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A HISTORY OF
INDONESIAN HISTORY

Jean Gelman Taylor

History is lived and experienced by every one of us. Schools, governments, and
the media sustain national myths that include some citizens, maybe many, but not
all; they produce a partial consensus, and can stimulate feelings of belonging or
outsider status. The writing of history by professional historians is the product of
institutions—libraries, archives, academic positions, and research granting bodies.
There are also histories written outside of academe by journalists, activists, and
enthusiasts. The writing of history by professional and popular authors alike is
conditioned by, and reflective of, the individual’s own historical time period, class,
gender, ethnicity, religion, and other circumstances. The writer’s own times throw
up the questions asked, and the theories, causes, and opportunities explored.

The state of Indonesian history—in the United States and abroad—is closely
bound up with the history of Cornell’s Modern Indonesia Project, and so I start here
with the CMIP’s own history. It was born in January 1954 into a society whose
government judged it important to obtain, and quickly, knowledge of the
independent states in Asia that had emerged following World War II. The Cornell
Modern Indonesia Project was brought into being, then, for American purposes. The
research generated was not to be knowledge conditioned by colonial scholarship, but
knowledge developed by a new generation of young scholars employing new
methods in research, notably fieldwork. These were some of the expectations:
contemporary conditions in Indonesia should drive research questions; projects
should be devised that were of practical relevance to Indonesia and Indonesians; the
methodologies applied should come from the new social sciences; and the new
studies would not be buttressed by knowledge of the Dutch language and colonial
archives, but founded on knowledge of Indonesian and possibly regional languages
as well. The Ford Foundation lent its substantial support to this endeavor, financing
the CMIP from 1954 through 1974.

CMIP’s first director was the late Professor George Kahin.1 He had been a
postgraduate student engaged in fieldwork in Indonesia in 1948, an eyewitness to

1 Elsewhere in this volume, fellow panel member Rudolf Mrázek also acknowledges Kahin’s
scholarly impact and his socially committed sense of the academic’s role.
the birth of Indonesia itself. His *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (1952) established conceptualization of Indonesia’s modern history as the product of Western, secularized, Dutch-speaking Indonesians who, from a background of politicking in study groups and parties in the 1920s and 1930s, had harnessed popular aspirations for independence to support self-government in the form of a republic. Historian William O’Malley challenged this interpretation in a 1980 essay. He drew attention to pre-war parties championing special rights for their religion, ethnicity, or home region, and to parties opposing republicanism in favor of monarchy. The numbers of these politically active individuals far exceeded membership figures for nationalist parties. So, O’Malley concluded, pre-war politics was not a linear movement from particular to nationalist identity and goals, but a politics of competing claims by many stakeholders. Little notice was taken of O’Malley’s assessment almost until the chaotic years following President Suharto’s resignation, when it seemed as if Indonesia were breaking apart.

Kahin’s sympathy for Indonesia gave him access to the highest levels of its government—access that now seems extraordinary for an academic. In setting up the research agenda of the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, he consulted with Indonesia’s President Sukarno, Vice-President Muhammad Hatta, and former Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir, as well as with senior Indonesian academics. He persuaded Ford Foundation authorities that funds should be used to support not only Cornell academics and postgraduate students, but Indonesian academics and advanced students from the University of Indonesia, too, for joint and separate research projects in the fields of government and economics. Kahin’s vision resulted in studies of villages, family, and household, of regional economies, of Indonesia’s citizens of Chinese ancestry, and of urban and legal-administrative histories. In the 1960s, the scope expanded to histories of the revolution and Indonesia’s international relations. Indonesians also studied at Cornell University.

**THE CMIP INFLUENCE**

In April 1966, the first issue of Cornell’s journal *Indonesia* appeared. It became an essential, indeed, prestigious journal for scholars of Indonesia in the United States and elsewhere. The first issue announced the journal’s mission: it would be open to all disciplines and to multi-disciplinary research; it would cater to specialists and non-specialists alike; it would be informal, exploratory, and spur discussion; it would translate documents and literary pieces from Indonesian into English; and it would publish open letters from scholars in the field.

In that same year, the “Cornell Paper” circulated, a preliminary analysis of the 1965 coup in Indonesia, later published in 1971 (Anderson and McVey). Its conclusions, at variance with the official line already developed within Indonesia by the New Order, brought an end to the fieldwork and academic collaboration that had been so productive. Now research visas were denied or restricted, and fewer Indonesians ventured to enroll at Cornell. This rift did not stop CMIP’s impetus for study of Indonesia. The journal continued. It attracted contributions from scholars from outside Cornell. By 1976, *Indonesia* was including book reviews, while it retained an original feature, regular analysis of Indonesia’s military in terms of the political careers of officers. As journal and scholars aged, “In Memoriam” notices also appeared in its pages.
The CMIP influence was felt outside the United States and Indonesia. It had a particular impact on Australia. Australia’s north had been bombed by the Japanese in February 1942 to forestall Allied counterattacks into eastern Indonesia. A generation of Australians died in Indonesia fighting the Japanese or in Japanese forced labor camps. In the 1950s, and especially after 1959, the fondness Australia’s governments had professed for Indonesia evaporated with the Free Irian and Crush Malaysia campaigns. Australia clearly needed Indonesian Studies. Instruction in Indonesian language began at the University of Melbourne in 1956, followed by the addition of history courses in 1959. Australia’s first Indonesia specialists were young men who, like Kahin, had experienced Southeast Asia at its birth, often as members of the Allied forces. They were elated by the overthrow of colonial rule and establishment of the Republic of Indonesia.

Jamie Mackie, Herbert Feith, and John Legge, with their Cornell connections, brought a focus on contemporary Indonesia and its economy, labor, government, and regional administration. Theirs was a blend of social activism with a high regard for Sukarno. Reading lists were short. Their students read Furnivall, Vlekke, Wertheim, and Benda, authors whose conceptions had been formed in the Netherlands Indies. For Wertheim and Benda, there was the harsh school of learning in a Japanese prison camp, which they endured as their families in Europe were perishing in the Holocaust. From Feith there was the determination that Australian students should also read political science theorists and anthropology, and a general sense that we should turn our backs on Indonesia’s older past. A generation of Australian journalists enrolled in these courses, and there were connections to mobile Americans such as Willard Hanna and Harrison Parker, as well as to Cornell. Australia’s founding Indonesianists sent their students to Indonesia and America, not to the Netherlands. By the time I enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, publications were flowing from Cornell, and we read McVey, Anderson, Maryanov, Weinstein, Bunnell, Dewey, and Wilmott.

Australia’s Indonesia scholars reflect “traditions” developed at Cornell, Yale, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), and, subsequently, in home-grown centers, such as the Australian National University and Monash. They are more likely to be formed through political science, anthropology, and ethnomusicology than through history. The near universal decline in interest in history and the emergence of new fields of research in the study of Asian societies and cultures, such as globalization studies, diaspora studies, postcolonial studies, sexuality studies, and media and cultural studies, are reflected in appointments made in Australian universities over the past decade. But scholars who have made a major impact on Indonesian Studies outside Australia are historians. Anthony Reid and Cornell-trained Barbara Watson Andaya pioneered “early modern” studies and the integration of Chinese and women into the grand narrative. Heather Sutherland focused attention on Makassar within the larger history of the archipelago. Cornell graduate Merle Ricklefs has dominated the study of Javanese Islam and the interaction of royal Java with the Dutch. Robert Cribb has fostered study of Indonesia’s historical geography; Robert Elson has challenged scholarship on the colonial economy.
Dutch Scholarship on Indonesia

In 1989, Kahin surveyed the scholarship of twenty-five years flowing from Cornell's Modern Indonesia Project. To grasp what was essentially Cornell, it is useful to turn to the Dutch tradition and an assessment undertaken in 1994. Dutch scholarship on Indonesia was shaped by history, institutions, and a journal. That history was the creation of a colony, which, from around 1850, was spreading into what the Javanese and Dutch characterized as "Outer Islands." In 1851, the Royal Institute of Linguistic, Geographic, and Ethnographic Studies (Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, KITLV; now the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) was formed on the initiative of former Governor-General J. C. Baud, former Minister of Colonies G. Simons, and Taco Roorda, professor of Javanese at the Delft Academy (established 1842), which trained candidates for the colonial civil service. The KITLV brought out the first volume of the Bijdragen in 1852 as part of this enterprise to educate aspirants for a career in the colonies, and also to bring to a Dutch reading public articles on languages, literatures, arts, law, archaeology, history, and public administration of the colony. Contributors in pre-war years were a mix of colonial officers, missionaries, interpreter-translators, and scholars. The first contribution by an Indonesian was published in 1878. Indonesians—read Javanese—wrote on ethnological and archaeological subjects. Their articles were few in number, around one percent of all articles published during the colonial period.

The Bijdragen is the world's oldest journal devoted to study of things Indonesian. The Delft Academy is no more. Instruction in Javanese and Malay Language and Literature, inaugurated at Leiden University in 1877, survives, as do the KITLV and Bijdragen in the post-colonial era. The context of Dutch scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s was not new men and new methodologies for the study of Indonesia. For Dutch students, fieldwork was out of the question in the tense years following transfer of sovereignty, leading up to Sukarno's expulsion of Dutch nationals from Indonesia in 1957 and the nationalization of Dutch businesses. Journal articles did not give preference to contemporary Indonesia, its problems, or needs. Historical studies were of the distant past.

In the 1970s, the KITLV and its journal began a process of reorienting. The study of Indonesia was no longer a Dutch preserve. Old colonial hands were succeeded in the journal's pages by professional contributors, and increasingly the journal published in English as it became the international language of scholarship (and the foreign language taught in Indonesia's education system). Since the 1970s, over half the contributing authors are non-Dutch nationals. Indonesian contributors remain few. In the Bijdragen's pages, articles on archaeology, literature, and language studies have given way to cultural anthropology and the arts. Historical studies have centered on the period 1500 to 1800. Publications in the post-war years were dominated by survivors' memoirs of prison camps and the bersiap period. In place of interest in contemporary Indonesia, there was a nostalgia fostered by elegant images in books for a time dubbed Tempo Doeloe (times past).

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2 Bersiap ("watch out, be alert") was a warning cry of Indonesian militias in the months following the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945. Dutch people emerging from prison camps were targets of the militias, and gave this term to a period they experienced as targets of Indonesians opposing return of the Dutch colonial state.
The Bijdragen now focuses on Southeast Asia, rather than specifically on Indonesia, and extends its coverage to Oceania. The KITLV has built up its impressive library collections on Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean. Despite the ups and downs in Indonesian–Dutch relations, there is now a new era. Indonesians flock to the KITLV. The Dutch open their archives to the whole world through digitalization. This innovation is of especial importance for Indonesians. From their own computers in Indonesia, they can study documents, scanned books, maps, images, and manuscripts with an ease of access not yet afforded by Indonesia’s own research libraries. The KITLV opened a Jakarta office in 1969, in conjunction with the Indonesian Institute for Sciences (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, LIPI), to facilitate the collection of Indonesia publications and translation of Dutch works into Indonesian. It has also become an important supporter in Indonesia of new scholarship published by Indonesians.

In her contribution to the stocktaking occasioned by the 150th year of the Bijdragen, historian Heather Sutherland linked historiography to relationships between the Netherlands and Indonesia at any one time, to prevailing attitudes, and to the cultural context of institutions and ideas that shape academic research agendas. If scholars primarily mined Dutch archives, their topics and fundamental conceptions were likely to be aligned with those of the old colonial administration, and their periodization would continue to reflect colonial organizing principles, as, indeed, much of Indonesian historiography still does. Sutherland argued that research primarily derived from the contents of colonial archives bound all Indonesian histories within periods such as the British Interregnum and Cultivation System, so that it was not possible to discern fundamental shifts of significance in Indonesian societies themselves.

Histories of Indonesians and Indonesia written in Holland have moved on from these gloomy considerations. A generation of Dutch historians, raised in a world where Indonesia’s separate existence is an accepted fact, influenced by the corpus of research from centers like Cornell, informed by fieldwork in Indonesia, conditioned by the resumption of more cordial relations with Indonesia, and the return of Indonesians to Holland seeking their own histories in Dutch archives—this new generation has been producing works of importance in recent decades. They are works of anthropology, and political and economic analysis, but also history, especially social history grounded in the belief that ordinary people need to be written into it.

Mention can be made here of Henk Schulte Nordholt’s historical studies, his reflections on historiography, and his driving vision of the necessity, for future generations of Indonesians, to create a permanent record of life as it is lived by Indonesians, rich and poor, great and unknown, across the archipelago. This vision is being realized in the audiovisual archive “Recording the Future,” a joint venture of the KITLV and LIPI. Filming, interviewing, and subtitling are the work of the Indonesian team members. They demonstrate how sound and sight can furnish data for the historian and enrich textbook studies. “Virtual Indonesia” (http://rtf.kitlv.nl), launched in Indonesia and the Netherlands in 2011, gives access to more than five hundred hours of recording.
INDONESIAN SCHOLARS AND INDONESIAN HISTORY

What of Indonesian history writing in Indonesia? Indonesian historiography had numerous traditions: from Indonesia’s regions in the form of hikayat and babad (epic tales, chronicles); from Dutch scholarship, especially its tradition of establishing “standard” editions of Indonesian manuscripts; and from academic trends evolving in Western universities. But in Indonesia, as elsewhere, history is shaped by institutions and publishing. And first we can note that not all the new universities in the new country of Indonesia had history departments.

Historians were called by political leaders into service to the nation. Attention must be drawn to the National History Seminar held in 1957 in Yogyakarta. Its findings were written up by the late Soedjatmoko and published in English in 1960 in the CMIP’s translation series. A year as guest lecturer in Southeast Asian history and politics at Cornell University followed. Then, in 1965, that fateful year for Indonesians, this preliminary reporting found fuller expression in An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography, in which papers from the 1957 seminar were published in full by Cornell. An Indonesian language version was also published.

In the introductory chapter, Soedjatmoko characterized the development of Indonesian historiography as “haphazard,” full of gaps, and uneven in its coverage of various eras and regions. He then got to the essential issue:

There is no continuous historical narrative nor is there any central point of vision [...] Although for some periods there is a more or less continuous historical narrative, the material is organized according to a viewpoint that was not, and in all fairness could not have been, an Indonesia-centric viewpoint—e.g., the Hindu-Javanese, East India Company, and the Netherlands Indies Government periods. (1965, xii)

He called for “a rational plan for the systematic study of Indonesian history” that would encompass a “vigorous examination of material already known, a search for new data, especially of indigenous and general Asian material,” and training of historians in “critical method and a thorough familiarity with its use.” These new historians would place Indonesian history within Southeast Asian history and draw on the social sciences for concepts, methodologies, and insights (1965, xxvi).

On the threshold of Indonesia’s second decade as a nation, Soedjatmoko wrote of the dilemma facing Indonesian historians. They were not just concerned with collecting data and sifting evidence: they were a part of society, expected to produce national history textbooks and national myths that would speak to the temper of the times, the crisis years of early nationhood. For Soedjatmoko, the study of history and history writing is intimately bound up with citizenship and with the freedoms to think and make choices. He characterized societies making up the new nation-state as having an ahistorical view of the world. Indonesia’s historians had to educate them to understand “the historical process” as “essentially indeterminate and open to man’s deliberate participation in it.” History would only be important when Indonesians realized they could make history, that they had choices among alternative courses of action and policies that would affect the course of events.

Then history ceases to be mere fulfillment of man’s curiosity, a mirror for his moral enlightenment or a fountain for narcissistic admiration, but becomes
essential for man’s orientation and meaningful participation in the modern world. (1965, 415)

Here is a conviction, formulated in the last years of Sukarno’s Guided Democracy, of the “emancipating force of history.”

The first generation of modern Indonesian historians were products of Dutch scholarly traditions, the next of training in Indonesia. Some were graduates of overseas institutions. I think here of the late Ongkokham, who studied under Professor Harry Benda at Yale University. In the new historical production, centrality was given to Indonesians and Indonesia. But questions of perspective, periodization, and terminology were unresolved. Indonesia was the geographic zone in which Indonesian history took place. That zone was projected backwards in time, a space coterminous with the republic proclaimed in 1945, and seemingly inhabited by people calling themselves Indonesians in centuries before the very term was born in the early twentieth. Important concerns were to produce histories that engendered a loyalty to Indonesia, a personal identification and attachment to it. Sukarno, Suharto, and the times demanded it.

General Suharto took office in 1966, forcing President Sukarno to transfer the mandate of governance to him, the evocatively named, but misplaced, Supersemar. Suharto began his administration by crushing all opposition on a national scale, through killings, imprisonment of opponents, and by devising a national credo on what had happened in 1965. In Suharto’s judgment, people who were fed, clothed, schooled, and employed would not fall prey to the seductions of communism; they would be quiet, orderly, industrious, and not get in the way of rapid economic development, but, rather, contribute to it. This kind of people needed a narrative that projected into the past a history of unity against colonialism, one that downplayed or obliterated histories of conflicts, whether of class, religion, or ethnicity, that emphasized unities between government and its people, and that portrayed his government as establishing order out of the chaos of the Sukarno years.

Such New Order histories were studied by the Australian historian Katherine McGregor (2007). She argues that Indonesian historiography took a militaristic turn and castigates the late brigadier-general and professor Nugroho Notohustanto for obliterating entire sectors of Indonesia’s population from the histories he personally wrote or oversaw as head of the Armed Forces History Center. McGregor also studied museums for which Nugroho was the inspiration, such as the Museum of Communist Treachery and the Museum of Eternal Vigilance, and their collections, dioramas, captions, and guidebooks. She labeled Nugroho’s analysis of the coup and its aftermath “hypocritical.” His life’s work was to place history in service to the Armed Forces to justify its dominating presence in politics and business and in the daily life of Indonesians.

McGregor does not take a stand on which groups in Indonesian society actually planned and launched the 1965 coup. This is not the purpose of her study. Neither does she examine the years leading up to the coup. This is a significant issue, for the reader is left unable to judge why and how the policy of exterminating communism and communists acquired legitimacy. Did Indonesia’s communists plan a mass

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3 Elsewhere in this volume, fellow panel member Laurie Sears discusses the late Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s historical writing through his historical fiction, which was conceptualized in his long years in the gulag on Buru Island.
 extermination of classes, ethnic groups, and religious groups, as did communist Cambodia’s Pol Pot? Did they plan forced collectivization of land and imprisonment of political opponents in labor camps, as in communist-led Vietnam?

McGregor’s History in Uniform found a receptive Indonesian readership among Reformasi-era activists. It was published in an Indonesian translation in 2008. In McGregor’s scholarship we can see the long reach of Cornell. Her isnad (chain of authorities) would include McVey, Anderson, Feith, and Charles Coppel.

Forty years after Soedjatmoko’s Introduction to Indonesian Historiography, SOAS-trained Bambang Purwanto published a critique of histories written by Indonesian scholars with the provocative title Gagalnya Historiografi Indonesia Centris! (The Failure of Indonesia-centric Historiography?). He judges that Indonesian history writing has become disoriented. Its founding principle was to be the antithesis of colonial-centric historiography, but instead history writing in Indonesia became a tool for hurling abuse at others. Purwanto argues that it has shrunk the past by allotting 350 years to Dutch history and colonial culture rather than understanding the Dutch era as part of Indonesia’s history and Indonesians’ past.

Purwanto argues that, although Indonesia-centric history has succeeded in bringing Indonesian actors to the forefront of historical narrative, it is basically political history. Indonesian historiography does not research and construct a history for the “people without history”—peasants, women, children—so that a sizable proportion of Indonesia’s population has no past. Indonesia-centric history, as conceived by Indonesia’s scholars, is elitist, formal, and admits only a national or nationalist spirit as the prevailing ethos at any point in time. It has produced the kind of fuzzy thinking that calls Gajah Mada, Diponegoro, and Cut Nya Din Indonesian, as Soedjatmoko also observed long ago.

With Reformasi, the term pelurusian sejarah (straightening out history) entered general discourse, and it was used to call for an alternative to the New Order’s doctrinaire version of Indonesia’s history. But instead, Purwanto argues, it became similarly dogmatic. To counteract the single interpretation, Purwanto introduces the concept of empathy. Empathy, he says, is necessary to the historian. It leads the historian to bring into the narrative groups hitherto overlooked, as Indian historians aimed to do in subaltern studies. Along with empathy and critical analysis, Purwanto calls for historical imagination to infuse the history written for its principal consumers, the living and future generations of Indonesians. His new conceptualization of Indonesia’s history is not cast as a special and extraordinary narrative, but one brimming with the ordinary life of ordinary people. He calls for Indonesia’s historians to supplement documentary evidence with non-textual sources such as paintings, names of people and streets, types of music, symbols, caricatures, and the like. A rich variety of sources, guided by a commitment to the human, should produce new themes as well as new methodologies in the study of Indonesian history.

Most professional historians in Indonesia have considered themselves empiricists, concerned with facts and structure. Purwanto describes his kind of history as deconstruction, and he notes the threats that have reared up in Indonesian circles. Critics have charged that social historians deny the religious sense of humankind and the very existence of God. We are reminded of Soedjatmoko’s insistence that history teach Indonesians they are the ones who determine their destiny. Purwanto counters denunciation with the argument that history and fiction arise from the same bedrock of language, that language is embedded in its culture,
that language cannot directly represent absolute facts about the past. And he makes
the argument that histories are products of the now, that is, of their authors' own
historical time period, context, language, and experience as individuals. So history
imparts a relative truth, and there is no absolute and single truth about the past. In
an Indonesia today, which oscillates between a fondness for the certainties of the
New Order and the radicalism of the Salafis, this is a statement tantamount to
heresy.

Recognizing and describing the daily life of the masses, Purwanto argues, grants
history its humanity; micro-history is history imbued with humanness, a study of
institutions and doings of people who are sometimes irrational. The pitfalls of this
kind of approach, which Purwanto sees, is that it can be reduced to a kind of
antiquarianism, an anecdotal romanticizing of the past, approaches that are unable to
explain the contemporary world where change is very rapid. Purwanto refers to the
1957 Yogyakarta history seminar and the perceived need of the times for history to
help develop a national identity. The late Sartono Kartodirdjo shifted the focus from
straight anticolonialism to other social factors, such as millenarianism, in his study of
the Banten peasants' revolt of 1888, but, critiquing from the stance dubbed by Adrian
Vickers the "loyal opposition" (2007), Purwanto still finds Sartono's main
explanation for the revolt is economic exploitation by the Dutch. He says Sartono
failed to examine the internal dynamics of peasant life, such as growing conflicts
between hajis and other social groups in Banten in an era of economic growth.

Muhammad Ali and Onghokham were social historians who struck out on
different paths relative to the rest of their fellow practitioners, but, says Purwanto,
they had no followers. Colonial power is only one element among many in the
history of Indonesia's past. He gives several examples. Regarding the Cultivation
System, Indonesian writers' focus has been on foreign private capital and
exploitation, rather than on peasant agriculture and smallholder trade in coffee, off-
farm employment, non-formal employment, and the growth of Indonesian hostels
and food stalls, signs of what Purwanto terms the horizontal mobility of the
indigenous population. He takes as another example the phenomenon of bandits, or
jagos. They enter history as anticolonial nationalists, but, in political, economic, and
social terms, they were criminals. In avoiding analysis of this dimension, Indonesian
historiography avoids internal conflicts and tensions. Max Havelaar is read only as an
anticolonial novel of exploitation by the Dutch, but it actually portrays the reality of
repression of the population by indigenous elites. And here we may note that the
Suharto government concurred in this historical interpretation and therefore banned
screening of the 1976 film in Indonesia.) Sartono, Purwanto says, saw Java's villages
as peaceful and orderly; he described the labor of their inhabitants for the bupati as
part of a patron–client relationship, but termed their labor for the Dutch as
exploitation. In Purwanto's judgment, this anticolonial point of view prevented
Indonesia's major historian from studying the internal dynamics of villages.
Subaltern or underbelly history still does not get attention from Indonesians writing
history; that is left to foreign historians.

Heather Sutherland, in the article previously mentioned, noted the decline in
history as a discipline. Social scientists sometimes turn to historians for a few facts,
she says; historians turn to the social sciences for ideas. Why have historians of Indonesia—Indonesian and Western—had so little influence on international history debates and historiography? Indonesian historiography should have left a major imprint on the historiography of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. We had J. C. van Leur and John Smail making breakthroughs, commanding us to consider the angle of vision in history writing, beckoning us to come ashore, or to look beyond the car’s headlights into the dark places along the highway.

Van Leur died defending Indonesia in the battle of the Java Sea in 1942. His 1934 thesis was published in English in 1955. Smail’s landmark essay, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Southeast Asia,” was published in 1961. But all this was overturned by the publication in 1976 of Edward Said’s Orientalism. He turned the clock back for Asian historiographies. By focusing on what Europeans said, did, wrote, and painted, and taking scant interest in what the colonized said, did, wrote, and painted, Said effectively obliterated them from their own histories. Now students wanted to study Europeans in colonies, dissect the kind of material they collected, sneer at the photographs and sketches they made, study representations. Said’s book had an extraordinary appeal, perhaps because, in the case of Western scholars, it satisfied a need to study ourselves. Foucault’s analyses of power also encouraged concentrated interest on Europeans, rather than on Asians as the subject of their own histories. The great possibilities opened up by Van Leur and Smail for an Indonesia-centric history were lost. The human majority receded again into the background, just as it had been in colonial historiography, to become Van Leur’s grey, undifferentiated mass.

In all the words written in the works noted above, surprisingly little was said about the Islamic historiographical tradition. Soedjatmoko characterized Indonesians as having an ahistorical view of life. And yet history writing can be said to have developed inside Indonesian societies as part of the process of conversion to Islam. There was a felt need to connect past to present, to give new Muslim rulers a royal genealogy, and to incorporate royals claiming descent from Hindu gods into an Islamic present. Histories, therefore, narrated how the existing king became Muslim.

But what exactly could be characterized as Muslim historiography? Arabic terms for history are story, anecdote, period, and time. Indonesia’s noun for history, sejarah, derives from the Arabic, not Greek. Arab historiography began with narratives of single events, told in poetic forms whose meters and patterns facilitated memorization and were entertaining when recited or sung to an audience. At the heart of Islamic historiographical tradition are biography and genealogy. They served as sources of authentication of transmitted information. Islamic historiography evolved in the context of Jewish and Christian historiography. Jews and Christians had laid down their versions and forms of history in the Tanach and Bible; they had a concept of a history of the future, that is, a known end of time by which present actions could be evaluated.

Islamic history was narrated within a succession of years, with emphasis on transmission of received facts and views. The moral purpose of history was to cultivate loyalty to the established order and foster regard for Islamic cultural heritage. History, in the hands of Islamic geographers, preserved mundane knowledge and accumulation of new knowledge. For while historian–geographers

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5 Sears also cites the impact of Said, but in relation to the perceived intellectual foundations of area studies.
incorporated passages from previous writings, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, they also sought out new information, traveled extensively, interviewed people, took notes, gave information on the natural world, and referred to documents, letters, and speeches. Popular histories were rhymed romances involving heroes of Islam. One may argue that through them audiences got a sense of Islam and of Muslims as historical phenomena. History was a means of cultivating ideals and aspirations of Islam in the minds of Muslims, more than an intellectual evolution toward evaluating the facts being transmitted.

The demands in Indonesia in the early Reformasi years for “straightening out history” have not yet led to a wholesale rethinking of the past, how to write about the pre-Islamic past, or how to understand that colonial history was also Indonesians’ history. Instead, historians now wanted to write “correct” versions of history that made Suharto the villain and focused on 1965 and brought justice to victims of the coup, of its aftermath of massacre and imprisonment. Asvi Warman Adam wanted to sue the Dutch for history; GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, Free Aceh Movement) supporters in Aceh produced a historiography in which Javanese colonialism succeeded the Dutch; and writers of popular Islamic histories argued that Islam had been the religion of indigenous Indonesians already in the seventh century.

I am a product of Cornell as mediated through Australian academics, Nugroho Notosusanto’s history seminars at the University of Indonesia, and John Smail’s lectures at the University of Wisconsin; influenced by colleagues in the Netherlands, such as Schulte Nordholt, and colleagues in Indonesia, such as Onghokham and Bambang Purwanto. In Indonesia: Peoples and Histories (2003), I tried to implement Smail’s call for autonomous history, to tell parallel histories of communities, to narrate histories through byways and minor characters, as well as through big events, and to bring in ordinary lives, problems, and encounters. In discussions, John contended that putting Indonesians at the center of their history could probably not be sustained for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His illness prevented him from assessing whether I had managed to continue to construct those centuries within that perspective. Eric Tagliacozzo understood this. In his perceptive review (2004), he suggested I had gone too far in accentuating indigenous agency and had almost written the Dutch out of Indonesia’s history.

A new generation of scholars established in US and other universities have learned Arabic. I think of Michael Laffan, Julian Millie, Peter Riddell, Nico Kaptein, and Martin Bruinessen. New riches come from new scholarship based on new sources. We are a long way from Clifford Geertz’s confident assumption that Indonesians only got a “scriptural Islam” late in the nineteenth century. In Indonesia, there are scholars of Indonesian Islam, such as Azyumardi Azra, whose research has pushed back the establishment of continuous networks of travel, contact, and study between archipelago scholars and scholars in Mecca to the sixteenth century. There are activists such as Hilmar Farid who study history to respond to the demands of their time, and groups such as Komunitas Bambu at the University of Indonesia and new publishing houses such as Masup and Ombak bringing new histories to a wide reading public. There is great interest in history. Every bookstore in Indonesia has popular histories alongside the self-help books. Soedjatmoko reminds us that
historical consciousness is bound up with a sense of individual liberties and active citizenship.

Now, here we are considering Indonesian history in a US context, in the context of 9/11 and of an American president with connections of a personal kind to Indonesia. Indonesians, post-Suharto, have lost their fear of Cornell University. It seems time to build on Cornell’s strengths of the past. Taking the liberty offered, I make two recommendations, and they are that the CMIP foster projects championed by Kahin. First, I recommend financial support for a six-month period of residence at Cornell for outstanding Indonesian scholars to rewrite their dissertations for publication. English-language publication ensures an Indonesian scholar access to positions in Western universities, the chance to use great libraries, to attend seminars, and to engage with colleagues worldwide. Such publication helps build a scholar’s international academic reputation. Ideally, there should be support also for producing an Indonesian-language translation of such work. The Indonesian publication will bring to academics and the reading public in Indonesia the fruits of first-class research. It will be an inspiration for new postgraduate students, and make a strong contribution to Indonesian historiography.

The second plank of Kahin’s platform was Cornell’s translation series, whereby Indonesian scholarship was brought, through the medium of the international language of English, to the widest audience. Publication in English puts the results of Indonesian research into academe, and makes it available to be reviewed in international academic journals and presses. Reestablishing Indonesian-to-English translations will provide our students with the results of new research and histories through the different perspectives of our Indonesian colleagues. I would start with Bambang Purwanto’s Gagalnya Historiografi Indonesiasentris?!

Works Cited


“Recording the Future.” http://www.kitlv.nl/home/Projects?Id=20


