

***The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics.* Edited by Tineke Hellwig and Eric Tagliacozzo. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 488 pp.**

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Three narratives reside between the covers of *The Indonesia Reader*: introductory and explanatory notes by the editors; excerpts from ninety-two authors; and a visual narrative comprising photographs and cartoons. The audience for this *Reader* is imagined as “those who are interested in this unique country” (p. 12). Most likely, its readers will be college students. Two prominent specialists in Indonesian Studies have assembled the *Reader*. Eric Tagliacozzo is an historian who has sailed Indonesia’s seas; he has studied the fringes and wild spaces of the archipelago, the construction of the colonial state, and, lately, has begun a study of pilgrims to Mecca. Tineke Hellwig specializes in Indonesian and Malay literatures; in the interlocking histories of European and indigenous communities; and in women’s and gender studies, with special focus on Asian women. This marriage of the editors’ interests produces a selection of texts that is extraordinarily wide-ranging and idiosyncratic.

*The Indonesia Reader* will likely not be read cover to cover, as I read it. More probably, readers will sample its selections, and professors will assign particular readings for class exercises. But those who do read this book through, and in the order in which the readings are assembled, will surely support the editors’ conviction that Indonesia’s outstanding characteristics are diversity and complexity, whether of terrain, flora and fauna, peoples, cultures, beliefs, politics, or histories.

Readings are organized within ten loosely defined periods covering circa 400–2006 CE. A set of common emphases or themes is apparent in each section. Alongside reports on the archipelago’s land and sea formations are testimonies of those long dead, and studies by epigraphers, anthropologists, political scientists, and historians. There are voices of those who command and of those who observe—both insiders and outsiders. There are excerpts from chronicles compiled over centuries past by anonymous generations of storytellers, and excerpts from the signed works of today’s novelists and poets. The voices of manual laborers, preserved through investigative reports from colonial times, tell of thwarted ambitions, destruction of plans, and hard lives. For the silenced in today’s industrial economy, it is the imagined lament, penned by a leading Indonesian playwright and activist, that represents workers’ struggles. There are samples of contracts and treaties, articles of antiquarian interest from the *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, stories from the colony that found their way into newspapers in Holland, private correspondence, and fragments of memoirs, as well as abstruse articles in which linguists and early historians argue with and among themselves. There are manifestos from Indonesian political and literary activists who defied Jakarta, and classic studies of Indonesia from the West’s Herbert Feith, Clifford Geertz, and Benedict Anderson.

At intervals, to fill in gaps in the overarching narrative, the editors include paragraphs on topics such as Bugis ships and batik, and tables of figures on the incidence of beri-beri among soldiers and numbers of *hajj* travelers. Through their selections, Hellwig and Tagliacozzo affirm that variety *is* Indonesia. They incorporate a

great many viewpoints of academic scholars and foreign observers alongside Indonesian voices. The Indonesian voices are generally to be found in chronicle, poem, short story, manifesto, memoir, and reportage. Apart from an overview of the development of archaeology in Indonesia by R. P. Soejono, there are no selections from the notable first generation of post-independence Indonesian historians and thinkers: nothing from Sartono Kartodirdjo or Soedjatmoko, for instance, or from subsequent generations of scholars such as Taufiq Abdullah, Onghokham, Bambang Purwanto, and Azyumardi Azra.

The editors have consciously selected Indonesian texts that are not generally reproduced in standard histories. Instead of the historic Declaration of Independence from 1945, for example, there is the Cultural Manifesto of 1963 in which twenty signatories affirmed:

We do not prioritize one cultural sector over another. Each sector struggles together with one another for the sake of culture based on each respective uniqueness. (p. 372)

Many teachers of Indonesian history will welcome the translation into English of texts that are hard to find, such as the first known words from the archipelago, chiseled into stone in Sanskrit in an Indic script. These form the Kutei inscriptions of circa 400 CE, in which Mulavarman describes himself as “king of illustrious and resplendent fame,” and lists his gifts to Brahmans of “water, ghee, tawny cows, and sesame seeds, as well as eleven bulls” (pp. 18–19). Staring back across the centuries at the Borneo king and his boast of good deeds is President Suharto. His assertion of his own righteousness is contained in the authorized account of his childhood (published in 1991):

I always remember the teachings of our ancestors: respect for God, teacher, government, and parents. Even though I am the President, I have not changed in this way in the least. I always live up to these principles and advice, because I believe in their truth. (p. 355)

Teachers may wish that the *Reader* had even more translations into English of Indonesian voices in place of readily accessible English-language texts. But the editors’ selections are based on their judgment that understanding Indonesia entails consulting the widest range of scholarship, and therefore they include works written in English as well as works translated from Indonesian languages and Dutch. Inevitably, readers will identify their favorite selections. I found riveting Van Sandick’s description of the raining ash, huge sea swells, and black days continuing long after the first eruptions of Krakatoa in 1883. Readers will find some omissions puzzling and wonder why this or that was not included. For instance, I would have chosen Soewardi Soerjaningrat’s 1913 article in *De Expres*, “If I happened to be a Dutchman.”<sup>1</sup>

There are gems. One of these is, for me, a speech O. S. Tjokroaminoto delivered to the 1916 congress of Sarekat Islam, in which he says, “We are committed to the land where we were born, and we are committed to the Government that protects us,” and later refers to “Our Queen” (pp. 266, 267). At a time when Cairo thinkers were castigating nationalism and “geographic Muslims” as destructive of Islamic unity,

<sup>1</sup> “Als ik eens Nederlander was,” *De Expres* (Bandung), July 19, 1913.

Tjokroaminoto welcomes Sarekat Islam's aim "to ascend to the level of a nation" (p. 265). At this point, there was no turning aside from everyday reality, no intransigence, still hope. He goes on to say:

[...] we have no qualms to pay attention to everything that we consider advantageous, and to require whatever we think will ameliorate *our race, our native soil, and our Government*. (p. 265)

He demands a Colonial Council as "a first step towards obtaining self-government here in the Netherlands Indies" (p. 268). In this speech, Tjokroaminoto affirms his organization's commitment to "our Muslim faith" (p. 266). By the end of the *Reader*, there is the diametrically opposed stance of Imam Samudra:

This is my jihad. [...] To ask for clemency [commuting the death penalty for planning the suicide-murders of 202 fellow human beings in Bali on October 12, 2002] would mean to admit that the law of unbelievers is legitimate; to admit that there is truth outside Islam is a negation of the syahadat. (p. 430)

Original to this *Reader* is the inclusion of photographs and cartoons with explanatory captions and notes. We see: architectural styles of houses, rice barns, and mosques; the faces of Indonesians made famous by their resistance to foreign rule, as well as faces of nameless miners and market vendors; and posters and cartoons commenting on crises of the day. An enigmatic advertisement for *luwak* coffee shows the nocturnal animal obligingly excreting two beans directly into the proffered coffee cup. The visuals complement the written narratives. It is, therefore, a cause for dismay that the quality of the reproductions from Duke University Press are so poor and do not do justice to this innovative decision of the editors.

Few literary pieces were chosen—a surprise, given Hellwig's interests. Translation from Javanese of cantos from the *Nagarakertagama* and *Babad Dipanegara* were selected, perhaps, for the wonderful details they offer: Mpu Prapanca's queen dances before her ladies; Javanese and Dutch envoys to Prince Dipanegara sit on chairs in his presence, but Mr. Smissaert, unmoved by this civility, is angered by the discussion, so that "his face was hot, glowing with wrath, (and) his heart was afire" (p. 124). Too little is translated from *La Galigo* and the Lombok chronicles. Here, the editors have opted for paraphrase and explanation over substantial extracts from the primary sources themselves. The sampling of modern genres includes a vintage short story from Nh Dini about a young woman schoolteacher trapped in village life and polygamy, and a letter Pramoedya wrote to his daughter from his prison farm on Buru Island.

Some of the twenty-first-century selections are dark: Marsinah, victim of murder; Imam Samudra, instigator of murder. A fictive lament from 2039 addresses the child born forty years earlier, conceived by rape during the anarchy of May 1998. Journalist Desi Anwar considers consequences for women, and civil liberties generally, arising from the Anti-Pornography and Porno-Action bill, reviewed by Indonesia's parliament in 2006 and ratified in October 2008. There are articles on the social impacts of the 2004 tsunami, and on preserving the komodo dragon from extinction. Alongside them is an assessment from Indonesia's sixth president of the degree of freedom of speech advisable or permissible in matters relating to Islam.

The interview of Samudra, conducted through his brother, startles the reader of these 400-plus pages by its statements of implacable rigidity. The *Reader's* editors have so constantly stressed pluralism, diversity, and tolerance as Indonesian characteristics that we realize, at this late juncture, how few expressions of Islamic religiosity have been included in this volume. A sampling of *fatwas*, sermons, or booklets of instruction might have prepared us to recognize that within the diversity that is Indonesia there are many strands of Islamic thinking. But, looking back, we may recall the editors' selection from Ibn Battuta's account of his visit to Pasei in the middle years of the fourteenth century. Of Sultan al-Malik az-Zahir, Battuta writes:

He is constantly engaging in warring for the Faith and in raiding expeditions [...] His subjects also take a pleasure in warring for the Faith and voluntarily accompany him on his expeditions. They have the upper hand over all the infidels in their vicinity, who pay them a poll tax to secure peace. (p. 68)

There is also a strange sense that, somehow, the center of Indonesia is missing. So many selections come from the country's periphery: from Aceh, Riau, Banjarmasin, Minahassa, Komodo Island, Lombok, and Papua. This focus, which closely mirrors Tagliacozzo's research interests, is refreshing and instructive, but still there is little of Java and Jakarta in the book.

The *Reader* includes a bibliography, index, and list of sources. This latter will be invaluable for postgraduate students who may wish to follow up sources documented in footnotes of the originals but not included in the text printed here. I think readers will look for a glossary to explain terms such as *dagoba*, *coffre*, and *pukat*. But, at the end of 488 pages, the reader must acknowledge that here is an embarrassment of riches, and feel gratitude for the Herculean task Hellwig and Tagliacozzo undertook in discovering a multifaceted Indonesia for us. *The Indonesia Reader* is a volume to be welcomed, sampled, enjoyed, and assigned.