

# The Indonesian Reader

The Indonesian Reader provides an introduction to the world's largest archipelago. The fourth most populous country in the world, encompassing nearly 18,000 islands, Indonesia has a larger Muslim population than any other nation. This title, aimed at the traveller, student, and expert alike, includes journalists' articles, explorers' chronicles, photographs, poetry, stories, cartoons, drawings, letters, speeches, and more, conveying a sense of the history, culture and diversity of this extraordinary land.

Laura Noszlopy

**Hellwig, Tineke and Eric Tagliacozzo. Eds. 2009.**  
*The Indonesia Reader. History, Culture, Politics.*  
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WHEN I FIRST picked up this book I was sceptical about how its editors would manage the enormous task at hand. The attempt, however 'imperfect and incomplete,' to 'show some of the arc of Indonesia's histories and societies over the centuries, from geographic, cultural, political, economic, and religious points of view' (p.ii) is audacious, to say the least. But I believe the editors, an historian and a literature scholar, have done a fine job of it.

The book is divided into ten distinct parts, arranged thematically into a loose chronology. Each part contains up to a dozen pieces drawn from primary and secondary sources; political, commercial and literary materials; written by men and women; indigenous and foreign authors. Much of the material has been translated into English (and I wonder if the series editors left in something of a Dutch 'flavour' to the English style).

## A cornucopia of sources

It really is an extraordinary cornucopia of sources that illustrate some of the pivotal and unique moments in Indonesia's life. Opening with excerpts from the 5th century Kutei Inscriptions, the region's earliest known examples of writing which were found on stone pillars in eastern Borneo, the Reader then takes off with its own trajectory across time and the islands. In between, the materials track the growth of Islam, the colonial experience (for both the colonisers and colonised), independence, and modernity. Aptly, the book ends with two illuminating notes - and very typical of the contemporary scene - from the Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and Jakarta-based journalist Desi Anwar, respectively. SBY discusses Indonesia's reaction to the 2005 controversy surrounding the publication of a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper; he appeals for tolerance and understanding in the world's most populous Muslim nation. In some contrast, Desi Anwar discusses the potentially far-reaching privations that may be imposed following the ratification of the so-called 'anti-pornography bill' by the Indonesian parliament. Snapshots like these demonstrate the real tensions at the heart of contemporary Indonesia.

Below: Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also known as SBY.

Below right: Borobudur. Photograph by Heng Phang.



While there is an implicit focus on power shifts, politics and authority, it seems that the pieces have been carefully chosen for their individual perspectives on the greater events and trends. There is a general balance between civilian and military writers, for example, and insiders and outside observers to the event or moment in question.

## An educational literary journey

My only real qualm about this book relates to the Reader's proposed readership. The authors state that 'the Reader is a primer for anyone who wants to know why Indonesia looks the way it does today' (p.ii). For me and for previous reviewers, the carefully selected content held together, made sense and even elicited awe at times. But I tried to put myself in the shoes of a newcomer to Indonesian or even Asian Studies, an undergraduate student perhaps - the kind of nonspecialised reader I suppose the editors envisaged - and I wondered how they would make sense of it, in all its breadth and detail. Would they indeed be able to glean an understanding of this fascinating nation in at least some of its historical, social and cultural complexity? After all, it was an educational literary journey, even for someone reasonably well-versed in Indonesian matters.

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## Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense

*Along the Archival Grain* attempts to illuminate both the processes of colonial administration in the Dutch East Indies through their archival records and the processes of historical research in untangling these narratives. Stoler goes through the personal letters, as well as the official reports of particular civil servants, painting a broader picture of their world-view and life in the Indies. She traces the evolving attempts to classify and control the different groups in the Dutch colonies, which was particularly marked by ambivalence towards Indies-born Dutch, and concern about those raised in the Indies.

Katrina Gulliver

**Stoler, Laura Ann. 2009.**  
*Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense.*  
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THE PLASTIC TERM *Inlandsche kinderen* was applied variously to those of mixed ancestry, those of Dutch parentage born in the Indies and those whites (wherever they were born) living in poverty in the Indies. Beliefs about the type of people these *Inlandsche kinderen* were, their predilections and limitations (a continual tension, given that no firm definition to the term was ever made, let alone a category to allow such essentialism) shaped official efforts to regulate society.

The European Pauperism Commission of 1901 sought to establish precisely who these liminal figures were, and codify clearly who was European-born, Indies-born Europeans, and the mixed race who were 'European only in name' (p.158). This involved intrusive questioning of those who fell below a specific household income. They were asked about things like alcohol

and opium use, gambling, and prostitution. More broadly, their lifestyle was assessed to see if it conformed to European standards. Their children's Dutch fluency was included in this assessment.

## Understandably evasive

The attempt to carry out this survey revealed that there were far more 'Europeans' living at this income level than had been previously assumed. Given the nature of some of the questions ('Was your mother a prostitute?' 'How many illegitimate children do you have?') it is not hard to imagine some evasiveness on the part of the subjects, as well as reluctance on the part of the questioner. The assumption of moral decline in tandem with fiscal limitation was particularly insulting, and racially coded. As Stoler points out, a major shortcoming with the scheme was that the definition of poverty assumed very different standards of living for Europeans and Asians:

*'Most embarrassing to all, and especially to the ruling elite, were the numbers of subaltern civil servants in government offices whose own incomes were lower than the level at which pauperism was calculated to start. The commissioners lamented this*

*'misunderstanding' and misconstrual of their intention by those questioned, among whom were lowly clerks in those very offices charged to carry out the investigation'. (p.162)*

This clearly indicates that it was less about poverty in absolute terms, and more about whites whose lifestyles were seen as unsuitable, and particularly unbecoming for Europeans in a colonial environment. The simplistic assumption of financial need on the part of those who lived in a local style also demonstrates the reluctance of the official view to understand those who may have chosen such an affinity. The pretence of despising such people could not completely hide the concern and even fear that the existence of those who had 'gone native' elicited among administrators.

## Sending sons to Europe

The issue of the *Radikaal* (the qualification required for a career in the colonial service, which was only offered by the academy in Delft) brought to a head the tensions between the Indies-resident Dutch and the colonial administration. The costs (both financial and personal) of sending sons to Europe for a decade or more of schooling caused strains for families in the Indies, which were met with condescension from the authorities in the Netherlands. Most poignant of all are the disjunctions between what was seen, and known, by administrators in the Indies, and what refused to be seen or accepted by their bosses.

Attempts were also made with new schools in the colonies to improve (particularly mixed-race) children, to raise them as an ideal artisanal class in the Indies. These schools included agricultural colonies, designed both to improve, and limit the aspirations of, those enrolled. These agricultural colonies, based on French models, were of limited success. However, they demonstrate a growing anxiety about the role of the Eurasian community and how these people should be classified in colonial society.

Through these studies of individual instances, which demonstrate different facets to the administrative challenge of the Indies, Stoler also demonstrates the challenge of the historian to read through the 'partial understandings, epistemic confusion' (p.185) of the records left by various civil servants. This is a densely written and researched account, which illuminates Stoler's long research in Dutch archives. It is certainly a useful addition to the historiography of Dutch rule in the Indies, but more broadly for those studying colonial administration anywhere.

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