

A Balancing Act

Research >
Indonesia

The research programme 'Indonesia across Orders' aims at bridging the usual chronological caesurae in historical research of Indonesia. While most historians simply stop at 1942, or concentrate on the Japanese period or on revolutionary Indonesia, the programme explicitly strives to explore themes that can bring the different episodes together and tell the story not as a jerky ride over political thresholds, but as one of continuous change.

By the 'Indonesia across Orders' Project Bureau

Simple as this may sound, the heuristic and epistemological problems are huge; or in normal words, there is a problem of scarcity and a problem of perspective. The latter needs some explanation. Writing histories of a society in the flux of decolonization and self-definition lacks the usual and soothingly neat perspective of the nation. While histories of Japan or the Netherlands can be safely written from a national, centralist perspective, this is much more difficult to do in the case of Indonesia, or any other multi-ethnic colonized society, even if the usual procedure is exactly to take one such perspective. This often ignores the social realities of a decolonizing society, where an entire spectrum of fragmented loyalties, uncertainties, and expectations prevail. To get beyond the ethnocentrism and nationalized histories that dominate the field, it is essential to reconsider existing sources and to look hard for alternatives.

Every episode of history creates its own problems. One obvious dilemma of any historian dealing with the colonial period is the unbalanced sources. This is an almost insurmountable problem, as the creators and keepers of the records were also the principal actors in the colonial effort. Local newspapers, including those in Chinese, will be an essential source, but even then the individual voices will only sound occasionally through the printed pages. Oral histories can provide an essential counterbalance to generalized accounts, but the pre-independence generation is dying out. Local lore might prove to be an indispensable source for reassembling and re-presenting the experiences of 'common people' at the local level.

The same is true for the short period of the Japanese occupation regime. Japanese source materials on the period 1941-1945 in Indonesia are scarce and difficult to locate. This is partly due to the diffuse character of the Japanese military and civil bureaucracy in which tasks and responsibilities were far from clear and record keeping was based upon strategic and military interests. Moreover, in the aftermath of Japan's surrender in August 1945, many original Japanese data were destroyed, or found their way to the archives of the then active allied military forces and intelligence services. The materials that are available mainly detail the organization of the Japanese military administration and its official socio-political and economic policies. Periodicals and newspapers published during the war period give a wealth of information, but they are generally biased because of propaganda purposes. There are apparently very few Japanese wartime statistics on socio-economic developments and, apart from a few village studies,

one will look in vain for sources describing local changes within Indonesian society itself. Tracing relevant Japanese source materials will form an integral part of the research programme. This requires a great deal of ingenuity and initiative. Private company and *zaibatsu* records as well as personal memoirs are available in Japan. Interviews and oral history testimonies can still be another source of information. Thorough research in British, North American, Australian, Indonesian, and Dutch archives might bring unexpected results.

The recently established Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) will also be an important source. Its main objective is to digitalize and put on the Internet original Japanese historical documents related to Asia, starting from the early Meiji era to the end of the Pacific War. It has created an impressive database based upon Asia-related materials from three institutions: the National Archives of Japan, the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Institute for Defence Studies of the National Defence Agency. As JACAR is still in progress; so far only 10 per cent of the original data have been digitalized (totalling about 2.3 million images), but it is expected that every year an additional 2 million images will be put on the Internet.

The post-1945 period creates its own difficulties as far as source material is concerned. A country at war and in civil strife leaves few paper traces and although there is a large amount of sources from the ministry archives in Jakarta and The Hague, much has been lost or has never been transferred to public archives, and is untraceable. Again the problem is how to get to the locality. Most archives of the municipalities and regencies, or *kabupaten*, have been lost, although there are indications that bits and pieces are still stored in the local authorities' closets and attics.

Any research into the turbulent and changeable history of Indonesia during the period of early independence must be also a quest for relevant sources that allow a perspective beyond the official façades of the Dutch and Indonesian governments. This asks for a great creativity in the use of sources. Self-evidently, eyewitness accounts will be sought, but it might be difficult to find useful informants. Existing interview collections are valuable but have their obvious limitations. The Koleksi Sejarah Lisan (Oral History Collection) at the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta brings together several hundreds of interviews, but most of the informants have been successful figures in post-revolution Indonesia, and their memories are often tinged by their social position. The recently collected interviews of the Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië of the Royal Institute of Anthro-

pology and Linguistics (KITLV) have the obvious drawback that the interviewees are almost exclusively (Indo-)Europeans. The same goes for many private writings, such as letters and diaries: they abound for the colonial strata of the Europeans and Japanese, but are scarce for the Indonesian communities. Apart from the fact that there was an imbalance in recording activity from the outset, traditions and politics of record keeping have certainly favoured the colonial documentations.

The quest does not stop at interviewing and reading the papers or scouring the provinces in search for administrative leftovers. Much of the research within the programme will concentrate on urban areas. These places can still convey lots of information on the events and changes of the 1930s to the 1960s. Maps and other pictorial information will give depth and perspective to these city-reading activities. Again, a thorough search for private collections might have surprising yields. Recent efforts to trace private film material from Indonesia have brought up fascinating home movie material from some prominent Chinese families. Similar films from Dutch inhabitants of the East Indies are available in greater numbers, but have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Photography is yet another source that has been used too sparingly and can provide essential information on the changes in the day-to-day lives of the people inhabiting the archipelago from the 1930s to 1960s.

After its kick-off in September, the 'Indonesia across Orders' programme has planned a first, slightly experimental series of presentations on home movies and their usefulness for historical research. Although having been neglected in the past by scholars and critics alike, home movies offer a unique glimpse of life in the former Dutch East Indies. Images of sugar plantations and refineries, mines, and the urban environment show the backdrop of the various political, economic, and social changes that took place during the turbulent period 1930-1960. The two workshops dedicated to home movies and propaganda and publicity films from the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia, organized in close cooperation with the Filmmuseum Amsterdam, feature movie showings, eyewitness accounts, lectures by specialists, and discussions (for more information, see 'The Dutch East Indies on Celluloid' on this page). It lies in the line of expectation that the hunt for (alternative) sources will yield new findings. How many and to what extent their disclosure will attribute to new insights remains to be seen. <

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