

Introduction

Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world, with a population its government estimates at 220 million. It consists of 19,000 islands strung across the equator, some of these no more than sand spits, others like Java and Sumatra, large and densely populated. Two of the world's largest islands, Borneo and New Guinea are partly within Indonesia: Kalimantan is the Indonesian name for its part of Borneo, while Indonesia's half of New Guinea is now called Papua – formerly Irian Jaya. As a country joined by water, Indonesia covers an area as wide as Europe or the United States.

There are over 200 major cultural and language groups on the islands. Java is the most populous island, with over 100 million people packed together on its 132,000 sq. km. Jakarta, the national capital with a population of 15 million, is located on the island of Java. Javanese culture dominates the other cultures of Indonesia, but the main language of the nation is a form of Malay called Bahasa Indonesia or Indonesian.

Indonesia is generally featured in the world's media for political violence and involvement in international terrorism. It has rated at the top of international corruption watch lists, and its president between 1967 and 1998, Suharto, has been named as the head of state who extorted the most personal wealth from his country.

Such negative images do not do justice to the country. It may have the largest Islamic population in the world, with 90 per cent of the population identifying themselves as Muslims, but no more than a few hundred would want to be associated with the fanatical violence of terrorism. Indonesia is not an Islamic state, but rather has a long history of religious tolerance. Before many parts converted to Islam in the fifteenth century, Hinduism and Buddhism were the majority religions, and there are still significant minorities who adhere to these faiths. Chinese temples can be found throughout the archipelago, as well as Protestant and Catholic churches, and even synagogues. There are still many Indonesians who practise

ancient forms of ancestor worship or animism, and these earlier spiritual beliefs pervade the observances of the larger religions.

The many religions of Indonesia are part of the cultural richness of this diverse country. Indonesia's famous shadow puppet theatre, the *wayang*, is an ancient art that combines Indian epic tales with indigenous mythology. Indonesia also developed some of the richest textile traditions in the world, the best known of which is *batik*, the art of wax-resist dyeing. Each part of Indonesia has its own wealth of music and theatre, the visual arts, poetry and literature. This diversity and depth of Indonesian culture is a product of openness to new ideas and practices that have come to the islands via millennia of trade with India, China and the rest of the world, the same kind of openness that has embraced shopping malls, mobile phones and DVDs.

In political terms, Indonesia has turned, slowly and hesitatingly, towards democracy, as shown by the mass demonstrations that brought Suharto down. After more than thirty years of military-dominated dictatorship, Indonesians have entered the twenty-first century with a desire to clean up government and make it representative of the people. Indonesia has had far fewer political assassinations than the United States or India – no president has ever been killed. It is safer to walk the streets of major Indonesian cities at night than to walk through some of the inner parts of Sydney or Los Angeles.

Indonesia's historical experience explains its diversity, and why it is a country of paradoxes. Although in earlier times there were kingdoms that embraced large parts of the Indonesian archipelago, Indonesia did not come into existence as a country until the middle of the twentieth century. The physical boundaries of Indonesia were established by the Netherlands when they took over the many islands and made them into a single colony: the Netherlands East Indies. Some parts of Indonesia were ruled by the Dutch for 300 years, others for less than thirty. Dutch rule explains many aspects of Indonesia, because it provided administrative and economic foundations for the modern state. Legal systems, labour relations, urban development and many other aspects of present-day Indonesia were stamped by the Dutch.

Under the Dutch, Indonesians began to conceive of themselves as a nation. After the Japanese invaded Indonesia in 1942, a small group of Indonesians developed that notion of nationalism into a struggle for independence: the Indonesian Revolution of 1945 to 1949, led by Sukarno, Indonesia's first president. When sovereignty was transferred from Dutch to Indonesian hands at the end of the Revolution, Indonesia

became one of the new nations of the era of decolonisation. As a new nation it has struggled to balance the interests of different groups and maintain coherence against both the pressures of its own diversity and tensions created by international politics. The present state of Indonesia is as much a product of struggle and the use of force for political ends as it is the realisation of national identity.

Telling the history of modern Indonesia is difficult because a country as huge and heterogeneous as this does not have a single narrative. Most historical accounts have been concerned with the activities of a small group of political leaders, those who created the nationalist movement under the Dutch, led the country to independence, and who have fought amongst themselves to control it ever since. There have been official histories, which play up nationalism and unity in ways that paper over the cracks in the national edifice. These are usually histories of state heroes and big events, and do not say much about the experiences of ordinary Indonesians.

One of the few Indonesians with a coherent and developed vision of the nation's history is the country's most famous novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Of the 220 million individual stories that could be told about Indonesia, Pramoedya's links the world of politics with everyday life. Pramoedya was born in a small town in Java during the colonial era. His father and mother gave him a strong sense of nationalism and its importance, and in his writings he has wrestled with the problems of Indonesia's national identity. Amongst those writings is a series of four novels about the formation of nationalism, *This Earth of Mankind*, and a series of semi-autobiographical stories about growing up on Java and experiencing Dutch rule, the Japanese invasion and the Indonesian Revolution.

The novels that make up *This Earth of Mankind* provide insights into how Dutch colonial society was riven with contradictions, especially between the desire to control Indonesians and the desire to bring them progress. In these books Pramoedya gives insights into the feeling that developed amongst Indonesians of becoming modern people, desiring emancipation, leading to the need to be an independent nation. What Pramoedya's writings show is that ideas of progress, the modern, and the nation, are contested by different social groups, mirroring the physical struggles of Indonesian history.

The Earth of Mankind begins with the volume of the same name, and portrays a naïve young man, Minke. This character is based on the historical figure of Tirta Adhi Suryo, one of Indonesia's first nationalists. In this novel Minke struggles to rebel against his aristocratic Javanese traditions and come to terms with the wonders of technology and

enlightenment promised by the West. An important aspect of modernity brought out in Pramoedya's writings is that tradition becomes a self-conscious process of identifying the older facets of identity and emphasising them. Pramoedya, like other nationalists of his generation, rejects what they call 'feudalism' in tradition, the emphasis on hierarchy that links birth to power.

Pramoedya's novel presents Minke's growing awareness of living in a colonial culture of subjugation. Over this and the next two volumes, readers see through Minke's eyes the processes by which the Dutch took over the islands of Indonesia and exploited them economically, and the developments through which Filipinos, Chinese and other Asians came to form their own senses of national identity. The important elements these novels identify are the growing gulf between different ethnic and class groups in Indonesian society, and the ways this gulf is emphasised by the colonial state; and the awareness of a need for emancipation that grows out of the frustrations of colonialism, emancipation that includes the struggle of women for recognition. Pramoedya gives a detailed impression of urban life and its relations to colonial modernity, and in the last novel gives a detailed portrayal of how Indonesians became their own torturers under the colonial system, shown through the figure of an Indonesian spy for the Dutch who is responsible for the death of Minke. These facets of the experience of colonial rule are examined in the first three chapters of my book through focusing on Pramoedya's identification with Tirto's life.

Pramoedya wrote his novels to convey how his parents' generation grew to become nationalists. His father, a nationalist teacher, was born in the same year as the fictional Minke, and through Minke, Pramoedya examines his father's frustrations as a nationalist left powerless by the efficiency of the Dutch suppression of indigenous politicians, a powerlessness that led him to gambling as an outlet for his stymied political desires.

Pramoedya moved to the city, and worked as a journalist during the Japanese period. He was gaoled by the Dutch for supporting Indonesia's struggle for independence, then gaoled during the regime of President Sukarno for being outspoken in support of Indonesia's Chinese minority. He has described life in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, in a way that no other author has, by taking his readers into the backstreets and slums. As someone active in left-wing cultural politics, he was caught up in Indonesia's major upheaval, the purge of Communists that began in 1965, and led to the killing of at least 500,000 people. It was this purge that brought Sukarno's successor, Suharto, to power. Pramoedya was one of hundreds of thousands gaoled by Suharto's military-led government in the aftermath

of the purge, and he spent fourteen years in prison, most of those in the harsh conditions on the remote prison-island of Buru, in eastern Indonesia. There, when eventually given paper by his gaolers, he wrote *This Earth of Mankind*. Returning to Jakarta in 1979, he spent almost twenty more years under house arrest, his books banned. When Suharto fell Pramoedya was free to become a public commentator and publish again.

Other key prison writings by Pramoedya give detailed insights into his personal experiences and the ways that they have been incorporated into his writings. His prison letters and articles, published as *A Mute's Soliloquy*, give a moving insight into what it was like to live through the colonial period, the Japanese occupation of Indonesia and the Revolution. He tells how he used his personal experiences as the basis of his early fiction – accounts of life in the countryside and the city which convey the sense of a struggle for survival in the face of unbearable suffering. Pramoedya's many novellas and short stories on the Revolution give more detailed guides to his formative experience of this struggle, and chapters 4 and 5 of this book draw on them to connect the personal to the larger scheme of political and economic changes of these periods.

Pramoedya's writings echo his bitter life experiences, showing what so many millions of Indonesians went through as Indonesia turned from a parliamentary democracy, to a semi-dictatorship under Sukarno, and then an authoritarian regime Suharto called his New Order. They evidence the cynicism that many Indonesians still feel about the promises of political leaders, beginning with the disillusion of the national revolution of 1945–9 that did not bring the bright new world of prosperity that many people had hoped for. In his writings from the 1940s and 1950s he conveyed the experience of daily life for people who live in grinding poverty at the whims of politicians. Fictional and non-fictional accounts merge in the clear realism of his prose. Chapters 5 and 6 trace this process, up to the beginning of Pramoedya's long imprisonment. The experiences of imprisonment form a counterpoint to the prosperity that Suharto brought about in the nation, changes discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

Pramoedya's life and writings are a guide to understanding modern Indonesian history, an epic and highly serious vision of the story of Indonesia as a nationalist tragedy that began at the turn of the twentieth century, and was betrayed by Suharto's New Order. Any history writing involves leaving out most of 'what happened', and by selecting a series of themes about culture and society, Pramoedya's writings provide an alternative historical agenda, one concerned with power and everyday experience. They are also writings that are jaundiced, partial and partisan,

elevating nationalism to the centre of Indonesian life, arguing that nationalism should be rooted in the people, and that it should be a modern nationalism, for which most aspects of traditional culture are irrelevant. In this they differ from the works of some of his contemporaries, for example the novelists Umar Kayam (1932–2002) and Father W. S. Mangunwijaya (1929–99). Kayam was an author, actor, film-maker and academic who explored tradition as the basis of modern Indonesian culture, and in particular used the so-called ‘feudal’ traditions of Central Java to find elements of value for Indonesians as a new people. One of the great contradictions of Indonesia is its dependence on ancient characteristics – temples such as Borobudur, or royal traditions – to define a distinctive modern national personality. Mangunwijaya, a Javanese Catholic priest, engineer and writer, combined the *wayang* shadow play with a James Joyce-style of modernism to criticise the moral corruption and materialism of his country.

Mangunwijaya wrote his novel *Durga Umayi* as a reply to *This Earth of Mankind*, depicting the country as the product of the tail-end of colonial rule, and of a struggle so full of contradiction that it is almost farcical. Mangunwijaya took on the ancient Javanese characterisation of the world as part of a mad age, where survival depends on coming to terms with contradiction.

Still, Pramoedya’s descriptions of life in the slums of Jakarta or in the prison camps on Buru are written in hope, a faith in humanity’s struggle for a better life. In his fiction he tries to move outside himself to illuminate the lives of ordinary people under tragic circumstances. While he was still banned, Indonesians and foreigners alike savoured Pramoedya’s writings as forbidden fruit, as his writings were part of continuing dissent against the Suharto regime, dissent that ultimately contributed to the disintegration of that rule.

His works have also been immensely influential in the writing of foreign histories of Indonesia because they have provided an Indonesian perception of historical experience that is an alternative to the official view. During the Suharto era the discipline of history was heavily repressed, and starved of its basic resources – access to archives and critical debate. In the post-Suharto era there has been a flood of books and articles in Indonesia that challenge earlier accepted histories, but most of these have been little more than attempts to counter New Order propaganda. The republication of Pramoedya’s works has been one wave of this flood, contributing to a new kind of public debate which promises to revivify public history. The fall of Suharto has had the paradoxical effect of

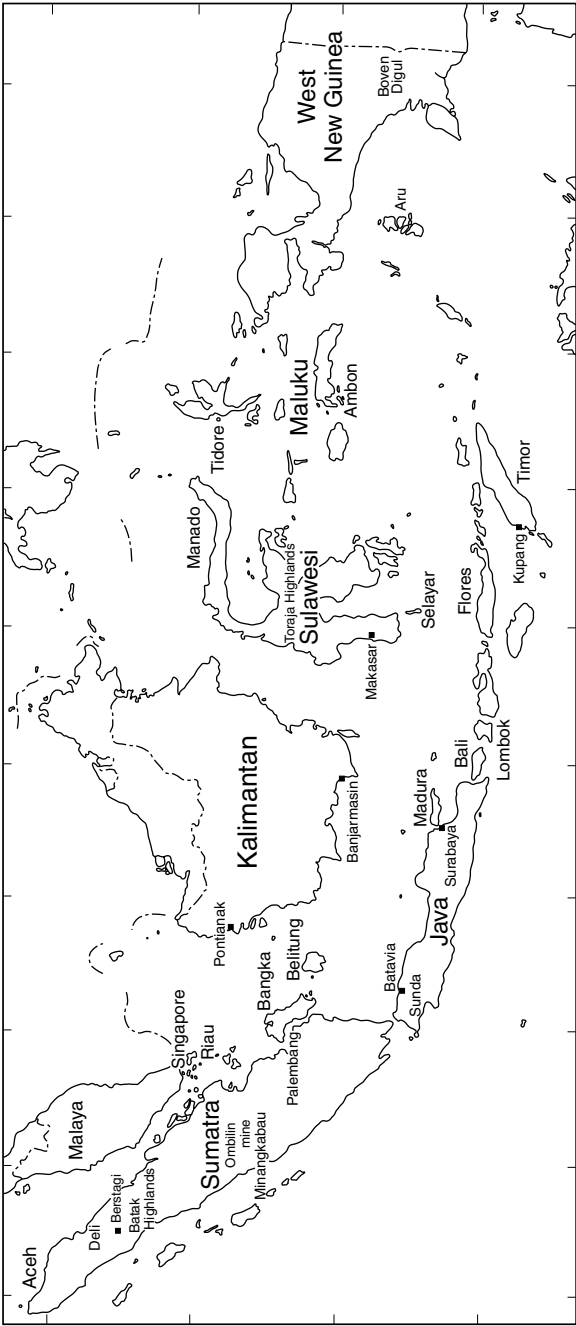
Introduction

7

allowing Pramodya to return to being a major public intellectual, as he was in the 1950s and early 1960s, but at the same time creating new political agendas for Islam and ethnic struggle that are outside Pramodya's vision of Indonesia. The waters have still to settle.

Indonesia is a place of tragedy and farce, of tradition and modernity. Umar Kayam's emphasis on traditional roots for a new nation answers the need for depth in a country uneasy with the modern. He and Mangunwijaya are both much more in touch than Pramodya with the spiritual and religious interpretations that most Indonesians employ to make sense of their lives. The tragedy of Indonesian history is its continued pattern of exploitation, lives lost and opportunities squandered. The farce is of the surreal aspects in a disjointed nation, but mixed with these is an enduring optimism that has enabled Indonesians to salvage a sense of shared purpose out of their existence in a state created under foreign rule.

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Map 1 The Netherlands East Indies

CHAPTER I

Our colonial soil

Having spent myself the greatest and the best part of my life in the Dutch colonial service and having pawned my heart to the welfare of the Dutch East Indies and the people over there . . .

(former Governor General Jonkheer Mr A. C. D. de Graeff)¹

Before 1945 there was no Indonesia, but rather a collection of islands spread across the Equator that the Dutch made into the Netherlands East Indies. In 1898 a new queen, Wilhelmina, ascended the throne of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Wilhelmina's tropical empire, known simply as the Indies, numbered more than 28 million subjects on the prime island of Java, and some 7 million others on what were referred to as the Outer Islands, although not all of these as yet were under Dutch rule.² Although she ruled for the rest of the colonial period, Wilhelmina never visited her colony. She never experienced the sudden monsoonal downpours, the green landscapes dominated by volcanoes, or the spicy heat, but every year her birthday was celebrated there, with night markets and festive arches.

What was it like for the Dutch, ruling that vast archipelago of Indonesia? The Dutch made up a special, upper social class of the Indies – soldiers, administrators, managers, teachers, pioneers. They lived linked to, and yet separate from, their native subjects. From 1900 to 1942 these colonial rulers worked to make the islands into a single, prosperous colony, and for that they expected gratitude. In 1945 when the Pacific War ended and the Dutch attempted to reassert their control over the islands of Indonesia, they were genuinely shocked that some of the peoples of their islands would fight to the death to keep them out. There was a vast gap between Dutch perceptions of their rule, and the views of their Indonesian subjects, but it is important to understand Dutch views, because they have shaped modern Indonesia.

CONQUERING THE INDIES

To create a modern colony Wilhelmina's loyal subjects had to complete a takeover begun when their ancestors founded the port city of Batavia – now Jakarta – on the north-west coast of the island of Java in 1619. It was significant for Indonesia's creation as an unplanned colony that it was founded on business, not Dutch national expansionism. These seventeenth-century Dutchmen set up this colony as investors in the world's first great multinational company, the United East Indies Company. Batavia became the centre of its Asian trading network.

Over the next 200 years, the Company acquired additional ports as trading bases, and safeguarded their interests by gradually taking over surrounding territory. By 1800 the Company had been wound down, but the Dutch had achieved control over most of Java, parts of the larger island of Sumatra, the fabled eastern spice islands of Maluku (the Moluccas), and the hinterlands of various ports where they had established bases for themselves, such as Makasar on the island of Sulawesi (Celebes) and Kupang on the island of Timor.

By the end of the nineteenth century steam-ships and the new Suez Canal made for shorter journey times from Europe, and new attitudes towards expansion. Tiny Holland, nostalgic for its seventeenth-century greatness as a world trading power, joined in the competition for empire that had overtaken the mentality of Europe. Despite claims that the Dutch government had no policy of aggression, only one of 'reluctant imperialism',³ from the 1870s onwards the Dutch fought a series of wars to enlarge and consolidate their possessions.

The Dutch venture into full-blown empire-building began with the strong and independent Muslim sultanate of Aceh. Aceh, on the vast and promising island of Sumatra, is known today as a centre of bitter conflict and rebellion. Its name also dripped blood in the nineteenth century. The French, British and Dutch were all trying to consolidate their holdings in Southeast Asia, and were interested in the natural wealth that Aceh had to offer, particularly pepper and oil. In 1873 the Dutch invaded Aceh, little realising that it would take thirty years to complete the takeover.

For a Dutch soldier watching the lush green shore-line as he sailed towards Aceh it must have seemed as though the pending task was going to be very easy. Standing with him on the ship were troops from all over Europe whom the Dutch had signed up, men down on their luck or getting away from their pasts. In separate quarters on board were local soldiers from Java and from Ambon, in the spice islands of Maluku. The colonial