Ravando, *Perang Melawan Influenza: Pandemi Flu Spanyol di Indonesia Masa Kolonial, 1918–1919*. Jakarta: Kompas [with a foreword by Prof. Dr. Hans Pols and Prof. Dr. Nila F. Moeloek], 2020, xxxvi + 468, ISBN: 9786232415546, price: IDR 149,000 (paperback).

The 1918 influenza pandemic attacked almost all corners of the world. The Dutch East Indies was among the most seriously affected areas. The mortality rate was fairly high, although the officially released data did not accurately reflect this reality. The disaster, which occurred more than a century ago, is among a long list of incidents that historians have not studied comprehensively. The available information about this historical pandemic has dwindled with time. In this light, *Perang Melawan Influenza: Pandemi Flu Spanyol di Indonesia Masa Kolonial, 1918–1919* (Combatting Influenza: The Spanish Flu Pandemic in Colonial Indonesia, 1918–1919) is a very important publication that can partly fill this lacuna in scholarship.

The main topic explored in this book is the relation between the 1918 influenza pandemic and a number of political, social, and cultural issues. It does not intend to strictly provide a linear description of the spread of the disease. Rather, it discusses the beginning and the spread of this disease in the Dutch East Indies, as well as governmental policy that failed to overcome its transmission by trivializing early warning signs, despite the fact that other parts of the world had treated the disease with a sense of urgency. This can be seen from the debates in the Indies People's Council (*Volksraad*) between Abdul Rivai and Th. De Vogel, the director of the Civil Health Service (*Burgerlijken Geneeskundigen Dienst*, BGD). At this forum, Rivai, who was also a medical doctor, criticized the colonial government for not doing anything to prevent massive transmission; at the same time, he witnessed many victims of the influenza virus. Moreover, he criticized the habit of the colonial health authorities to blame the natives for using traditional medicine, which allegedly enabled the disease to continue to spread. Rather than increasing their efforts to deal with the disease, the BGD thus opted to problematize the habit of the indigenous population (pp. 4–6). The events that serve as this book's starting point effectively convey the contemporary climate when the 1918 flu pandemic hit the Dutch East Indies.

Through a division into two separate waves, the author discusses the chronology of the disease and its transmission in the Dutch East Indies in detail. The first wave is discussed in general terms, based on the news about the outbreak gathered from daily newspapers. The second wave is discussed, still mainly through an exploration of newspapers, by focusing on different residencies in the Dutch East Indies. In this section, the author maps the spread of the dis-

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ease, presenting a richly detailed overview. His description of the death toll of this pandemic is quite complete. The used sources, primarily government reports, may not provide the complete figures, which is something the author is acutely aware of. By looking at the existing numbers, he invites us to imagine a larger scale of the pandemic. The cultural aspects surrounding the 1918 pandemic are discussed by calling attention to a number of ritual practices carried out to ward off the disease. These practices come from common ideas that the disease was a consequence of immoral behavior. Interestingly, the rituals were quite diverse, although their goal remained the same: to expel evil forces manifested in the form of a disease. In the wake of superstition, hoaxes about the disease also spread widely. This situation was exploited by some people to reap economic benefits, taking advantage of the heightened fear among the population at that time. One example is the “prescription” to offer 50 cents to a person named Prawadrana—whose house had reportedly been visited by the divine Nyi Roro Kidul—in order to be protected against the disease (p. 282).

The dynamics around influenza are also placed in the global framework. The book’s lengthy description of the early history of the influenza virus makes it easier for readers to understand its later impact. Stories about the hardship caused by the 1918 pandemic in various other places of the world provide global comparisons. This section explains why the pandemic is better known as the Spanish Flu, even though it is suspected that the virus was transmitted by the American army. The timeline of its global spread is also concisely summarized, enabling readers to see the issue in a global perspective. However, it is precisely in this section that the author seems unable to sketch a direct relationship between what is happening in colonial Indonesia and elsewhere in the world. As a result, his characterization of the global dimensions of the disease appears detached from the phenomena described in Indonesia.

The book emphasizes the importance of the economic aspects of the epidemic, in which the poor suffered a considerably worse fate. The colonial government alleged that the wide transmission of the virus could be connected to the poor nutrition among the indigenous population, resulting in compromised immune systems. This attitude of victim-blaming appears to have been a common strategy to cover up the government’s inability to control the spread of the disease and support its many victims. In this section, I would have liked the author to not only present data, but also to explicitly analyze the data within the structure of the colonial state. From this perspective, the pandemic emerges not only as a medical issue, but also as the result of multiple political and economic problems plaguing the colonial state.

But even as it stands, *Perang Melawan Influenza* reads like a war against invisible enemies, bad habits, and anti-science attitudes. These three things are

very important and very germane to understanding and contextualizing today's COVID-19 pandemic. The book's effort to impugn such attitudes, through an insightful discussion of events that unfolded a hundred years ago, both echoes and offers insights into Indonesia's current conditions.

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