

Problems of Indonesian Historiography

Review Article

THE WORDS OF REINHOLD NIEBHUR, "the emancipating force which is history," with which this volume closes, indicates the belief which has inspired its editor and his associates, Mohammad Ali, G. J. Resink and G. Mc. T. Kahin, to produce this scholarly survey,* not only of historical writing on Indonesia, but also of the sources available for its study, and the disciplines involved. How comprehensive is its scope may be seen from a scrutiny of its twenty-two essays. The list is as follows: Historiographical Problems by Mohammed Ali; Pre-Seventeenth-Century History: Sources and Directions by L. Ch. Damais; Archaeology and Indonesian History by R. Soekmono; Epigraphy and Indonesian Historiography by Buchari; Local Traditions and the Study of Indonesian History by Hoesein Djajadiningrat; The Javanese Picture of the Past by C. C. Berg; Later Javanese Sources and Historiography by H. J. de Graaf; Origins of South Celebes Historical Writing by J. Noorduyin; Some Malay Historical Sources: a Bibliographical Note, by J. C. Bottoms; Chinese Historical Sources and Historiography by Tjan Tjoe Som; Recent Japanese Sources for Indonesian Historiography by Koichi Kishi; Some Portuguese Sources for Indonesian Historiography by C. R. Boxer; Dutch Historical Sources by Graham Irwin; English Sources for the Modern Period of Indonesian History by John Bastin; Soviet Sources for Indonesian History by Ruth T. McVey; Use of Anthropological Methods in Indonesian Historiography by Koentjaraningrat; The Significance of the Study of Culture and Religion for Indonesian Historiography by P. J. Zoetmulder; The Sociological Approach by W. F. Wertheim; The Significance of the History of International Law in Indonesia by G. J. Resink; The Significance of the Comparative Approach in Asian Historiography by J. M. Romein; Aspects of Indonesian Economic Historiography by F. J. E. Tan; The Indonesian Historian and his Time by Soedjatmoko.

Adequate comment upon such a wealth and diversity of studies would obviously require far more space than is available in a review article. I propose to confine my attention to the sections dealing with the early history of Indonesia, with its indigenous sources and the work so far done upon them. I do so because in my view the importance and interest of the subject need emphasis. The book as a whole is indispensable reading for the student of Indonesian history. Indeed, every student of historical method will find in it

* *An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography*. Edited by Soedjatmoko. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 1965. 427 pp. \$9.75. (Toronto: Thomas Allen Ltd.).

much to his profit. It bears striking witness to the rich heritage of scholarship bequeathed by the Dutch to Indonesia through their work on its early history and civilization. The great body of work they have built up, involving a formidable range of linguistic studies, the virtual salvaging of its splendid ancient monuments and art treasures, and the recovery and interpretation of its early literatures, has been matched nowhere else in Southeast Asia save by the French in the case of the civilizations of Angkor and Champa. J. H. Kern, J. L. A. Brandes, N. J. Krom and W. F. Stutterheim were the pioneers whose work provided their successors with the basic information, the techniques and the inspiration to make the advances recorded in this book. Those who have shared in this expansion of knowledge include two outstanding Indonesian scholars (R. Ng. Poerbatjaraka and the late Hoesein Djajadiningrat), two French scholars (George Coedès—himself the pioneer historian par excellence of Southeast Asia—and L. C. Damais), and a whole galaxy of Dutch scholars, men such as C. C. Berg, F. D. K. Bosch, J. G. de Casparis, R. Goris, W. P. Groenevelt, C. Hooykaas, F. H. van Naerssen, B. Schrieke and J. Ph. Vogel. But since the record of their work is for the most part in Dutch, and hence inaccessible to all but a few non-Dutch students, the world of learning is lamentably ignorant alike of the importance of their field of study and of the high distinction of their labours.

In view of the importance of archaeology and epigraphy as sources for the earliest Indonesian history, the chapters by Soekmono, the Head of the Archaeological Service, and his colleague Buchari give an encouraging picture of progress. It is possible now to form a much clearer idea of the administrative and social structure and the religion of the Sailendra period. Much of the mystery previously surrounding the Sailendras themselves has also been cleared up by the labours of de Casparis and Damais on fresh epigraphical material. The former's discovery that there were two rival royal dynasties in central Java (the Buddhist Sailendras and the Saivite Sanjayas) and that the latter were finally victorious over their rivals in 856 in a battle on the Ratubaka plateau, has put an end to much fruitless speculation. He has also discovered evidence which shows that the splendid Lara Jonggrang temple complex at Prambanan was erected at the same time by the victor, Rakai Pikatan, and not early in the following century as Krom and Coedès had supposed. In a sense it was the Sanjaya reply to the Sailendra temple-mountain, the Borobudur, erected half a century earlier.

The discoveries of Damais also regarding the dating of Javanese inscriptions have been of great service to the historian, as Coedès shows in the new edition of his *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* and not least in their demolition of theories woven around the mistaken reading of a date. Buchari's example of the fantastic results that have accrued from Goris's and Stutterheim's misreading of the date on the back of the famous Camundi statue is an awful warning of the perils of the too-eager applica-

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tion of the imagination to fill in the gaps in knowledge that are so tantalizing.

On the controversial subject of Professor C. C. Berg's theories regarding the historical value of the Middle-Javanese writings dealing with, in particular, the empires of Singhasari, Majapahit and Mataram, the volume contains much of interest. There is in the first place Berg's own article in which he analyses the stories in the great masterpieces of Javanese literature, the *Arjunavivaha*, the *Pararaton*, the *Nagarakertagama* and the *Babad Tanah Jawi* with that intimate knowledge that places him in a class apart among students of the subject. It is many years since he first enunciated the theory that these documents must be interpreted in terms of the cultural pattern of Javanese society when each was produced. He himself sees them as products of priestly activities aimed at enhancing the magical powers of a particular ruler. He accordingly discounts much of their historical value. His own ideas, however, have undergone a process of continuous evolution, and a footnote warns that the article in the present volume represents his 1959 viewpoint. Since then he has produced a major work, *Het Rijk van der Vijvoudige Buddha* (1962), in which he propounds further theories. He is far from dogmatic in the presentation of his views, reminding his readers, in the article in question, that only provisional results are possible because there is still a considerable amount of manuscript material awaiting study, as well as "abundant evidence of information handed down in oral tradition in priestly families."

There can be no doubt that Berg has uttered challenges, and posed questions, which the student must take seriously. Hence, when Damais lightly dismisses Berg's approach as "much too theoretical" and accuses him of accepting sources only when they seem to be in accordance with his theories, and "systematically" rejecting those that contradict them, his attitude appears to be quite incomprehensible; for, on the one hand, even a student without any knowledge of Javanese can realise from the available translations that they present apparently insoluble problems of interpretation, and, on the other, in both range and detail Berg's knowledge of this literature is immense. Happily, however, Father Zoetmulder, who, like Berg, has devoted a lifetime to the study of Old Javanese language and literature, devotes his article in this volume to a study of Berg's ideas. He is of the opinion that the difficulties of Berg's 'syntypical' method are almost insurmountable, seeing that in order to understand the meaning of certain writings produced by a past culture one has to use those same writings as the key to an understanding of that culture, and, moreover, with a highly inadequate knowledge of the language involved. He points also to the dangers involved in the use of the term "culture-pattern," especially in the case of an extinct culture, where there is no possibility of verification.

Berg's theories, he emphasizes, are, however, the result of a really comprehensive study of all the available sources, and are an attempt to make

sense out of what is often heterogeneous and apparently contradictory. Nevertheless, there are many uncertainties and doubts, which involve the use of "many more question marks" than one is inclined to accept. His general estimate of Berg's work is that it is "sufficient proof of the significance of cultural history and religious history for Indonesian historiography." "Without these disciplines," he writes, "it appears to be simply impossible." But he shrewdly suggests that Berg is really far more interested in throwing light upon the character of his Javanese sources than in writing new history. Here, I think, he goes right to the heart of the matter.

Dr. H. J. de Graaf's view of the *Babad Tanah Jawi* differs in many respects from Berg's, and in his paper he refers to their conflict of opinions, which began in 1953 following a public lecture which he delivered entitled "On the Origins of the Javanese State Chronicles." In it he maintained that the *babads*¹ exhibited a better sense of history than Berg attributed to them. Their quarrel has been in particular over the question of the historicity of two characters in the *Babad Tanah Jawi*, Panembahan Senapati, considered to have been the founder of the Mataram dynasty, and his son, Panembahan Krapyak, the reputed father of Sultan Agung (1613-45). Berg's belief is that Agung was the *novus homo*, the real founder of the dynasty, and that the compiler of the *babad* provided him with suitable ancestors in order to legitimize his assumption of power. de Graaf on the other hand accepts Senapati and Krapyak as historical persons, and has published biographies of them. "Professor Berg and this author," writes de Graaf in his paper, "have continued the exchange of opinions on this issue, but on important points our views have not come closer to each other."

The point that he stresses in the present paper is that the parts of the story dealing with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are in a different category from those dealing with earlier periods, since they can be checked against a variety of Dutch sources. Moreover, where the compiler is dealing with contemporary events, one finds a degree of accuracy and chronological order. This, he points out, is true of the period from 1600 to 1635, though not of the succeeding period, which contains much that is "mythical." His suggestion is that a first edition of the *babad* was completed during the last years of Sultan Agung's reign, but must have been considerably altered by the later compiler who brought the story up to the year 1677, when the rebel Trunojoyo stormed and sacked the Mataram *kraton* (palace-city) driving out Agung's successor, Amangkurat I.

de Graaf describes the *babad* literature as sacral, and says that the older manuscripts were also used as political weapons, so that from time to time alterations had to be made—and indeed were made "until very recent times"—in order to bring the story into line with the policies of later Mataram rulers. Factual accuracy would inevitably be sacrificed in making

¹ A *babad* is a historical tale in verse, usually the work of a court poet.

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such alterations; and the compiler would often have to rely on oral narratives extremely partisan in character. The *babad* literature, he comments, not only records vicissitudes in the fortunes of Java's royal families, but "has itself undergone that same fate." Hence it is essential constantly to check up with other sources. His final pronouncement is that the information contained in the *babad* literature is extremely valuable, if not always for the period dealt with in the text, at least for the insight it gives into the compiler's own period.

The three other papers in this volume on indigenous sources confirm one's impression that there is still an enormous amount of pioneer work to be done: what has up to the present been written about the early history of Indonesia must be seen as something of the nature of an interim report, which will have to be considerably modified and, one hopes, augmented, as new knowledge is acquired. Dr. Djajadiningrat, in discussing the subject of local traditions, asserts that wherever there have been kingdoms in Indonesia, their historical traditions have been maintained; and while the stories have a strong mythical content, glorifying an individual monarch or telling some aetiological tale about the foundation of a kingdom, they have proved useful in verifying some reference in a foreign account or in linking up, and giving coherence to, scraps of information otherwise isolated.

There is a big field here for systematic exploitation, as J. C. Bottoms shows in his very comprehensive discussion of Malay historical literature. He points to further classes of material in addition to the fifty or more separate Malay historical works, with which he is concerned: autobiographical works, descriptive poems, codes of law, diaries and personal letters, and memoranda. In a section entitled "Some Malay Ideas of History" he lays down the precept that the first step towards an understanding of the Malay texts is to know what they meant to the Malays for whom they were written. One shudders to think how often this golden rule has been broken in the approach to oriental texts. Bottoms tells us that what best pleased the Malay were legend, phantasy and "a pleasant hotchpotch of court and port gossip"—in fact entertainment and instruction. To him history was a branch of theology, so that the historical and theological sections of a work are often juxtaposed, and legendary material added. Thus it is rarely possible to take what is written at its face value: it is necessary to have an adequate knowledge of the writer and his environment plus some reliable data by which his statements can be checked. He refers to C. C. Berg's writings as the "classic exposition" of this situation, which, however, he contends, is not something peculiar to Indonesian and Malay writings: it is inherent in all historical writing. Nevertheless, he emphasizes, the characteristic features of these Malay texts are of real value to the researcher of today now more concerned with social and economic forces and with group attitudes and conflicts than with political history and chronology. He quotes Hooykaas's comment on the *Salahilah Kutai* by way of illustration: "This gene-

alogy records few genuine events, and its contents are far less important than those of the *Sejarah Melayu*. Its value lies more in the non-historical material to be found in it; for people's thoughts and feelings in those former times are very clearly drawn, as are the descriptions of palace ceremonial and dress customs."

In contrast to all this, the Buginese and Macassarese chronicles discussed by Dr. Noorduyn show an almost skeptical attitude towards mythology and legend and a matter-of-factness which appear to have been the result of the practice of keeping diaries, both court and private. Their term for chronicle means "the things concerning the people of former times," and its composition was inspired by an evident concern to save from oblivion everything considered worth knowing. Their diaries, which are short and exact, record occurrences in the royal family, state affairs, warlike expeditions, and pacts with other states as well as natural phenomena such as eclipses, earthquakes and comets. They also record valuable data about weapons, fishing implements, houses, ships, laws and custom. They are written in an Indonesian script that had its origin in India, and use a solar calendar obviously borrowed from the Portuguese.

These writings were produced by a number of little states in South Celebes engaged in constant struggles among themselves for hegemony. All are concerned with local traditions and events; none attempts a picture of the peninsula as a whole. Their dry prose style makes them fundamentally different from Javanese historical literature which was produced by court poets. And the characteristic feature of the Javanese writings, the chronogram (a date disguised in words), is found in no South Celebes writings. Indeed, their lack of chronological data is their greatest drawback; one has to go to the diaries upon which they were based for dates. It was a literary convention not to mention dates in the chronicles. How does one account for the development of this form of historiography in such intriguing contrast to the writings of the rest of Indonesia? Much more work will have to be done on it before a satisfactory answer can be given. There are rich manuscript collections in Macassar, Jakarta and Leiden, Dr. Noorduyn tells us, and they will well repay the researcher for his trouble. Its sudden appearance in the early seventeenth century when the Islamization of southern Celebes was beginning may hold the key to the explanation.

To conclude this survey let me briefly stress two points. In the first place such a body of expert information about Indonesian historiography has never before been brought together in a single volume, and in English. True, to follow up a great many of the references a knowledge of at least Dutch is necessary; and the sheer bulk of the published work in Dutch on this subject is immense. But there is also a great deal in English and French; so that with this volume's publication there is no longer any excuse for ignorance about the nature and scope of early Indonesian history and historical sources. In his Preface Dr. Kahin tells us that originally only an

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Indonesian edition was planned; but the editors decided that an English-language version must be produced in order to assure wider availability. How right they were.

Finally a point alluded to several times already must be stressed again. The amount of unexplored material is enormous, and who can say how much is yet to be discovered, especially in the field of epigraphy? Dr. Soekmono lays it down that a deliberate search for new materials is essential to any plan for the systematic study of Indonesian history. But who is to do the work, and who finance it? May one suggest that some of the United States money now being spent so lavishly upon research into current affairs in Southeast Asia, or very recent history, might be better spent upon promoting the study of its ancient civilization, about which too many people are too woefully ignorant?

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