

Anthropological Futures

Report >
Southeast Asia

27-28 November
2002
Leiden,
the Netherlands

Following 32 years of Suharto's New Order rule in Indonesia, the startling, occasionally marvellous, and all too often frightening developments of the last four years of Reformasi and its aftermath challenge us as scholars to consider the political-historical conjunctures in which we work and to think anew the ethnographic contexts of which we write. The nagging sense of crisis across the archipelago (with varied manifestations in different places), the recurrent political turmoil and communal violence, the novel experiments with democracy, civil institutions, and forms of publicity, the stubborn persistence of powerful forces opposed to change, the processes and by-products of decentralization, and, last but not least, the diverse negotiations by Indonesians of their positions within a post-9/11 global world order, all demand our urgent attention. The exploratory conference 'Anthropological futures for twenty-first-century Indonesia' was convened with these interrelated purposes in mind.

By Patricia Spyer

Among other issues raised, the conference convener addressed the need for new research agendas that can better address the complex social dynamics and political processes characterizing Indonesia since Suharto's step-down. Are the same intellectual paradigms employed in research carried out under New Order conditions equally valid today, or did 'the appearance of order' – in John Pemberton's felicitous formulation (Pemberton 1994) – put in place by the Suharto regime cause us to look in some directions and not others? Has a new set of complex problems emerged which have only now become accessible?

Along with the refiguring of unfolding circumstances, the legacy of the Suharto era and, equally important, that

of the scholarship of the New Order can be explored from new perspectives. Amongst other issues, conference participants were invited to consider, in retrospect, the ramifications of legal restrictions and policies of the New

Order with respect to media and labour as well as the impact of the regime's cultural politics *vis-à-vis* religion, ethnicity, and gender. The bankruptcy of the former regime's historiography, the silences covering the massacres of

Two films

were screened at the conference. *Maiden of the Morning Star*, an episode on Papua from the TV docudrama series *Library of the Children of the Archipelago*, focuses on expectations for the future in this frontier of the Indonesia nation state as seen through the eyes of a young Papuan schoolgirl. *Viva Indonesia: Letters to God*, a compilation of four produced as part of the 'Visual House of Papua' project, addresses the pervasive Indonesian stereotyping of Papuans, ethnic tensions, local ambitions of independence, and the Indonesian school curriculum, specifically the teaching of national history. The film features five children across the archipelago who, confronted with crisis in their post-New Order lives, each write to God asking him to intervene in their own particular troubling circumstances.

Presentations were given by Webb Keane, P.M. Laksono, Wim Manuhutu, Ratna Saptari, Henk Schulte Nordholt, and Mary Steedly. Discussants were Kees van Dijk, Frans Hüsken, Nico Schulte Nordholt, Fridus Steijlen, Heather Sutherland, and Leontine Visser. The CNWS Research School and the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Leiden University, the KITLV Vereniging, IIAS, the Royal Dutch Academy funded project 'Indonesian Mediations,' the National Museum of Ethnology, and WOTRO/NWO all provided valuable conference support.

1965-66 and the New Order's human rights record, and the relative paucity of scholarship regarding Islam and the country's ethnic Chinese, seem especially worthy of reconsideration. Issues of globalization and the nation state's redeployment within an increasingly heterogeneous world are matters of concern together with, more specifically, current revisions of the nation state project and related issues of sovereignty, regional autonomy, and historical and political revisionisms. Amongst these more volatile issues, participants were asked to consider the kinds of imaginings, experiences, and ordinary and extraordinary events that have come to characterize the everyday across Indonesia since 1998.

Besides an afternoon of film-screenings by Garin Nugroho and Arjo Danusiri, introduced by the latter, an ethnographic filmmaker from Jakarta, the conference featured six speakers who engaged the issue of Indonesian and anthropological 'futures' in a range of compelling ways. Thinking about and imagining the future involved a detour through the past (Keane, Steedly), an engagement with the shifting temporalities woven through women's life cycles of work as well as with the subjective narrative of this variable experience (Saptari), a consideration of the conditions as well as possible outcomes to be pursued in the aftermath of violence (Laksono, Manuhutu), and the problem of 'making the future' through a process of 'decolonizing' the disavowed national historiography of the New Order (Henk Schulte Nordholt).

A focus of discussion was how thinking about the future necessarily implies a vantage point with respect to which not only the future – or a range of possible or alternative futures – come into view but also particular perspectives on the present and past as well. Imagining the future, in Indonesia – as elsewhere – means being cognizant of the possibilities alive at any given moment, compels the exploration of the different temporalities and positions that people