
REVIEW ESSAY: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

Tjamboek Berdoeri [Kwee Thiam Tjing]. *Indonesia Dalem Api dan Bara* [Indonesia Aflame and on the Coals]. Jakarta: Elkasa, 2004. First published 1947.

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Indonesia Aflame and on the Coals is a journalist's story of Malang, principally, both before and during the Japanese occupation and during the revolution. It is written by a nationalist, but it is not a success story. It culminates, not in the transfer of sovereignty, but in the scorched-earth tactics of the revolutionaries as they retreat in face of the returning Dutch. It is not, however, a story of policy or an overview of events. It is the best sort of reportage, recounting life as Kwee Thiam Tjing observed it and (using the pseudonym Tjamboek Berdoeri) wrote about it. He gives us his experiences, but his focus is not himself but those he met. His picture is amused, cool, involved, but also detached. He is very much aware of, but not overly invested in, the hierarchies of the society around him. Perhaps, in that sense, he was an intelligent product of colonial society. He saw and even depended on a stable society founded on differences. When social arrangements changed abruptly, he was sometimes amused, as, for instance, when during the revolution a cook became an officer and, having moved into a house in the former Dutch neighborhood of Malang, he did not understand the proper use of the refrigerator. This man is someone Kwee knew earlier and, as the man rises in rank, from being Kwee's underling to an important person, Kwee bears him no rancor. On the contrary, he is pleased that the man is a "sportsman." Kwee clearly had a capacity to adapt himself to different eras.

Kwee saw things in local terms, not because he was provincial, but because he drew on his own experience as he looked at events that he recognized as world-historical in their origins and importance. Thus, for instance, he compared the failure of the Dutch to resist the Japanese to a poker game. His perspective was broad, taking in the world scene, but his interpretation depended on what he knew first hand. He used his own human, and humane, reactions, which seemed, if learned rather than innate, to have been gained through experience. He was a nationalist but sympathetic to the suffering

of the Dutch under the Japanese. He saw for himself and saw a lot because he was curious. His own ability to take things in, to see, to understand, to recount the actions that occurred before his eyes no doubt sustained him as the context, political and social, changed. He assumed that the social fabric would endure through the Japanese conquest and the revolution. He describes the systematic cruelties of the Japanese with precision and outrage, and sometimes with humor, as when he tries to give boiled eggs to hungry Dutch prisoners and one after the other they are put in the pockets of Japanese guards. Kwee is helpless, given his lack of Japanese and their one word of Indonesian, "hoeh-hah," as he reproduces it, which serves for every occasion. Kwee finds it amusing to show that, for the Japanese, one word suffices for everything; it is Kwee's revenge. The book was written after the Japanese surrender; the removal of the Japanese from the scene surely enabled him to maintain his emotional equilibrium in the face of Japanese injustices and atrocities.

It is different, however, at the point when Indonesia is set afire. He blames (but also excuses) the untutored lower classes, or, rather, a segment of them. His stories are of individuals, but when it comes to the looting perpetrated by Indonesians when the Japanese first enter Malang and the atrocities that occur during the scorched-earth practices after they leave, it is a question of class. Even here, however, he personalizes the perpetrators, calling them Djamino and Djolitèng. If it were not for the presence of Djamino and Djolitèng, who, he says, exist everywhere, the atrocities that he felt so keenly would not have occurred. They were not, thus, an intended part of the revolution. Some Djamino and Djolitèng murder, rob, and rape. They, a subsection of the *pemoeda* (youth), in the Indonesian case, do not recognize rights of any kind—neither to property, body, or life itself. They take. They destroy. Thus, they represent either an elemental force of revolution or a force that emerges with each revolution. They are distinguished from other Indonesians who are appalled by their deeds and who see the revolution in terms of its goals.

Djamino and Djolitèng embody the force that the New Order later will term the "*massa*" (masses). This force is not uncontrollable, but it needs to be controlled. During the revolution, it acted in the name of an end, but that end seemed, if not outside Djamino and Djolitèng's understanding, at least not distinguishable by them from their own desires. They "arrest" Chinese whom they groundlessly suspect of being spies (*mata-mata*), and they rape and torture their captives. They represent an anti-social force released by the revolution, one that blends into the strategic destruction demanded by the *bumi hangus* (scorched earth) policy. Kwee describes Malang exploding and in flames and then glides into his final description of a massacre in which twenty-one Chinese, some among them relatives of Kwee, are murdered. Djamino and Djolitèng represent an element, he says, which is not limited to any specific nationality; they are found "in Europe and Asia" as well (he does not mention Africa); "civilization" does not eliminate this tendency. However, Kwee does not lose his temper with the *pemoeda*, but only with the Chinese. He has seen dogs at work on the corpses. He asks Chinese organizations to bury the dead properly before evening. But, out of fear, they refuse. This is the climax of the book, the culmination of the scorched-earth policy, as he experiences it. Kwee is enraged by the refusal of the Chinese organizations to bury the dead, and his anger has made him too, Kwee says, into Djamino and Djolitèng. But it is not these Chinese who are responsible for the massacre, of course. A subsection of the *pemoeda* have deprived him of his sang froid

and made him recognize himself as, not only Djamino and Djolitèng, but also, for the first time, as “Chinese,” in a sense new to him: he is responsible to his kin and is opposed to the revolutionaries. He maintains a loyalty to the revolution itself only by distinguishing Djamino and Djolitèng from other *pemoeda*. But his loyalty to “Indonesia” has been shaken for the first time.

He ends the book a page later. The Dutch, returning, have their Motor Transport Dienst, whose initials on their vehicles, some say, stand for “Merdika Tida Djadi” (Freedom will never come). Others respond it means “Merdika Tetap Djadi” (Freedom is coming). So far as he is concerned, it means “Moesti Tentoe Dami” (There must be peace; There must be a solution). *Dami* (or “*damai*” in current orthography) indeed implies the restitution of a state of peaceful relations rather than the violent replacement of one social element by another. Victory, in Kwee’s terms, would not simply consist in the establishment of an independent Indonesia or, for the Dutch, in the re-establishment of colonial rule, but, coming after the horrifying episode of the torture and deaths of the twenty-one Chinese and the refusal by the Chinese organizations to bury them, the birth of a society in which such incidents would not dominate, if they must occur at all. “But when?” he asks. The last words of the book are in Dutch:

Mijn Heer en mijn God!

Uw Wil Geschiede

Amen

“May God’s will be done,” leaving open all the possibilities contained in that phrase. Surely Kwee hoped that God’s will would include both the restitution of social order and the success of the revolution. But his hope for such success is obviously tempered by the shock of events—a shock that precisely opens the possibility of not knowing the end of the revolution. This shock arose, not from outside society but from within it, when the society became revolutionary.

Every society has its Djamino and its Djolitèng, he says, and thus every society has the possibility of undergoing revolution. Djamino and Djolitèng are from “the class a little above the very bottom.” When the revolution comes, the revolutionaries can be divided further. There are those who are *gepeupel*, perhaps the equivalent of the *massa*, as the term was first used before its value was inverted and it gained notoriety in the New Order, and those who are *gespuis*, from the Dutch again, meaning the rabble. The first can be arrogant, especially when they gain a higher position. But, he says, they are not *djahat*; they do not have evil intentions or perpetrate evil acts. People in the second group, however, “in a time of revolution become killers, rapists, arsonists of homes of innocent inhabitants, slaughterers of victims whose corpses are drenched in gasoline and burned.” It is a question of class, but personal character determines which subdivision of the class they will fall into. Kwee is careful to say that the actions of the Indonesian Djamino and Djolitèng are nothing when set on a world scale; by comparison, their acts are merely the work of children. Thus the revolution is doubly separated from its atrocities. It is a matter of bad people. These evil people have their chance in a revolution. But the Indonesian revolution or the Indonesian people or both

are better than comparable cases elsewhere. And thus Kwee avows his faith in the revolution and in its nationalist goal. The book ends in 1947 and was published almost surreptitiously in order, as Ben Anderson says in his introduction, to avoid complications from the newly returned Dutch.

It is not simply social instability that disarms Kwee. He is well able to deal with the changes in hierarchy that put him on a bicycle and a former subordinate in a car. The man, seeing Kwee on his bike, pulls his car over and invites him home. The man is "*sportief*," and Kwee bears him no grudge at all, he says after meeting him on the street. Rather, the incident proves how, through his human and intellectual breadth, Kwee can function in the face of drastic change. His functioning depends, first of all, on his linguistic ability, for example, on his capacity to address the man mentioned above in the dialect of Malang, a mixture of Indonesian, Dutch, and Madurese, thus avoiding the formal language that would have made their relations awkward. Kwee's linguistic cosmopolitanism, his borrowing of the words, if not the languages, of everyone he meets (least of all, but including, the Japanese) transcends any particular religion or nationality. Kwee mastered the words of his environment: Javanese, Madurese, Dutch, Malang dialect, Hokkein, Mandarin, and others. What he heard, he took in and assimilated to his own speech. Kwee was at home with everyone on Indonesian soil, without feeling that he had to be like them. He was "Indonesian" in an Indonesia where linguistic cosmopolitanism made this possible. Such cosmopolitanism came through learning and cultivation (a cultivation that takes place on the street and is to be distinguished from formal learning). In Kwee's urban space, differentiation and the recognition of particular rights came only through cultivation. His cosmopolitanism was threatened by a force that recognized no cultivation. The strength of the book lies in its portrayal of the force within the revolution that negates Kwee's cosmopolitan culture, all the more so because the latter cannot comprehend the former. With others, even the single-worded Japanese, Kwee could hear, understand, and answer them, and later even recount stories about them. With Djamino and Djolitèng, he could not. The man responsible for killing Kwee's relatives was in the *Stadtswacht*, the local force created by the Dutch when they knew the Japanese were coming. Kwee, too, was a member of the *Stadtswacht* and was, in fact, this man's superior. There, Kwee could have normal intercourse with this man since Kwee was able to deal with everyone. When that man became Djolitèng, as it were, this was no longer possible. Kwee was disarmed; no longer the Indonesian cosmopolitan (if that is not an oxymoron), he became, instead, a Chinese with obligations to family—obligations that he could not fulfill.

Kwee's Indonesia is no longer, as testified to by the footnotes that explain the words that now are not only foreign to Indonesian but also excluded from it. We need someone to tell us what these words mean, and we have to thank Benedict R. O'G. Anderson and Arief Widodo Djati for making Kwee's book accessible to us. At the same time, what a terrible shame for language, culture, and politics, that their efforts are now indispensable.

Anderson and Arief Djati's editing are acts of love and must have taken enormous effort, as is the case too with Anderson's careful introduction, which tells us whatever of importance we now know about Kwee's life. Anderson continues Kwee's biography past the period reported in the book. Kwee went to Malaysia, probably about 1961.

He left Indonesia, Anderson speculates, most likely because of the series of anti-Chinese incidents at that time. He returned after the anti-Chinese riot in Kuala Lumpur in May 1969.

Surely Anderson is correct in his suppositions about the reasons for Kwee's exile and return. But one can speculate further. Indonesia was set aflame by an ambiguous, dual force: on the one hand, by the scorched-earth policy, a strategy designed to prevent the return of the Dutch; on the other, by Djamino and Djolitèng, whose actions take them beyond that goal and do so in the name of the revolution. But the rise of Djamino and Djolitèng, against whom Kwee found himself defenseless and with whom he unwillingly identified himself in a moment of rage, could not have been accidental. In Kwee's view, Djamino and Djolitèng exist everywhere; they await only the opportunity to emerge. They formed part of the people (*rakyat*) under Sukarno and, as the *massa*, they marked the element against which the New Order ostensibly set itself, all the while adopting the *massa's* violent tactics. The time at the end of this book was thus the end of an era. It was the beginning of the end of Indonesian cosmopolitanism—the end of a society, colonial or national, in which one could find one's place by linguistically reflecting its elements (and thus including everyone on the basis of their difference) and feeling oneself part of the scene. Taking in others, Kwee found a place in an Indonesia that is no longer; as a cosmopolitan, he was an Indonesian. Extraordinary individuals such as Mangaradja Onggang Parlindungan, writing *Tuan ku Rao*, might re-inflect Kwee's polyglot style, but they are rare because the social setting in which such speech could be reflected back to oneself and others as proof of one's place and as guarantor of one's security is gone.

Once Djamino and Djolitèng (*gespuis*) were placed at the heart of political mythology, fear and reliance on force dominated. Anti-revolutionary terror supplanted the security given by an ability to take in difference and thus transcend social change. Indonesian cosmopolitanism lost its social function and thus its future. The effective memory of the revolution is the memory of the violence that ended Indonesian cosmopolitanism, memories twisted apart from the revolution's stated nationalist goals and limited to mere destruction rather than the opening up of possibilities. These coals have been kept aglow by a perverted, counterrevolutionary nationalism targeting the *massa*. The result: Indonesia all too often aflame.