tsar was slain and the kaiser fled his country." Each of the "times," each "age" and "moment" is made exceptional, that is particular, fragrant, sounding, precious, and moving in its own exceptional and particular way. This makes Shiraishi's history, his quiet dialogue with Pramoedya, so appealing, appearing real, and—perhaps—true to what the reality is.

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<sup>8</sup> See "Professional Dreams: Reflections on Two Javanese Classics," in Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 289–98.

