

Rudolf Mrázek. *A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta through the Memories of its Intellectuals*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. 328 pp.

Howard Federspiel

There are three main lines of thought that the author follows to give both substance to and insight into this study of an important Indonesian elite. First, he is concerned about interviewing a group of elderly people not previously known to him, and he reports at several points about his growing rapport with his interviewees and about the directions that the interviews take. Assailed by hesitancy and doubts at the beginning, he overcomes his own shyness and ultimately comes to regard his effort as a clear success. His second concern centers on the methodology and orientation he carefully outlines in the introduction and then revisits several times to give his work coherence and insight. Basing his intellectual approach on the thinking of the French architect and urban planner Le Corbusier, he uses architectural idioms, such as "space," "fences," and "public way," to present his material in a different manner than might ordinarily be expected of a cultural historian. This approach is buttressed by the insights of several European writers, such as Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust. In fact, the book is more about the development of a methodology than it is about the actual substance of the interviews that he conducted. His conclusion, in particular, is a strong summary statement about the nature of changing culture in Indonesia and elsewhere that transpired during the twentieth century, but it is all set in the parlance of architectural concepts. As a third line of thought, he presents the findings of his research in interviewing the elderly Indonesian notables, who had much to say about general matters from their lifetimes' experiences. Sometimes he cites anecdotes that they have told him in order to amplify historical occurrences, while at other times he presents their insights about the march of Indonesian national existence over nearly a century, and, at still other times, he tells of their reminiscences of ordinary lives lived over long periods that were marked by ordinary and extraordinary events.

This study's interviews gave rise to three general contributions. The first relates to the "noise" of Indonesian culture and civilization, that is, the ordinary sounds that cross boundaries incessantly—the cries of the hawkers, the trilling of birds, the voices of passers-by, and the particular sound of various transportation vehicles. The author implies that it is a unique mixture of sound peculiar to Indonesia, and that his group of interviewees did not try to avoid or block such noise, but moved toward it and functioned freely within it. Occasionally an anthropologist or professional traveler will hint at this phenomena—incessant, ambient noise—within a culture, but seldom do such descriptions compare with the richness and intensity of Mrázek's observation of it. The second contribution centers on the role of education in the Dutch colonial system and how access to that education and its mastery was the key to later reward in the colonial system and, ironically, in the emerging Indonesian state that followed. Most notably, that education gave participants entry to a class that, even in times of repression, gave status to those who were products of that education. In a telling anecdote, one interviewee related that the prisoners at Boven Digul, the notorious Dutch internment camp for political detainees of the first half of the twentieth century, were treated according to their earned educational status, with those having advanced degrees given appreciably more privileges than those with lesser certificates or

degrees. The third contribution is grounded in those views of the history that the interviewees themselves experienced, their general attachment for the Indonesian nation that arose during their lifetimes, and their general lack of rancor against the Dutch and the Dutch colonial system that attempted to frustrate the emergence of the Indonesian national movement. As students in Dutch schools, they did not see discrimination as much as they saw (understandable) differences between themselves and Dutch students. As adults in Indonesia, they did not regard the rise and fall of various Indonesian governments as any sort of betrayal of nationalism or national aspirations, but merely as the simple march of history of an independent Indonesian state and nation. Perhaps their age when interviewed—most were in their eighties—had mellowed them and made them less passionate about such judgments than they might have felt when younger.

There are two specific comments that can be made about the book. First, it centers on a cultural elite that contributed enormously to the rise of the Indonesian nation and state and is in many ways an accolade to that elite's success. In the mid-twentieth century, several European scholars, such as Bousquet¹ and Furnivall,² made the case that the Dutch in the East Indies (as Indonesia was then identified) were in the process of transferring European technology and "cultural values" (read, "modernity") to the peoples of the Indies. "Native education" was seen as one of the key ingredients in this transfer and the means to ensuring the continued success of the transfer that the Dutch set in motion. Mrázek is looking at this earlier expectation from the other side of a historical era and traces the cultural transfer that occurred and evaluates its worth. Wisely, Mrázek does not attempt to evaluate the success of the entire transfer, but limits himself to the very successful infusion of "modern" values (read "European") into the minds of an important Indonesian elite. As such, he reveals how a legacy from one culture was transferred to another culture. In this case, important Dutch educational values became equally important in Indonesian culture and the Indonesian intellectuals were the agents of that transfer.

The second comment concerns the "voice" of the narrator that is used to introduce conceptual matters, to set the stage for quoted selections, and to summarize and make specific points. At times, the "voice" appears merely to be expressing the sense of the sum of the interviews; at other times, it appears to be the formulator of the methodology, attempting to place the interviews into an intellectual format and elaborate such findings; and, at other times still, the "voice" appears to be that of the author himself, interjecting his views, perceptions, and research directions. Most of the time the reader is not bothered by such distinctions. At some key moments, however, it is a problem, as when his narrator insists that interviewees who did not give strong anti-Dutch views in their original statements do so later in the interview. One wonders why the insistence on a form of political correctness, but also why the departure of the "voice" from its usual explanatory and analytical role.

¹ G. H. Bousquet, *Politique musulman et colonial des Pays Bas*. Translated from French by Philip E. Lilienthal, with the English title of *A French View of the Netherlands Indies*. Issued under the auspices of the Secretariat of the Institute of Pacific Relations (New York, NY, and London: Oxford University Press, 1940).

² J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and the Netherlands Indies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

This is but the latest in a series of strong writings by Mrázek on Indonesia; he is certainly accomplished in the field. His last major work, *Engineering Happy Land*,³ received very good reviews, and he is author of several other works over a span of two decades. The closest writing outside of Indonesia to his work is by his colleague Vicente Rafael, who writes extensively about the impact of the colonial period on the Filipino intellectual elite.⁴ There is also a recent study of Soviet influence on Central Asian intellectuals,⁵ but it does not come close to the quality and insight of Mrázek's study. Mrázek's book is sometimes slow moving—after all, it is a carefully crafted work—but it rewards the patient reader.

³Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineering Happyland: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴Vicente Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵Sam Trnum, *Life at the Edge of Empire: Oral Histories of Soviet Kyrgyzstan* (Bishkek, Kryrgyzstan: American University in Central Asia, 2005).