Review Essay

Recollecting Jakarta’s Social and Medical History

Vivek Neelakantan
The University of Sydney, Australia
vivekneelakantanster@gmail.com


What are the benefits of incorporating memoirs and medical biographies into mainstream Indonesian historiography? Much of the literature about the history of post-independent Indonesia deals with politics. Much less attention is given to social history, more specifically to the history of medicine. Firman Lubis' memoirs capture the socio-medical history of Jakarta during the first three decades of Indonesian independence between 1945 and 1979 and the political transition between the Soekarno and Soeharto eras (between 30 September 1965 and 12 March 1967). In some ways, the social history of Jakarta post-independence is a microcosm of the social and political upheavals that characterized the history of Indonesia during the same period.

The books under review were written from an Indonesian physician’s perspective in Bahasa Indonesia. The author—the late Firman Lubis—was
Professor of Public Health at Universitas Indonesia (UI) and founder of *Yayasan Kusuma Buana* (1980), an Indonesian NGO that urged the acceptance of family planning in urban areas by addressing the needs of women and children in underserved areas.

**Jakarta 1950-an**

In *Jakarta 1950-an*, in which Lubis assesses Jakarta's contribution to the formation of post-independent Indonesia's national identity, he attributes Jakarta's cosmopolitan outlook to the advancement of medical education under Dutch colonialism which saw the inauguration of the STOVIA (*School tot Opleiding Voor Inlandsche Artsen*) in 1902 (p. 71). The medical students of the time originated from diverse ethnic groups including Javanese, Minangkabau, Batak, and Ambonese. Nationalist student organizations such as *Jong Java*, *Jong Celebes*, *Jong Batak*, and *Jong Minahasa*, united in 1928 to declare the Youth Pledge which promoted three ideals: one motherland, one nation, and one language. As Indonesia's diversity is reflected in Jakarta's ethnic composition, Lubis rightly refers to Jakarta as *kota kebangsaan* (national city).

The second theme of the book is public health. The author recollects that during the 1950s, Indonesia was faced with the challenge of combating infectious diseases particularly smallpox, cholera, dysentery, polio, tetanus, and rabies. Unfortunately, the Indonesian Ministry of Health lacked adequate resources to initiate vaccination programs against smallpox and other infectious diseases. Tuberculosis was a major endemic disease in Jakarta that affected the overall vitality of the population. Lubis observes that during the 1950s, Jakartans perceived tuberculosis as a romantic disease that imbued its sufferer with higher sensitivity (p. 144).

The weak point of *Jakarta 1950-an*, in my view is the subordination of historical context to the enumeration of detail. While the author offers a primary account of Jakarta's social and medical history, the presentation could be better organized thematically. For example, sanitation, public health, and flood control in Jakarta are interrelated themes that could be efficiently integrated into one section in chapter six that focuses on town planning and sanitation.