Kathryn Robinson (ed.)

In Youth Identities and Social Transformations in Modern Indonesia (2016), edited by Kathryn Robinson, ten anthropologists explore the challenges Indonesian youth face in transitions to adulthood amidst economic growth and globalisation. Importantly, the volume asks what young people’s perspectives and practical realities reveal about the socioeconomic and political futures of Indonesia. Each study is an insightful addition to youth studies and Indonesia, and is especially relevant for those working in development and social science fields.

The volume’s 12 chapters are organised under six different themes that use ethnographic approaches to convey youth’s views, aspirations and influences. Some studies compliment these youth-centred approaches with large survey data aimed to capture young people’s transitions and generational changes. Geographically, studies draw from rural and urban locations across Indonesia to show how political and economic powers affect a range of youth differently across gender, age, class, and ethnicity lines as they negotiate access to employment and education. A key theme traced throughout the volume is the contrasting influences of cultural inclusion and exclusion youth feel: At times, they are idealised as agents of the future; at others, they are feared and criticised for having different values than generations before.

Part 1 gives critical conceptual grounding for studying youth. Chapter 1 emphasises how the social construction of “youth” and their individual experiences must be understood within wider societal structures. As such, this approach requires research with youth, instead of about them, which respects youth’s roles as future agents of social and economic change. Chapter 2 describes the Ambivalent Adolescents in Indonesia (AAI) project that surveyed 3,565 youth in nine locations from 2006–2008. Their results discuss youth’s perspectives in transitions from education to work, and show that many young people have high career aspirations, but recognise their chances for success are small.

Part 2 transitions to the difficulties youth face in finding jobs and questions whether education secures futures in Java and Sulawesi. Chapter 3 shares teenage experiences from a rural Javanese village, where youth see “home” as no place for a job and recognise the structural “webs of power” that constrain their life choices (White and Margiyatin: 50–59). Similarly, Chapter 4 traces how education has become a central aspiration in Sorowako, South Sulawesi. Different from their parents’ generation, which saw a nickel mine transform
agricultural lands and livelihoods, today’s youth aim for longer schooling and office jobs. Common through both studies is a new ambivalence felt between intergenerational relations, caused by parents who have little experience in modern economy pursuits, and youth who desire autonomy but depend on family for financial support.

Creatively, the role of friendship in peer surveillance is discussed in Part 3. Chapter 5 examines the significance of close friendships in West Sumatra. This chapter finds that friends, especially among girls, act as an external social conscience that provides self-awareness and support in transitions to independence, such as when young girls leave home for education and work. Chapter 6 examines Pramuka, an Indonesian Scouts organisation that aims to build youth into responsible, disciplined citizens. From young people's perspectives, Pramuka is seen in positive light, as it instils values of teamwork, leadership, and gender equality where youth can navigate the “power relations that favour organisational hierarchy” (127). However, there is little critical reflection of this argument; as Pramuka carries no inherent gender, ethnicity or social divisions which deeply divide much of Indonesia and constrain young people's opportunities.

Part 4 examines how youth's social spaces change over time in Java. In a longitudinal study, Chapter 7 follows three classes of urban and rural youth over four decades in Yogyakarta, noting how economic reforms and globalisation have transformed youth's physical spaces and social influences. Similar to other chapters, youth have responded with broader aspirations than their parents’ generations, but express frustration over deepening social divides between poor and middle classes. Chapter 8 examines how the nation’s “moral panic”—fear that globalisation leads youth towards drugs, sex, and alcohol—shapes teen socialising for “safe” times of the day in Internet cafes and shopping malls. Similar to Chapters 5 and 11, this study reflects how friends, especially among females, encourage “moral behaviour” when away from home.

Sparked by Indonesia’s transition to democracy and economic downturns, Part 5 studies inter-religious violence among students in Java and young men in Ambon. Chapter 9 presents an original photo essay that captures Ambonese men posed next to large Christian images they have created to claim city space against Muslims. Likewise, Chapter 10 examines youth who join conservative Islamic groups whose values denounce Western consumerism. Both chapters reflect how young males—who are often unmarried, with low wages—attempt to express identity through visual and physical protests to power and religion. Both studies are reiterative of youth’s demand to be heard and recognised, as outlined in Part 1.

In one of the most interesting sections, the final chapters ask how globalisation affects young women in Java and Lombok. Chapter 11 uses AA1 sur-