
Based on his 2008 doctoral thesis at the Australian National University, Taufiq Tanasaldy’s book addresses a theme of increasing and significant interest in the recent literature on Borneo, one which resonates in other parts of Southeast Asia. Tanasaldy’s work assembles in depth interviews with over one hundred local officials, community leaders, activists, and intellectuals, as well as extensive research in archive collections in Australia, Indonesia, and the US, delving through a wide range of primary and secondary literature, some of which is accessed here for the first time (including political party documents, personal diaries, official and private political correspondence, government reports, newspaper clippings). His work provides a contribution to the study of the relationships between ethnic identities, culture, and politics. Unfortunately, collections in the Netherlands (other than some of Dr. A.H. Böhm’s papers and some materials held in Australia) were not consulted ‘due to time constraints and the author’s limited understanding of the language’ (p. 10).

The topicality of this text is in no small part due to the dramatic events in Kalimantan from late 1996 to 2001 when serious and bloody conflicts ensued between the primarily Christian Dayaks and the Muslim Madurese in the provinces of West and Central Kalimantan, resulting in a large loss of life and a significant refugee problem. There is already a substantial literature on these events (among others by John Bamba, Bambang Hendarta Purwano, Jamie S. Davison, Michael Dove, Mary Somers Heidhues, Gerry van Klinken, Nancy Lee Peluso, Emily Evans Harwell, Mary Hawkins, Human Rights Watch, Syarif Ibrahim Alquadrie, Huub de Jonge and Gerben Nooteboom, Anne Schiller, Glenn Smith and Hélène Bouvier, and postgraduate students at Gadjah Mada University [Muhamad Abas, Yasser Arafat, Giring]); Anika König has also recently successfully defended her PhD in 2012 at the ANU on ‘the cultural face of conflict’ in the Dayak-Madurese conflicts of 1996-97.

In some respects these ethnic tensions form part of a wider series of open conflicts in other parts of the Indonesian archipelago following the collapse of Soeharto’s New Order in 1998, the institution of policies of decentralisation and the politicisation of identities, particularly among marginalised
minorities in Indonesia's outer islands. Nevertheless, some of the Dayak-Madurese conflicts pre-dated these events and, as Tanasaldy argues, evidence of these tensions date back to at least the 1950s. Even from 1945 there was a politicisation of ethnicity in the continuing struggle between the Indonesian nationalists and the Dutch colonialists and, even before the introduction of Soekarno's Guided Democracy in 1959 and the implementation of the centralised and authoritarian policies of the New Order from 1966, the Dayaks of Kalimantan had already begun to organise themselves politically and to build a pan-Dayak identity. This occurred well before the non-Muslim indigenous populations of Sarawak and British North Borneo (Sabah) started to develop and express a Dayak and other sub-Dayak identities in the run up to independence within Malaysia in 1963. Dayak identities were also formed in relation to, or we might say in opposition to the development of politically conscious movements among immigrant communities, particularly the Chinese, across the former territories of British and Dutch Borneo. Nor has the sultanate of Brunei been immune to these cultural and political processes, as ‘racial’ or ethnic identity and difference became embedded in the Constitution of 1959.

Tanasaldy’s contribution to these studies is to present a detailed historical narrative of the development and transformation of Dayak identities and politics in West Kalimantan from the pre-independence period up until the mid-2000s. Specific attention is given to the origins and rise of Dayak politics (1945-60), the decline in political activity and Dayak marginalization from the 1960s until the end of the New Order in 1998, and ethnic politics and conflicts involving the Dayaks from then until 2005. There is an enormous amount of historical detail here, with extensive footnoting which provides all kinds of new avenues for other researchers to explore. Especially interesting for me are the accounts of the contributions of members of the Dayak political elites and communal organizations to post-independence political and cultural developments in the province. Nevertheless, the book reads rather like a heavy doctoral thesis and perhaps more careful editing would have helped to sharpen the narrative and improve the analysis.

Tanasaldy’s conceptual contribution is relatively straightforward and unsurprising. He argues that political and regime changes in Indonesia at the national level have both opened opportunities and imposed constraints on Dayak action at the provincial and local level, and that their
political activities have been ‘entwined’ with those of other ethnic groups (pp. 5-6). With regard to more recent Dayak-Madurese conflicts, Tanasaldy weighs and evaluates a range of factors and processes in explaining Dayak violence, especially their political, bureaucratic, economic, and cultural marginalization prior to 1998, and their strengthening political consciousness, organization and identity during Reformasi, and he considers some of the literature on ethnicity and ethnic conflict characterized in terms of the standard approaches to the analysis of identity constitution and formation (primordialism, constructivism-instrumentalism). He concludes, correctly I think, that these conflicts were not the result of political engineering or motivation, but rather that they had much more to do with historical (including past inter-ethnic antipathies and conflicts) and cultural/perceptual factors (including ethnic stereotyping).

Tanasaldy refers to Michael Brown’s two-fold categorization of the reasons why some inter-ethnic relations become prone to violence into ‘underlying causes’ and ‘proximate causes’ (pp. 40-7) and he keeps loosely to this framework. But other than his references to Jamie Davidson’s important work I did not detect a sustained engagement with the available literature on ethnic conflicts in Kalimantan, both academic and popular, as well as with the ‘insider’ perspectives adopted by members of the Institute of Dayakology in Pontianak (many of whom Tanasaldy interviewed), and how these might be thought about and reinterpreted in relation to the explanatory historical framework that Tanasaldy adopts.

Overall, this is a worthy contribution to the ever expanding literature on ethnicity, cultural politics and violence in Indonesia. It is also a valuable addition to the political history of West Kalimantan and studies of the wider post-war development of Dayak politics in Indonesian Borneo. It brings together an impressive range of source materials and, in so doing, I hope it will encourage others to explore further not only issues of inter-ethnic relations in the province but also such processes as social class and elite formation, the development and transformation of political organizations, and relations between political leadership, representation, political constituencies, and mobilization.

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