

Jennifer Lindsay and Maya H. T. Liem, ed. *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian 1950–1965*. Leiden: Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) Press, 2012. 529 pp.

Howard Federspiel

The title for this book, *Heirs to World Culture*, comes from a statement made in 1950 by an influential group of Indonesian intellectuals associated with the *Siasat* weekly magazine. The statement, given the title of “Testimonial of Beliefs,” was a declaration of intent and provided a general guideline for Indonesian artists and writers over the next decade, and is quoted in Lindsay and Liem’s introduction (p. 10): “We are the legitimate heirs to world culture, and we are furthering it in our own way.” Accordingly, the articles in this anthology examine the landscape of the Indonesian artistic scene in the period generally known as the “Sukarno era,” to test the legacy of that effort to advance Indonesian culture. The array of subjects is sufficiently broad to describe the many facets of the scene in those years and also rich enough in information and findings to invigorate studies of an era that has passed, yet was so pivotal to Indonesian national and societal development.

The volume was prepared by independent scholars associated mostly with universities and think tanks across the world specializing in Indonesian studies. The group was organized by the prestigious Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asia and the Caribbean (KITLV), which has a record of a century and a half in sponsoring scholarly research on Indonesian themes. In this case, funding was provided by a grant from the Australian-Netherlands Research Collaboration program for two seminars that brought scholars together to discuss their findings and explore common themes in preparation for publishing a volume presenting the results of the research. Jennifer Lindsay and Keith Foulcher, two important scholars on Southeast Asia, were the primary movers of the intellectual part of the project. The effort aimed simply to bring together the important research being done on the era to give it common exposure. It was not expected that this publication would be a definitive study of the era under discussion, but rather a stepping stone to future research and understanding of arts from that era. As such, it has great value to other scholars, but less importance to groups looking for final answers.

There is great range to the presentations in the volume. One group of studies centers on regional, ethnic, and religious diversity. Accordingly, there are studies about artistic development on Bali, among the Sundanese, at Medan, on Sulawesi, among the Indonesian Chinese, and with certain Muslim elements. A second collection addresses international audiences that were exposed to Indonesian culture through the efforts of these artists, notably the United States, Communist China, the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, and the Netherlands. A third category, which is really the heart of the study, centers on the organization known as Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, the Peoples Institute of Culture), a communist cultural front, which acted as a dynamo for intellectual and artistic development during the latter part of the era under

Professor Howard Federspiel is retired from Ohio State University and is currently organizing his professional papers. His most recent book is *Sultans, Shamans, and Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

study. The final group, less clearly defined, but still apparent in general terms, deals with efforts in the sub-eras of this time frame.¹

The first group, on regional diversity, is illustrated by Marje Plomp's article on Medan in North Sumatra, which for a time in the early and mid-twentieth century was renowned for being the region's capital of pulp fiction. The article describes the growth of a group of intellectual writers who contributed to a distinctive style of writing detective novels set among Malays in North Sumatra, Singapore, and the Malay Peninsula. This genre used the *jawai* script² as its principal medium between 1950 and 1965, the writers interacted with the rising cultural elite in Jakarta, thereafter turning away from detective novels in favor of novels embracing the realism of the post-World War II Indonesian literary movement. This change in direction drained off many of the best writers and led to a waning of the influence of the group in Medan itself.

Among the articles examining regional, ethnic, and religious groups, the piece by Hairus Salim offers an important insight into the contributions of the Muslim community. Hairus Salim examines those Indonesian Muslims seeking inspiration from the broader Islamic world and relates the particular themes they brought into Indonesia from Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. In particular, he examines the work of Hamka (acronym for Hajji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah), a leading author of fiction in the late colonial and early independence era, and especially the influence of Egyptian Muslim writers, such as al-Manfaluti. Hamka has been greatly lauded by the modernist Muslim community in Indonesia for his religious exegesis and his defense of Muslim values in Indonesian society, but little has been written heretofore about his literary work, which merits more attention among scholars than it has received.

Efforts abroad are examined very ably by Jennifer Lindsay, who outlines and evaluates the role of Indonesian performers, particularly dancers, through an energetic state sponsorship of their work abroad. She notes in particular that the performers themselves, drawn from different quarters of Indonesian society and highly reflective of regional cultures, themes, and styles, came to embrace all the differences as included in a larger genre of "Indonesian" performances. She contends that this new insight fostered a cross fertilization among the members of ensembles that worked together on their tours abroad. She particularly describes the visits, early in the era, of the Indonesian touring group to the Peoples Republic of China. These visits were well received because the economic conditions, folk styles, and cultural backgrounds of Indonesia and China were similar and allowed significant artistic communication to take place.

Regarding Lekra, Michael Bodden provides an in-depth view of its plays in East Java during its heyday in the early 1960s. He provides considerable detail about the political role that Lekra's dramas played and gives examples of the infighting that took place regarding the staging of particular works. Of equal interest is the commentary on three plays presented at the time that were regarded as significantly advancing

¹ Notably so-called Liberal Democracy (1950–57), martial law (1957–63), and the Sukarnoist state (1963–65). Guided Democracy, the official designation of the era from 1957 to 1966, encompassed both the martial-law and Sukarnoist-state sub-periods.

² *Jawai* script is a Malay language employing a modified Arabic script, which was a major language form for the Malay region between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries.

communist propaganda and, indeed, the communist mission in Indonesia of the time. Communists thought the dramas condemned shortcomings in Indonesian society in a truthful and insightful way, while noncommunist groups saw distortion of local cultural development and a tendency to take cultural happenings out of context. The plot lines and literary commentary on the three plays provides a detailed and full picture of the Lekra effort. Further perspective on Lekra's work is provided by I Nyoman Darma Putra, who juxtaposes the efforts of Lekra on Bali with those of the LKN (Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional, Institute of National Culture), sponsored by the Indonesian Nationalist Party. While the communists and the nationalists were officially tied to one another as supporters of the Sukarno government, they carried on continual apology, polemic, one-upmanship, and innuendo against one another as part of a larger political maneuvering between the two groups nationally. The competition seems not to have unduly harmed cultural programs to any great extent but certainly was a frustration to those involved in the fray.

Those chapters reflecting events in a sub-era are illustrated by Keith Foulcher's examination of the contents of the intellectual magazine *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation), published during the early 1950s, which presented and analyzed the discussions concerning Indonesian national direction and other key issues of the time. Notably, in 1955, there was coverage of the meetings of *Konfrontasi* intellectuals with the American Black intellectual Richard Wright; with Indian community-development project planners; and with the American anthropologist Claire Holt. Wright was praised for his work on behalf of the oppressed "Negro population" of the United States, but his "socialist-realist" approach was viewed as contrary to *Konfrontasi*'s own "universalist realism" orientation. Discussions with Indian community planners raised the issue of how much influence "Eastern" traditions and "Western" approaches should have on social and economic development in Asia. The *Konfrontasi* intellectuals mostly viewed "Eastern" traditions as a burden to nation-building and favored emphasis on rationalism and innovation, while the Indian planners saw little distinction between "East" and "West" as motivators of modernization. The tri-lingual discussion with Claire Holt (Dutch, Indonesian, and English) covered the development of the Indonesian arts, but reached no firm conclusions regarding the role and value of traditional art forms—music, dancing, theater, and visual arts—vis-à-vis more recent, "modern" offerings by Indonesian artists. The articles in *Konfrontasi* discussed issues raised elsewhere, but did so from a frame of reference that reflected the notions of Asian peoples who were just emerging from under colonial rule and were yet in an underdeveloped political and economic state. By the end of the Liberal Democratic era, these issues had become stale, like the Liberal Democratic institutions themselves, and the magazine faded from the scene.

It is the nature of such anthologies that editors must take what is available, so there are sometimes gaps, or there may be duplication and even the inclusion of works marginal to the overall project's main lines of development. Fortunately, the workshops that reviewed all these articles seem to have shaped and honed the works so that the anthology has general cohesiveness and fits its articles into a good study of the era. As well, the editors have provided good order, well-edited writing, and appropriate conclusions so that all the works meet good standards of publication; a few are even stellar in their writing and research findings. The articles are readable, using a good level of vocabulary that enhances findings without being either pedantic

or simplistic. An important glossary of acronyms provides the short and long names of numerous associations active in the era, a necessity in any study of Indonesia during the twentieth century.

Political and social context is important in any work describing developments in a given era of history. Jennifer Lindsay, in her introduction, has a section on “political mapping,” which lays down a very brief description of the political highlights of the time. As well, there is a five-page chronology of important events of that era to provide national context. The scope of the introduction and chronology is probably too brief to provide much context, and some readers of the volume may find they need more background detail. Those people might consider using the pertinent sections of general histories, such as M. C. Ricklefs’s *History of Modern Indonesia*³ or Taufik Abdullah’s *Indonesia: Towards Democracy*.⁴ In an important reader on the time period, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore used the reviewer’s own article on the army and Islam to summarize the political confrontations of the day.⁵ Politics was always an important consideration. As well, one should remember that Indonesia throughout this era was only slowly recovering economically from, first, World War II (1939–45), and then the Indonesian Revolution (1945–49), during which periods economic conditions can only be described as dire. Always there were shortages of consumer goods and there were spot famines at various times throughout the archipelago. While there was some recovery in the early 1950s, by the 1960s Indonesia was often described as a “basket case” economically, and international development agencies, such as the World Bank, issued reports that doubted Indonesia’s ability to overcome its poor economic status in any reasonable time frame. Benjamin Higgins⁶ and Bruce Grant⁷ describe the actual conditions in the cities and countryside, which affected the work of everyone, including the artists, writers, and intellectuals.

Finally, this volume’s effort to provide conclusions falls a bit short. Each article includes a summary or conclusion, which help gather themes and provide understanding for the preceding discussion. But these vary in style and direction so that no overall findings are apparent. While Jennifer Lindsay’s introduction to the volume attempts to give the articles overall purpose and context, the volume would have profited considerably with a brief final article summarizing the common findings from the diverse articles that make up the study. But despite these matters of context, this is a good anthology, with new information and insights, about an era often referred to by many writers on Indonesia, but not understood very well by most of them. It is of value to all of us studying the country regardless of our specific specialties.

³ M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

⁴ Taufik Abdullah, *Indonesia: Towards Democracy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press, 2009).

⁵ Howard M. Federspiel, “The Military and Islam in Sukarno’s Indonesia,” in *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, ed. Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, and Yasmin Hussain (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press, 1985), 151–58.

⁶ Benjamin Higgins, *Indonesia: The Crisis of the Millstones* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1963).

⁷ Bruce Grant, *Indonesia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967).