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Writing Indonesian history in the Netherlands

Rethinking the past

There are two obvious ways of writing about the 'state of Indonesian history'. The first could be called Rankean: objective, scientific, and buttressed with a scholarly apparatus of typologies, tables, inventories and notes. The second is more post-modern: aware of artifice, admitting the influence of context, accepting subjectivity, and sensitive to the need for disclosure. This essay is closer to the latter than the former. In a compromise that is perhaps typical of much contemporary history writing, it concedes a fundamental subjectivity, but hopes to achieve some measure of respectability by considering a few external sources and paying attention to circumstances.

It is usual in such essays to have an initial footnote acknowledging the writer's gratitude to various colleagues, students and friends, while at the same time absolving them of all responsibility for the argument presented. Both points must be made here with such emphasis that I have elevated them to the body of the text: many co-workers might recognize individual ideas or comments, but reject the interpretation. I alone can be held accountable for the following opinions.

The main argument of the following pages, however, is uncontroversial enough. Briefly summarized, I suggest that the development of Indonesian history in the Netherlands, like all history writing, is shaped by two major, interacting forces. The first is socio-political, and refers to the constellation of relevant interests and attitudes within the producing society, including changing international relationships, in this case between the Netherlands and Indonesia. The second influence is cultural, comprising the institutions and ideas which shape the academic infrastructure and the formulation of research agendas. Here, we focus on debates within and about history and the social sciences in general, and on Indonesian history in particular.

This much is fairly obvious. But I also – quite subjectively – suggest that the writing of Indonesian history at the moment seems to be in rather poor shape. We have an image problem, and it is our own fault. The interesting intellectual terrain seems to have been captured by other disciplines, reducing history to being the drab provider of raw material for cultural studies or social science. Or, as the more beleaguered historians might claim, modest and meticulous scholarship is being pushed aside by ill-informed but superficially impressive generalization.

The resulting crisis of confidence for the traditional arts and letters is both cause and effect of the paradoxical fate of history at the moment: scholars everywhere (except historians) seem to agree that history is too important to be left in the hands of its traditional practitioners. So everyone is getting into the act, producing confident conclusions and striking theories, while the historians are grubbing around in the archival dust, worrying about 'facts'.

Within Indonesian studies over the last twenty years history has moved from the centre of attention to the periphery. The relative number of young scholars working on Indonesian history is falling in the USA and Australia, although other Indonesia-focused disciplines flourish. In other Southeast Asian regions, history writing is increasingly important, while a new generation of local scholars – Thai, Malaysian, Filipino – make their mark in the international arena. In Japan, and within Indonesia itself, more scholars are doing more research, but as yet language and distribution barriers limit the international impact.

There are some grounds for satisfaction if we look at the situation in the Netherlands. Since the revival of interest in the 1970s a younger generation of historians has emerged, oriented not only towards Dutch traditions of colonial scholarship but also increasingly to more international trends. But at the same time I think there are serious reasons for concern. Two are general, and shared by historians in Australia or the USA: why, given Indonesia's size, importance and relatively good documentation, have historians of the country had so little impact on the international historical debate? and why are we losing ground to other disciplines?

There are obvious answers to both questions: Indonesia is a relative *terra incognita* in the English-speaking world because of its Dutch past, while the new fascination with a successful Asia has focused attention on economics and the need to compete in the future, rather than on understanding the past. Nonetheless, the impression that the relative number of historians has been falling, and that history in general and Indonesian history in particular are perceived as having little to contribute, demands a certain self-examination.

More specifically, I would suggest that Indonesian history writing in the Netherlands is only beginning to free itself from the restraints created by a strong past. We remain somewhat parochial and conventional in the questions we ask, and the sources we use. Within the wider Dutch scholarly community – particularly among social scientists – the notion persists that history consists of getting the facts straight, a sort of superior clerical work, and interdisciplinary dialogue remains underdeveloped. This caricature of history can continue because historians have avoided a fundamental, and increasingly essential, re-presentation of the discipline. That need for re-thinking and re-presentation is the underlying theme of this essay.

Context and background

There are regular surveys of the 'state of the art' in Asian or Indonesian studies, including history; Schulte Nordholt (1990) and Taufik Abdullah (1988) are informative examples. Such surveys range from accounts of developments in Japan, through reports by various committees, to special issues of Australian journals. Surveys of recent publications and dissertations are published in newsletters such as the *European Newsletter of Southeast Asian Studies* or the *Asian Studies Review* of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Individual projects, such as the ANU (Canberra)-based economic history group ECHOSEA or the KITLV's ecological EDEN group, report on current research and publications, as do various regionally oriented brochures, like South Sulawesi's *Baruga*. In addition, there are many general and specialized bibliographies; here the KITLV also plays a prominent role, publishing the twice-yearly *Excerpta Indonesica* as well as individual bibliographies in book form. Leiden's *Itinerario* and the *American Journal of Asian Studies* also compile regular listings. Moreover, if one has the stamina, it is possible to broaden one's search to assess wider fields, making use of such impressive CD-Rom services as *Historical Abstracts*, *Social Science Citation Index* and dissertation abstracts on-line, as well as the lists, disciplinary and regional bibliographies and regular abstracts provided by University Microfilms International. One can also turn to critical reviews in professional journals and such weeklies as the *Times Literary Supplement*.

There is, then, no shortage of raw material for a proper survey. This would undoubtedly reveal trends (perhaps even trajectories), and also lacunae, windows of opportunity, and impressive aspects which would repay international profiling, as well as weak points needing reinforcement. Perhaps I should have done this, but I was weakened not only by a battle fatigue born of participation in too many similar, bureaucratically generated exercises, but also by the feeling that we already had a rough idea of how things were, and a pseudo-statistical analysis would not answer the more difficult and important questions. These, it seems to me, concern not so much where we have been, but what we are doing and why, and where we should or could be going.

But before proceeding to these questions, I should admit that a historian's Pavlovian impulse overcame me, and I looked through most of the sources mentioned above. I wanted a quick check on my general impressions of how the writing of Indonesian history in the Netherlands compared to developments overseas. I was particularly interested in the situation in Australia, a country with a comparable population and strong interest in the region, and in the USA, where a new approach to Indonesian history writing was born in the late 1950s.

The November 1992 list of Indonesia dissertations in progress at Australian universities offers few surprises. Anthropology dominates with twenty

doctoral candidates, followed by history with fifteen; there are small clusters on politics (5), culture (5), geography (4) and economics (2). The ANU in Canberra was generally strong, followed closely in history by Griffith (in Brisbane) and Sydney. The total numbers for history do not differ strikingly from the situation in the Netherlands, where the probably less complete EUROSEAS Newsletter for May 1993 (volume 5, no. 2) shows a concentration of dissertation research in Amsterdam (at the Free University, the University of Amsterdam, and their joint Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam) and Leiden, with a couple of theses also in progress in Utrecht and Nijmegen. The Netherlands scores high in comparison with the rest of Europe; although Hull and SOAS (London) have impressive overall Southeast Asia expertise, history is most strongly represented in Paris, with minor Indonesia activity within Southeast Asian studies at Passau.

This geographical distribution is unsurprising, given the background of the various countries. More interestingly, it seems also, on the basis of this very unscientific sample, that the sort of historical research is also shaped by the traditions and political experiences of the countries and institutions involved. Roughly speaking, the Dutch dissertations in preparation tend to be regional socio-economic (particularly in Amsterdam), or more generally political (Leiden, Utrecht), while in Australia there is a relatively high concentration in cultural history (particularly in Sydney). Inevitably, there is a clustering of work on the colonial period in the Netherlands, where the modern period, and cultural and political studies, are relatively under-represented.

Perhaps these impressions should gladden a historian's heart, showing as they do the power of the past over the present. While such traditions can be limiting, they can also provide a basis for growth. But a glance at the United States scene shows that this contextual determination can also be negative.

The boom in Southeast Asian studies in the USA came with decolonization and the Cold War. Early twentieth-century individual teachers on Southeast Asia such as Clive Day, and later Raymond Kennedy, at Yale, or Rupert Emmerson at Harvard, had considerable stature but limited impact. The 1950s saw the birth of area studies programmes, with well-funded multi-disciplinary expertise focused on solving the problems of the Third World. Individual scholars with diverse backgrounds and training joined in creating such seminal centres as those at Cornell and MIT. Out of their debates emerged the first serious attempts to formulate approaches to the history and politics of the new nation of Indonesia, such as Smail's excellent article in 1961, and the Benda/Feith exchange of 1962; key articles in these debates are reprinted in Anderson and Kahin (1982). More generally, Geertz's ideas dominated discussion on Java for decades, while the work of Anderson and McVey on culture and politics set new standards. History was central to all of these approaches.

But if we look at the Indonesia scene in the United States today, history

has become peripheral. While individual teachers at universities such as Ohio and Hawaii remain active, the sense seems to be that within Indonesian studies the intellectual frontier has shifted to other disciplines. Social scientists or cultural studies scholars use their theories and methodologies to draw new insights from the historical record; but while they borrow information from historians, historians tend to turn to them for ideas.

Many factors have played a role in this, ranging from post-Vietnam War political pessimism about area programmes as a resource for social engineering, through intellectual fashions, to the personal disillusion experienced by some post-war scholars whose identification with Indonesia never recovered from the massacres of 1965-1966. Mission-oriented or problem-solving research tended to become concentrated in economics or applied social sciences, while theoretical insights were drawn from literary and anthropological debate. Within history itself, excitement was mainly generated by new subsectors of the discipline, such as women's history, far removed from the dominant preoccupations of Indonesian studies.

Summarizing our impressions from this Cook's Tour, we can say that writing on Indonesia in Australia remains fairly vigorous, with a strong interest in modern Indonesia, including aspects of cultural and political history. There, economic logic dictates a continuing commitment to Asia, with extensive government support and effective lobbying from the Asian Studies Association of Australia. But even there, history is less central than it was. In the USA the intellectual emphasis and challenge is elsewhere. Moreover, Indonesian history increasingly lags behind other Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand or the Philippines, where impressive contingents of local scholars participate in the English-language arena as well as in local intellectual life. After a strong beginning in the 1960s, Indonesian history came somehow to be seen as boring; we are in danger of losing a generation of scholars. But what of the Netherlands?

Here too we see the importance of the political setting, and not only the advantages but also the inhibiting effects of established traditions. The revolution against the Dutch (1945-1949) created tensions and ideological divisions between and within both countries. Whereas in Indonesia the turmoil of later events diminished the importance of these splits, in the Netherlands political standpoints on colonialism and decolonization continued to shape academic approaches to Indonesia. Although direct relations were broken in 1957, with Sukarno's expulsion of the Dutch, reactions to the 'coup attempt' and killings of 1965-1966 were filtered through established political perspectives.

The Netherlands' intellectual and scientific involvement with Indonesia has a long history; the first colonial institution anywhere to be dedicated to such pursuits was the Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences), established in 1778. The relatively thorough training of civil servants was the seed-bed for Dutch achievements in Indonesian linguistics, ethnology and history,

which emerged through practical contacts with the Indies, and usually within a Dutch-government-sponsored framework.

Nineteen sixty-five was a traumatic year for all who cared about Indonesia; while it represented an emotional and intellectual challenge for Australian or American scholars, it was also, for the Dutch, the reopening of opportunity. Americans and Australians sometimes found it difficult to work in Indonesia during the late Sukarno period, but on an individual basis it was feasible. However, for Dutch scholars it was almost impossible until after 1965, and they reacted with both relief and caution to the new situation. All were aware of post-colonial sensitivities. Some were wary of a regime they saw as born in bloodshed and illegitimate, and tended to focus upon those they felt the New Order neglected, upon poor peasants and urban squatters. Others were grateful for access to their sources, and aware of their vulnerability should this access be endangered. The cumulative effects of the period 1945-1965 on Dutch Indonesian scholarship were, I think, paradoxical: relationships within the academic community in the Netherlands were coloured by political convictions, while actual research on modern Indonesia was resolutely apolitical. Because of disdain, or a tactful desire to avoid any chance of offending, the political, social and cultural bases and development of the New Order were largely ignored.

During the 1970s academic recovery in Dutch Indonesian studies began. This was spearheaded in the social sciences and arts by the bilateral inter-governmental Programme on Indonesian Studies, with its relatively accessible scholarships, conferences and upgrading programmes. This was an opportunity to heal wounds, to renew contacts and to salvage the intellectual heritage of Indonesian studies in the Netherlands. There was some continuity of membership between the last colonial generation of the 'old Indonesia hands' and the higher levels of the Programme. These long-established friendships created a bridge, enabling a younger generation of post-war scholars to enter the field.

This apparently cosy but in many ways ambiguous relationship was abruptly interrupted in March 1992 when J.P. Pronk, Minister for Development Cooperation, offended Indonesian sensibilities by linking economic assistance to human rights. All research funded by his Ministry was unilaterally rejected by Indonesia, leading to a collapse of the old Programme and eventually to the emergence of a new one based explicitly on equality.

Despite the rapidity with which shuttle diplomacy papered together new arrangements, the rejection of Dutch aid was a dramatic symbolic event. While it could be explained away as a clever political move with a high public relations benefit and a low cost, there was no denying the pleasure it gave many Indonesians or the shock experienced by many Netherlands. Whether or not it will lead to a fundamental reassessment of Dutch-Indonesian intellectual relationships and of their tangled pasts remains to be seen. It is not so difficult to rephrase Memoranda of Under-

standing; it is a lot more difficult to change underlying assumptions.

Established political and cultural norms always influence scholarship, particularly for history, and they are peculiarly complex when a shared colonial past is involved. There is an extensive, indeed overwhelming, literature on Orientalism, on colonial ethnographies, and on representation, which is concerned with the relationships between political and cultural hegemony, presentation of the past and hierarchies of knowledge. An impression can be gained of this discourse on discourse by looking at works by Clifford, Inden and Stocking, or articles in the 1992 numbers of *Representations* or *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. This has attracted some attention in the Netherlands, but the resulting puzzles and polemics are seen more as a social science game than a real challenge to historians. There has been little self-examination within the profession.

A new relationship, a new agenda?

Dutch writing on Indonesia since the war has had various emphases, focusing on histories of the colonial relationship and decolonization, with some work on regional studies and socio-economic change, while the current stress is on economic history. Each of these efforts has contributed to our knowledge, and the achievements of historians in studying the Cultivation System, colonial mechanisms and local societies, as well as in providing excellent source publications, have produced a depth of knowledge that other Southeast Asian societies can only envy. In many ways we can be proud of what has been done in the Netherlands, where the last twenty years have seen an impressive re-entry into the international arena.

However, the public debate in the Netherlands on Indonesian matters has been preoccupied with the past, rather than the present. Accounts of prisoner-of-war camps or the treatment of coolies on plantations resonate deeply within folk memory and political consciousness, because of their centrality to the Dutch colonial experience. Such domesticated themes can provide a false sense of familiarity, an illusion of understanding the archipelago, which is reinforced by Dutch-speaking older Indonesians' sentimental reminiscences and the nostalgia boom in publishing. The tie between the two countries may be real, and the relationship special, but it is charged with ambiguities and sensitivities. These also inform Dutch writing on Indonesian history.

It is natural that Dutch historians should emphasize a time when their own history overlapped that of Indonesia, and which is so conveniently documented in kilometres of archives close at hand. But the historical agenda, as established in the past, must be subject to constant revision in the light of the changing relationship with Indonesia and current debates within history. It sometimes seems that Indonesia's achieving of independence took much less time than has the intellectual decolonization of the Netherlands, a process which has been proceeding for over half a century, with perhaps the 1992 rebuff as the final coda.

The emphasis at the moment on economic history is a case in point. In cooperation with Australian and Indonesian scholars, books are being published and workshops organized, while the *Changing Economy of Indonesia* statistical compilations provide accessible material for further work. Without in any way detracting from the solidity, relevance or sophistication of the work being done, its dominance is perhaps indicative of both the strengths and limitations of the current Dutch scene in Indonesian history. Economic history, particularly of the quantitative or micro-descriptive sort, can be technocratic, neutral and unlikely to offend; it is justifiable in terms of relevance for development, and may seem to be divorced from cultural and political ambiguities. This is not to say we must limit our work on economic history; on the contrary, it is an exciting and growing field. But the historical spectrum must be expanded to include the cultural and political dimensions currently receiving such short shrift, which are just as relevant for an understanding of modern Indonesia.

Since 1965 Indonesia has developed economically, and is now recognized as a junior Asian tiger; manufacturing has surpassed agriculture, urbanization is dramatic, there is a growing and increasingly articulate middle class. Rapid social change has not been matched by political reform. The question of the Suharto government's origins is now overshadowed by speculation as to its future. But changes within Indonesia have not always been recognized in the Netherlands, although current research rhetoric usually emphasizes the need to place Indonesia in context as a modern Asian power.

In this connection the drawbacks of the Netherlands' admirable academic traditions and its long links with Indonesia are readily apparent. It is all too easy to appeal to the past, to argue that what was once strong is always strong, and to strive for continuity when what is needed is adaptation. The intellectual wealth of the past represents a capital that can be invested, but it must be used in ways that relate to the present and the future. This is increasingly recognized, but it is only with the emergence of a new generation of historians in both countries that innovation has begun to seem as important as repetition. New directions and ideas will develop, not only through an open interaction with Indonesia itself, but also through participation in the wider intellectual fora of Indonesian studies and of the historical discipline as a whole.

Some Indonesian societies characterize those who compete in political and social arenas as 'hot', while those who opt out, or are side-lined, are 'cold'. Indonesian history now seems rather 'cold'. Historians have often taken a rather perverse pride in this, seeing themselves as diligent artisans, soberly immune to the transient intoxications of the latest fads or fashions.

There is much to be said for this, as long as what is being ignored really is peripheral. But there may be pressing reasons to enter the arena. Historians must join the debate if the issues being discussed are significant, or if they are perceived as such by relevant segments of the society. If the

public, students, government or funding bodies see history as unexciting and powerless to contribute to society's cultural needs, then the historians must act, even if they personally have no doubts about their worth. In these days of increasingly centralized allocation of social space and funding, each discipline must project itself effectively.

Many historians feel hard done by: on the one hand they are dismissed as theoretically impoverished, unimaginative and above all boring, while on the other hand they see their discipline being coopted and, feel, treated lightly, by trendy theoreticians. The tempests of political correctness have not reached the Netherlands, and there seems to be little debate among historians as a whole about the validity of their work. But we should take these wider issues seriously; they are more than simple fashion, they have real implications for the writing of Indonesian history. My concern here is not with abstract issues of legitimacy, or with establishing any correct approach, or with purely theoretical speculation. I believe that by re-examining fundamentals, we can free ourselves to do better creative work.

The essence of most historical research will remain far from flamboyant, characterized by a diligent sifting of evidence, a reluctance to specify goals in advance since sources are so unpredictable, a preference for careful dissection over initial generalization, and a choice for narrative form rather than theoretical construct. But we must better articulate the constraints and richness of the discipline. Complaints about poaching by more newsworthy neighbours are counterproductive. Historians must add to their strengths, by incorporating an understanding of theoretical and methodological potential into their work, by explaining themselves properly, by being self-aware and explicit.

The professional strengths and social centrality of history provide a strong foundation upon which to build. What we must do, however, is learn from other disciplines in making visible the assumptions upon which we proceed. This means that the choice of research topics, selection of sources, methodology, forms of presentation and narrative must be subject to thoughtful examination. This is no end in itself, but is necessary to validate our work. I suspect that the resulting research may be very similar to what we now do; but we will be better able to explain to fellow-scholars, to students, to government departments, to funding agencies and to the general public why we do what we do in the way that we do it.

Content

When attempting to evaluate the current state of Indonesian history, I could begin as most historians would, by placing it both diachronically and comparatively: what is its past, where is it now, where is it going and how does it measure up to other histories. Attempting to answer such questions is daunting enough, but it becomes even more complex if we ask ourselves: what is 'it'? What is Indonesian history?

This is a legitimate question, which gives rise to a number of others; my

purpose here is not to answer them, but to attempt to show how stimulating posing them can be. Should we, for example, be concerned with the individual, locally rooted accounts of the past as developed within Indonesian communities' own cultural contexts? Or should these be seen as the realm of the anthropologist, as exotic ethnohistories with mere curiosity value? Or are they perhaps a potential source of 'folk histories', which could profitably be linked to mainstream research?

Most conventional historians are content to follow a more familiar path: that of the modern professional historian working within the originally Western tradition of the discipline. Here, it can be argued (but it is usually simply assumed), is the terrain of the real scholar. Ethnic origin, cultural background and political belief are irrelevant: whether born or trained in Paris, Canberra or Yogyakarta, historians meet in the neutral arena of science. Research questions derive from the international debate, methodologies evolve and are tested in the circuit of workshops, periodicals and reviews, the common ground is unchallenged.

Such scholastic certainties rest on an achieved consensus, which was stable enough until the 1950s. Only the most unreflective historians believed in the possibility of reconstructing a simple truth about the past. Most have always recognized that there was no Archimedean point providing an external vantage position from which to view the worlds within which they lived and which they studied. But there was a – usually implicit – pragmatic consensus that one did the best one could. Objectivity might be a myth, and sources always partial in every sense, but with healthy scepticism, a wide range of material carefully used, and a decent narrative, a historian could produce valid work. So to many practising historians the current enthusiasm for post-Orientalist deconstruction, post-modernist critiques of pseudo-science, and the exposure of colonial ethnography's hidden agendas all seems somewhat inflated. After all, a good historian was already aware that history was made, and made within a specific context.

It is clear that the most crucial and interesting debate on these issues will take place in Indonesia itself, among Indonesian historians; an impression of their discussions can be obtained from their association's journal *Sejarah*. Social scientists in a number of Southeast Asian countries are deep in discussion on the 'indigenization' of Western intellectual traditions. Using a technological analogy, it is possible to speak of 'upgrading' local traditions, rather than 'downgrading' Western techniques, thus closing the gap between an alien superculture and local knowledge, to create new and accessible paradigms. The search for an Islamic yet 'modern' framework of analysis goes back to the nineteenth century, but is certainly no less actively pursued in the Muslim world today. Organizations such as ASEAN or UNESCO create fora within which Asians talk to each other, and the idea that Westerners should or could set the agenda are obviously misplaced.

Yet few would advocate the rejection of the historiographical and methodological techniques developed in the West, on the grounds that they are merely a product of a specific culture. But a modern Indonesian tradition of history writing could develop, drawing on both Western and local resources, on evolving historical 'little' or folk traditions as well as the theoretical and methodological debates current in universities and think-tanks. An exploration of how techniques and traditions can be developed to provide meaning in a dynamic society with many perceptions of the past would not only enrich Indonesia but the profession as a whole.

Within Indonesia itself, the corps of historians has slowly expanded, as has the infrastructure of publishing, periodicals and international networks. Most would now look to Australia, the United States or Japan for inspiration before turning to the Netherlands. In terms of the two countries' historiographical relationship, language and archives form the most pressing tie. Young Indonesian historians come to Holland because of these facilities, or the availability of funding, rather than from intellectual preference. Hopefully this will change, as the more diverse reality of modern Dutch work on Indonesia is consolidated and recognized.

For Western historians concerned with their own societies the challenges are less complex, but since the 1960s the cumulative impact of the debates on colonial, working class, minority and women's history has led to a greater self-awareness. The issue of the relationship between 'professional' and 'folk' histories is increasingly addressed, particularly by oral historians. But for Western scholars studying other cultures such new trends pose particularly interesting dilemmas, which should be made explicit.

If we automatically accept the hegemony of the Western historiographical tradition, its theories, priorities and methodologies, we can probably proceed much as before. This would, I think, be a pity. Historians' professional roles and social identities are not sealed off from each other. There is a creative tension between disciplinary demands and subjective agendas. Since these are constantly changing, static and absolutist standpoints can only be counterproductive. I do not, then, deny the centrality of this Western tradition, but I believe renewal and vitality within it will come through reassessment and innovation: deconstruction and reconstruction.

This reassessment should take place within the context of the discipline as a whole. Current debates within all sorts of history – European, Asian, American, African, Latin American – on such themes as state and society, ethnicity and nationalism, gender, proto-industrialization and the construction of reality are acutely relevant for Indonesian history. We should learn from them more than we do. Fundamental to reassessment is the idea that history is pluriform and many-voiced. We need to listen more carefully to the 'subaltern' narratives within our own societies, not because the tale of a baker's wife is necessarily more worthy than that of a general, but

because we need to hear them both. Similarly, we need to hear the whole range of voices from Indonesia's changing communities.

Westerners writing the history of other cultures are part of a process subject to critical evaluation by a variety of groups: specialists in other disciplines, government agencies, historians from other societies. It used to be fashionable to talk of 'relevance', but that is now almost as dated as 'objectivity', and for the same reason. Both presuppose a certain fixed order, and the questioning of assumed realities is increasingly central to the historical debate. For those of us working in the Netherlands, particularly if contact with Indonesia is limited, it is all too easy to remain within the mind-set of the colonial state. There is enough documentation in the Netherlands to occupy many historians a lifetime. Too much research is still *source-driven*, an uncritical exploitation of available written material, rather than *question-driven*. Compared with the creativity displayed in recent African and Latin American historiography, our writing on Indonesia looks dull indeed. Inevitably, if we align our priorities with those of the old colonial administration, we will seem somewhat removed from the issues of today.

Most societies attach great importance to history, which is crucial in creating and modifying social identities. This is clearly evident in the battles over school curricula in Britain, or over political correctness in American universities. To the wider society, history is the past, the past that has made us what we are, and explains our relationships with those around us. Conservatives in England fear that if British history is reduced to a mere 50% of the history curriculum, and too much is taught about the Ashanti or the Aztec, then a multicultural society without a proper hierarchy of values is just around the corner. Everything will become relative. To traditionalists, the defence of authorized 'proper history' is also the defence of absolute values: objective truth is possible, we are the centre of the universe, we know who we are, there is right and wrong; if we question history, then they believe we question the basis of society. But as society changes, so too does history. Both social change and historical interpretation are contested, each influenced by and influencing ideas and policy.

Social attitudes to historians' performance can have serious long-term implications. There is an international trend towards more intensive management of research. In the interests of accountability, aims, testing and administrative structures of research are more clearly formulated; this in turn requires organization into larger units, into group projects with their own bureaucratic documentation and controlling hierarchies.

The benefits of this trend are mixed. Since it is a very general question, here I will merely focus briefly upon several major repercussions for Indonesian history in the Netherlands. The first is that historians' applications for funding are judged in increasingly competitive arenas, often by multi-disciplinary committees and in comparison with projects from the social

sciences. Moreover, with greater control, governments are more inclined to set parameters, despite little knowledge of the substance of research. Funding agencies also tend to develop their own subcultures, with implicit checklists of desirable and undesirable qualities.

The recognition that Indonesian history can be seen as weighted towards the region (the archipelago), or to the discipline, has created an unresolved dilemma concerning its appropriate institutional embedding. Area studies or history department? (Cribb (1995) discusses the pros and cons of these alternatives in the current Australian setting.) Each alternative has a price, which contributes to its vulnerability: Indonesian history is always a minority interest within both region and discipline. An area studies context provides rich resources of social science, but leads to ghettoization, 'non-western' history is seen as an exotic, huddled together with anthropology, thus perpetuating the historical establishment's indifference to non-European work. However, abandoning the protection provided by the social sciences, and entering history departments, exposes minority historians as first-choice victims in the savage wars of university budget-cutting.

Within the multidisciplinary circuits historians often get low marks. The social sciences make much explicit (theory, methods, relevance), while the more traditional historians see no need to try to articulate their presuppositions. They will enthusiastically talk of sources, or of gaps in existing knowledge, but this seems feeble and pedantic when compared with theory testing, questionnaires, training field assistants and 'operationalization'. In reality, most differences between the arts and social sciences (like those between the exact and social sciences) are relative, and high-quality work appeals across disciplinary boundaries. But the style of presentation is very different. In this more competitive environment, the historians suffer from a poor image. While better public relations would help, I believe, as is clear from the above, that a more articulate, self-critical debating of our points of departure would invigorate the discipline.

Reassessment

I will try to illustrate what I mean by looking at some fundamental, and often unquestioned, categories which are commonly used in writing Indonesian history: those of time, space and social identity. In much research, even now, these elementary categorizations are drawn from administrative and political organizational principles developed by the late colonial state. These established frameworks dominate existing texts and structure the archival record. It takes an active effort of will to transcend them.

Despite lip-service to the contrary, conventional periodization based on imperial imagery is only gradually being abandoned. We still talk of the VOC period, the British Interregnum, the Cultivation System, Ethical Policy, Japanese Occupation and Revolution as if they formed fundamental demarcations throughout all Indonesian societies. This is absurd.

The reach and impact of the various governments was highly uneven, the continuities and crises of various regions, groups or institutions often bore little resemblance to this partitioning of the past. The relevant periodization should be decided by significant shifts within the subject of study, depending on the perspective adopted and the questions asked, rather than by prefabricated external labels.

But perhaps more importantly, the potency of naming is such that people come to believe that the labels can be equated with reality. As a result, narratives on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indonesian history can all too easily be reduced to VOC history, leading to fundamental misperceptions of societies, trade and politics. Company influence has been overestimated, while the resilience and innovative capacity of Asian traders has been underestimated, as was the extent of their networks. Local political dynamics were reduced to accounts of Dutch relations with local rulers, so that the history is oversimplified and the societies undifferentiated.

The opposite also happens: historians of Indonesian regions tend to see the VOC as the representative of advancing Dutch political power, and fail to appreciate that to the Company their area is merely one factor in the business of an early multinational. In each case, inappropriate bipolar and parochial perspectives are imposed upon both time and space. Internal social and cultural diversity and international connections are missed.

The same can be said of ethnic categories. Ethnicity is a fascinating and slippery concept. It can be deconstructed down to the roots, as we analyse the ways in which ethnic identities and relationships are created. But ethnicity *is* and it *was* – and determining what precisely it was, and the role ethnic identity played in the shifting commercial and political alliances of Asia remains a challenging project. In many cases, our ideas about ethnic categories and the social strategies of groups or nations in the more distant past are simple back-projections from the high colonial ‘plural society’ of the 1930s. We now recognize that ethnicity is a social construct; we must also recognize that the ways of its construction, and its meaning, vary with time.

When we read about Bugis, or Chinese, or English business activities in the 1700s, the implicit subtext is all too often one of ethnically defined competition, presupposing that economic competition was a comparable cultural imperative for all groups. Often a static ‘constant-pie’ economy is assumed, winners and losers are identified. The possibility of alternate value systems and strategies is often ignored, as Western views of race and ethnicity, and Western assumptions as to economic motivation, are projected upon the past.

Of course the documentation available for writing non-colonial history is very uneven, but this is a problem to be confronted, rather than an imposed perspective to be accepted. We have to extend the boundaries of what is possible by innovative and responsible exploitation of new types

of data. For example, interesting Kalimantan local histories are being produced using anthropological and linguistic evidence (see various issues of the *Borneo Research Bulletin*). But it is typical that few attempts have been made to explore these possibilities in societies better covered by the archives. Problems of source material also underlie the tension between the desirability of writing generalizing, synthetic work addressing large themes and issues, and the very real need for more detailed case-studies. However, this can be a creative tension: ambitious publications such as Reid's two volumes on *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, or Tarling's *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* generate debate. Some may criticize the first as premature and the second as solidly old-fashioned, but both present a mass of data within a historical vision. It is up to their colleagues to be corrective, to produce the detailed research or theoretical critiques which will take us further.

Moreover, the possibilities of the archival record are by no means fully exploited. New angles, the search for subtexts, can wring very non-colonial interpretations from the driest dossiers. A case in point: the extensive work being done on Indian Ocean trade between the 15th and 19th centuries, with its recognition of diaspora communities, and its search for new points of departure is gradually undermining the old Eurocentrism. In particular, attempts to base conclusions on detailed analysis of production and marketing reveal the variety within Asian economies, as well as parallels with and differences from European developments.

There has already been a long discussion on the concept of the 'village' in Southeast Asian history, beginning, like most such, with an iconoclastic and liberating attack on conventional wisdom. Further research then demonstrated the importance of deconstruction, followed by corrective analyses that moved the pendulum back again, somewhat towards the centre. Patron-client ties and extractive vertical relationships are now seen as basic to the politico-economic system, but local communities also had meaning and function.

Similar cycles are to be seen in many debates; perhaps the best known for Indonesian history are those on the impact of the Cultivation System of Dutch agrarian exploitation in the mid-nineteenth century. Was it involuntary, evolutionary or revolutionary? Was it beneficial or destructive, causing social levelling or sharp stratification? Perhaps in some cases and some times it was a bit of both (depending on crops and circumstances). And how does one measure progress anyway? The net result of such discussions is usually a recognition of analytic complexity, of regional diversity, of the need for more work, but – most importantly – also a more thoughtful and sceptical attitude towards past judgements. In other words, through debate we move forward, not just in the sense of accumulating more factual knowledge, but also of achieving greater understanding.

This forward movement in history writing of the last few years has been linked, as always, to changes in social context and intellectual climate. It

might have been possible, even if undesirable, to still assume in the 1970s that the perceptions and values of European officials in a strange environment represented a general reality which we could accept. After all, a common cultural matrix united the writers of the sources and the writers of the books – if not the objects of their scrutiny. A little racism might have had to be deleted here and there, but as a whole European perceptions were accepted as reliable. The fact that these views were assumed to adequately cover the spectrum of attitudes involved in the multi-ethnic past now seems harder to explain. It could only be either because we assumed that other histories were in every sense subordinate, and hence irrelevant, or because we feared that they could not be captured by our methodologies, and so it was more tactful just to pretend they did not exist.

Neither of these reasons is sustainable in the 1990s. When we make choices of perspective, we should be prepared to explain why. The contested colonialism of the 1930s may have led observers then to see European versus Asian, or Dutch versus Chinese versus Indonesian, or Dutch versus English or Japanese, as the grand themes of history. This is legitimate enough when writing colonial history, but inadequate for Indonesia. We are now much more aware of complex interactions within and between societies. The unseen social groups or unacknowledged ambiguities of the thirties are the hot topics of the nineties, and the underlying arrogance of the imperial powers and the First World falters before the economic renaissance of East Asia. So we have to come to terms with the limitations of our established knowledge and of our methodologies. Our work in the past has been limited: we must try to do better by expanding our research interests and our methodological reach. And so the discipline develops.

Projects for the nineties?

Given all the general comments and opinions expressed above, the possibly irritated reader has a right to pose a question: OK, then, be specific, what should we be doing? My initial response, since I am wary of prescriptive planning, is to take refuge in Mao-like exhortations: 'criticize categories, seek structures', for example. But this might, understandably, increase irritation to a dangerous level, so in rounding off this essay I will try to clarify some practical steps and personal preferences which might contribute to a more vigorous pursuit of Indonesian history writing in the Netherlands.

To begin with, the socio-political environment. Most of this is beyond our control, and is the same for Indonesian history as for other disciplines, but I would like to see more grass-roots awareness. In particular, we should try to create an understanding, within the society and the schools, of the continuities and wider context of Dutch East Indies and modern Indonesian history. There is still a residual awareness within Dutch society of the link with the Indies. This should be built upon, not in a spirit of

nostalgia, or retrospective justification or accusation, but in order to create an understanding of European-Asian interaction over a long period of time, including the most recent past. The colonial relationship should be placed in context, with less emphasis on value judgements, and more on the human complexity and structural mechanisms which give it its long-term meaning. In this instance, Indonesia could serve as a particularly relevant case-study for relations between North and South.

This would obviously be part of a wider Asia-directed effort, involving some self-redefinition by the International Institute of Asian Studies, the only possible equivalent we have of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Linked to this should be a public relations and lobbying initiative, again along ASAA lines. A common commitment to a national goal might also weaken the inevitable, but wasteful, interuniversity competition and the resulting individual backdoor lobbying of government departments.

Government funding for research is, in most countries, directed towards channelling work into defined structures, with their own administrative hierarchies and testable goals. Such top-down research can be very productive when focused upon coherently planned large-scale projects. The possibilities for joint problem solving and stimulating feedback can be major assets to such initiatives as the KITLV's ecology project or the ANU's economic history of Southeast Asia. A similar broad undertaking being discussed in several centres involves coordinating studies of overseas Chinese networks, while I have always thought that an integrated approach to the textile trade between India and Southeast Asia (from weaving villages to ultimate users) would produce valuable insights into economic and cultural history.

State-financed institutions have more difficulties with individual research, and the advantages of the new structures must be weighed against the dangers of over-regulation, bureaucratic evaluation and declining initiative. Administrators are low risk by instinct; they like predictability, they want to bet on the proven and avoid the untried. But innovation involves risk, and young researchers must be given the chance to challenge established boundaries. The old professorial patron-client ties are being broken down by the new structures; it would be a pity if the powerful, but research-oriented old school was to be replaced by an equally closed structure of top-down planners and money-spinning academic entrepreneurs. History would be particularly badly affected if this happened, given the contributions to the discipline by many a lone obsessive.

There is a welcome new realism in our relations with Indonesia. More bilateral ties between universities, less centralization and recognition of intellectual equality are all admirable goals. But realism should also acknowledge the problems which still remain: the financial limitations and overloading of Indonesian universities, the inherent conflicts produced by an emphasis on control by clumsy bureaucratic procedures when small-

scale, personal ties can be much more effective. Nonetheless, more intensive cooperation with Indonesia is essential if the balance between the colonial and the modern is to be redressed.

In order to strengthen personal knowledge of modern Indonesia among Dutch students, I would strongly support schemes to give selected undergraduates the chance to enrol temporarily in Indonesian universities, while junior Indonesian staff could obtain study-leave support to come to the Netherlands. To some extent these opportunities exist, but limited demand in the Netherlands restricts their use and expansion. This lack of interest derives mainly from the indifference to the post-colonial period which is such a striking feature of Indonesian history writing in the Netherlands.

If we turn to the more substantive and intellectual content of Indonesian history, we see a gap between current rhetoric and historical practice. It may now be affirmed that Indonesia and the Netherlands are not locked in an exclusive bilateral embrace, but historians barely seem to have accepted this. Indonesia did not stop being part of Asia because it was a Dutch colony: Singapore was the main port for many regions, Cairo an intellectual capital, networks to South China channelled trade and investment, while Japan was the rising industrial star. An all-dominating Dutch-Indonesian axis can never be adequate to explain the past; historians must be aware of the pluriformity of ties which cut through colonial boundaries and led into a variety of wider arenas. But this is difficult to realize, as long as the pattern of teaching and the emphasis on archival sources guide students into accepting established research parameters.

Any individual prescription for the study of Indonesian history as a whole can never be more than partial, but from time to time we must try to formulate personal priorities. As is no doubt clear from the above, I would like to see a deliberate transcending of the established periodization and spatial categories, emphasizing research which cuts through the end of the colonial period and the time of the Japanese occupation into contemporary Indonesia. Rethinking periodization also involves more than simply cutting the past into differently demarcated chunks: at the very least, assumptions of linear change have to be rethought. Even in apparently culturally 'neutral' sectors such as economic history, recognition of oscillations in the 'capturing' of labour, or the persistence of craft traditions within industrial structures require increasing sophistication. This in turn demands a broader range of sources – relying not just on archives, but recognizing that oral and life histories, the study of material cultures and archaeology, better use of the press, and landscape history all offer enriching possibilities.

We should also make more of an effort to frame the geographical limits of our research in terms of the relationships central to the themes we study. National states and colonial residencies should make way for family networks, rural clusters, institutional connections and transnational enterprises. The focus on political and economic history, buttressed as it is by

colonial archives, should be joined by more work on cultural and social phenomena, using literary, anthropological and linguistic methodologies to understand how Indonesians understood their situation. This applies not only to the crucial and very understudied seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also to the social transformations of recent decades. 'Urgent research' encompasses not only vanishing 'traditional' societies, but also the experiences of theatrical troupes in the pre-film era, rural peddlars and pioneering trade unionists.

History is the study of process, and is itself always in process: a 'correct' position or approach is inevitably temporary, and should be subject to critical debate. This presupposes flexibility in institutional arrangements, a diversity of ideological positions, variety in subject matter and innovation in methodology. And this all depends on dialogue.

The great changes in the institutional arrangements in Dutch academic life have expanded opportunities and funding, although both remain extremely fragile, given the economic constraints upon national and university budgets. The new graduate schools in Amsterdam and Leiden, the International Institute for Asian Studies and the new bilateral programme in the arts and social sciences all support PhD and post-doctoral fellowships, the organization of workshops and conferences, and access to other scholars and countries.

It is to be hoped that within this new environment a balance can be created between centralized funding and grass-roots freedom, between an emphasis on a common intellectual marketplace and the specific demands of various disciplines. For Indonesian history this means that we must better articulate our theoretical and methodological concerns, that we must participate more broadly in the debates within history and within Indonesian studies. During the 1960s there was discussion about goals and means, about the relationship of history writing to the intellectual and political climate of the times. Given the rapid changes in Indonesia, in international relations, and the energetic critique of the interpretation of the colonial past, it is imperative that Indonesian historians again examine the bases of their professional activity. We need more history in Indonesian history, as well as more Indonesia: a much greater engagement in the discipline as a whole, and more awareness of the complexity and life of Indonesia now.

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