

PETER BURNS

The Development of Indonesian Society. Ed. Harry Aveling. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979. Cloth \$22.50; Paper \$12.95. 241pp.

This book contains four essays, each by a different scholar. The editor asked them to co-operate in providing a history suitable for advanced students with no previous learning about Indonesia. He wanted the scholars to write from the viewpoint of Indonesia. He wanted them to treat problems of interpretation as having the same importance as "facts".

In his preface the editor mentions some of the difficulties in writing Indonesian history generally and some of the difficulties he and his writers experienced personally. He writes of the daunting grandeur in the task he asked the contributors to perform. He is aware of the tension between writing regional history and writing national history. The preface conveys, to me, a feeling of uneasiness — as though the editor were not quite sure that all the problems and tensions had been resolved. Such a feeling would be justified for the book as a whole does not succeed. Each essay by itself may have, or lack, particular merit, but they do not combine well. Even though the editor has arranged the essays to deal with successive periods, continuity is lacking. It may be that the problem lies in the concept of Indonesian history itself. It may be that the concept becomes increasingly invalid the further it is extended back in time.

The first essay, by Ann Kumar, recognizes this problem immediately. The writer limits her description of development during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to four communities only. This is reasonable. It would be an overwhelming task to treat every ethnic community in Indonesia even if the description were limited to those three hundred years. And it would be an anachronism if the history of Indonesia-as-a-whole were to be presented. Dr Kumar offers two major historical processes as themes common to all four societies. They are the entry of Islam and the penetration by

European powers. Yet, despite this, by the end of her chapter, in her summary, it is clear that these societies are four distinct entities.

The second essay, by Peter Carey, continues the history of one only of the four societies. He deals with Java in the nineteenth century. It would have been interesting if the original approach had been maintained. It would have helped offset the Java-centric tendency which is, I suspect, a major problem in writing Indonesian history. Of course, Java was the centre, the focus of Dutch attention during most of the century. But it was not the whole. Developments in the other three communities also had significance.

The last two chapters treat Indonesia as a whole. Robert van Niel deals with the history of the Netherlands East Indies from 1900 to 1945 when Indonesia proclaimed its independence. He provides a wide view including a sketch of literary developments.

Harold Crouch writes about the increasing emphasis on authority in Indonesia. This is related to the failure of successive systems of government to cope with the basic and lasting social problems. One of these, stimulated by the national revolution and developed by the communist party is the rising level of expectations. It seems that the exercise of power is the only answer for that. Crouch does not have the broad approach of the other three. He is concerned with problems of government.

All four writers ascribe too much knowledge to the editor's target reader. That is, you may remember, an advanced student for whom Indonesia is unfamiliar ground. "The first mention of the sultanate" (p.11) is Kumar's first mention of the sultanate. The alert reader will assume, correctly, that this was established in Aceh. Nevertheless, the introduction is abrupt. Similarly, Carey introduces the Culture System – in name only – on pp.62 and 63. He does not deal with it until pp.79ff. He refers to "the Magelang peace conference" (p.76). Once again the alert reader has to make deductions. Were there other peace conferences? With no familiarity with Indonesia the student is expected to understand the following geographical references:

At that time the leading *pesantren* and *pondok* in Kedu (Kuweron), Mataram (Melangi, Kasongan, Wotgaleh, Papringan) and Pajang (Maja, Baderan, Majasta) created a network of countryside support for Dipanegara which had ramifications as far afield as the great *pesantren* of Tegalsari in Panagara.

Van Niel writes that "(r)ecognition of the Central Sarekat Islam was finally given in 1915 on the eve of Governor-General Idenburg's departure" (p.125): This is the first mention of the Governor-General. The advanced student will ask why. What is the significance of Idenburg? Reference to the index will not help. Idenburg is not listed there. Crouch packs significant information into a sentence which demands the advanced student's concentration. An example from p.177;

In the years which followed factionalism in the army remained sharp despite a common sense of alienation which culminated in the refusal in 1955 of the army to accept a new chief of staff appointed by Ali Sastroamidjojo government which fell as a result.

Feith took several pages to describe this development (394-409) in *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy*.

It is necessary in the disciplines of history and political science that sweeping generalizations should be avoided. Nevertheless, the habit of qualifying every judgement can lead to vagueness or seeming self contradiction. In the first words of his preface, the editor cites Van Leur to show that Indonesian history is

- (i) an unknown world
- (ii) not absolutely unknown (there are similarities)
- (iii) (despite the similarities) new and unknown.

The reader learns that the construction of sailing ships had *more or less* reached the optimum form by the end of the seventeenth century (p.10), that the influence of emigrants was *almost certainly considerable* (p.99), that although the Regents were losing prestige, they were still powerful, much respected and obeyed (p.110), that the masses were receptive to the appeals of leaders who promised a *new (actually old)* and better world (p.120).

The illustrations increase in relevance through the book. They are well placed. They serve to separate the different

periods with which the writers are concerned. (Do advanced students need illustrations?) On each page of the notes, the relevant page numbers of the text are printed. This is a merit. There are some spelling mistakes, wrong word orders. The essays contain much information. I would not argue with most of it. (I would have mentioned the *Koelie Ordonnantie* on page 118, would have included Minahasa and the east coast Malay principalities with Minangkabau as exceptions on page 153). The book is useful, yet I feel that each of the scholars has written better work elsewhere.

