
Sitting at the crossroads of major sea lanes and trading routes, the islands that make up the modern nation of Indonesia have long been exposed to peoples, products, languages, ideas, and religions from other places. As Taylor puts it in her new book *Global Indonesia*, ‘Openness to the new is a constant characteristic of communities across the Indonesian archipelago’ (p. 150).

Students of Indonesian history are taught about the influences on the nation originating from elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East, Europe and the post-war ‘West’. This ‘whole world history’ view of Indonesia is familiar in the scholarship and Taylor’s own wonderful earlier book *Indonesia. Peoples and histories* (2003) is a stellar contribution to expanding our knowledge of both the external and internal histories of Indonesia.

What is different and exciting for the reader of this book, be they long-time students of Indonesia or novices, is its expansiveness and the generosity of interesting, relevant, and detailed historical narratives. The why, the how, the what, and the when are given a light touch that makes for compelling reading in small snatches or large parts.

Most importantly though, the title *Global Indonesia*, immediately gives us a new frame for viewing Indonesian history—not post-colonial or even modern Indonesia—but ‘global’ brings to mind a past and future where Indonesia is at the centre of a meta-narrative of world history, not a small or marginal participant within it. Taylor positions Indonesia and its history within a world system of nations, colonies, multinational corporations, and religions.

As we have seen from her other writings, Taylor’s true strength is her ability to drill down from this meta-narrative to reveal intricate detail of this engagement between peoples, showing how large forces impacted the lives of ordinary people from day to day. For example, Taylor’s description of the role of sago as an engine of ‘an archaic globalisation’ allowing hunter-gather communities of the Spice Islands to feed passing sailors and barter for knives and axes captures the sense of Indonesia being at the centre of a global system and its significant impact on the people of the archipelago, long before the term ‘globalisation’ came into vogue.
You can open the book on any page and find a nugget of historical interest. Taylor demonstrates skill not just in the assemblage of these stories, but in identifying the connections between and within them. In a section on disease, Taylor reveals the truly global links between the forests of Peru—where the bark of the cinchona tree provided scientists with quinine and protection against malaria—and the story of two Netherlands Indies scientists smuggling the protected cinchona seeds out of Peru. By 1914, plantations of cinchona trees were thriving on Java and soon produced nine tenths of the world’s quinine. The importance of telling this story, Taylor reminds us, was that ‘Quinine was a tool of empire’ (p. 76) and the ability to keep a steady supply within the colonies meant a stronger and more enduring presence.

In another example of such key connections between Indonesia and the world system, Taylor takes us from the invention of the pneumatic tyre in Scotland in 1888, to the subsequent increased worldwide demand for bicycles and cars in the early twentieth century, to the increased numbers of Chinese coolies arriving to work on rubber plantations in Sumatra (pp. 78-9). These examples reveal an excellent and experienced teacher of Indonesian and world histories.

Though not a scholar of Indonesian Islam, as a leading historian, she challenges us to consider how this century’s history of the world’s most populous Muslim nation will be written. Will it be, as Taylor believes, that of a nation at the centre of global Islam as its large population of Muslims makes right, or will it remain as it was in the twentieth century, occupying a place somewhere between the ‘East and West’? As Taylor shows in great detail, present-day arguments and trends about the place of Islam in Indonesian society are complex and far from uniform and indeed still a long way from the dominant Middle-Eastern narrative of ‘global Islam’. Taylor poses questions about the histories written in the past which failed to recognize Indonesia’s status within global Islam. Here she opens up space for this ‘re-imagining’ of Indonesia’s place in world history by reminding us that globalization ‘is not specifically grounded in the West’ and that ‘Islam offers a counter globalisation that invites, and indeed requires individuals to move away from freedoms so construed’ (p. 194).

In a society with freedoms to information, commerce, socialization, and travel such as they are in today’s Indonesia, and a cycle of cross-fertilization which has long been the way of life for its people, what we already know...
for sure is that global Indonesia will continue to import, adapt, develop, and thrive.

Jemma Purdey
Monash University
Jemma.purdey@monash.edu

Reference

Taylor, Jean Gelman