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The Indonesian Historian
and His Time

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AT this point an issue should be discussed which seems to underlie part of the present controversies about Indonesian history and upon which in large measure will depend what kind of historical studies will be undertaken in the near future—i.e., the relationship of the modern Indonesian historian to his time and his society. Two problems arise in this connection. The first one is a question which every Indonesian historian must inevitably face at some point in his search for a national, Indonesia-centric viewpoint—the question of a nationalist historiography.

While it is his loving concern with the past in all its uniqueness and his desire for concrete knowledge and understanding of historical events, persons, and situations that generally motivate the historian, it is for his contemporaries that he writes. Their interest in the past, especially during periods of rapid and revolutionary change, constant insecurity, and crisis, is bound up with and in proportion to their own emotional involvement in the present and their quest for answers to the problems that beset them. And especially when, as in Indonesia, nationalism is the prevailing mood in the country, the search for these answers will not take the form of contemplative introspection and patient seeking for detailed knowledge and clarification. Rather it will manifest itself in insistent demands for a nationalist historiography and for national myths, from which new confidence can be gained and sustenance drawn. Expression of this need can be found in the con-

tinued political use of myths already exploded by research, like the myth of Great Majapahit as the forerunner of Indonesian national unity and three hundred and fifty years of colonization over the whole archipelago as the basis for a common fate and common enmity, or even the attempt to establish a six-thousand-year history of the Indonesian flag. In historical research and education one can point to the reluctance to admit evidence that does not fit into the nationalist image and the insistence on patriotic and political qualifications for the historian and teacher of history. There is nothing particularly disturbing or frightening in this. Every nation has its normal share of myths. Myths are, to use C. C. Berg's phrase, socialized historical narratives. They are images of historical events or periods, partly derived from facts established by scholarly investigation, partly based on the provisional interpretation of their significance, but also partly a product of archetypal constructions fulfilling deeply and subconsciously felt individual and social needs. They are the aids of man in his orientation in the world, in relation to the past, present, and future of this life and in relation to life beyond this one. The passage from a scientifically justifiable historical interpretation into a historical myth signifies the social process through which society at large takes possession of this image, digesting it, grossly simplifying it and thereby suiting it to its own often subconscious purposes. In a period of the heightened self-assertion which nationalism constitutes, there is a great intensification and acceleration of this process of socialization of historical images and of this search for a new and significant relationship with the past and even for national self-justification through history. There is an acutely felt need to view history from the particular perspective which derives from an intensified expectation of the future. ("The future was present!" exclaims Michelet.) Few nations have been without a period of nationalist historiography. It took France a long while to outgrow Michelet's intensely nationalist conception. South African historiography has never really been emancipated from it. In a collection of essays dedicated to J. M. Romein, Ria Hugo writes: "History is by the South Africans still seen as a means for struggle, as exhortation or defense, and not as a science."¹ There is therefore little doubt that for quite some time the Indonesian historian will be confronted with demands for corroborative evidence for existing myths or for new myths, as well as for a historiography to justify them.

¹ Dr. Ria Hugo, "Die teoretiese geskiedenis en die Suid-Afrikaanse historiografie," in *Weerklank op het werk van Jan Romein* (Amsterdam, 1953), p. 65.

This obviously places the Indonesian historian in an awkward position. On the one hand, he is confronted with his society's demands for such a nationalist history. On the other hand, he realizes that a great deal more must be known before the structure of Indonesia's history can begin to take shape and before he is in a position to write any authoritative and responsible account of it. He also knows that the modern historian no longer enjoys the comparative isolation of his nationalist colleagues of earlier times in other countries and that his historical narratives should be able to stand up to other, non-Indonesian, accounts of what has taken place.² Moreover, even if a great deal more should be known about Indonesia's history, by the very nature of historical knowledge all the images he develops and all his interpretations and presentations will have only a provisional character, requiring constant reinterpretation. In fact, any discussion of the problems of historical interpretation and the synthesis of historical material into a coherent narrative in modern Indonesian historiography leads into questions regarding subjectivity and objectivity.

The great variety of documentary sources, records of the many ways their authors reacted to exposure to the unfolding of Indonesian history, each colored by the author's own values, his own cultural background, his individual training, his specific areas of interest, and the at least equally great variety in professional and general cultural background of those who have examined and synthesized this material into historical narratives are bound to make the modern Indonesian historian³ aware of the polyinterpretability of historical reality and of the difference between *histoire-réalité*, the actual occurrence of events, and *histoire-récité*, the narration of those events—between objective and subjective history. This is further emphasized by the fact that he is faced simultaneously with several different types of historiography, among them the Malay, Macassarese-Buginese, Javanese, European, and modern Indonesian. He is also confronted with various systems of periodization dating from before independence, and with several systems proposed after. He is also aware that although not all Europeans concerned with Indonesian historiography in the past were Dutchmen—as a matter of fact many were not—they shared with their Dutch colleagues the same general cultural background, their values, their

² The work of non-Indonesians in the field of Indonesian history still continues, and with significant results.

³ In the following discussion I have drawn heavily on G. J. Resink's reflections on this subject. An English translation of his articles is being prepared for publication as vol. VII of the series "Selected Studies on Indonesia" (The Hague), edited by W. F. Wertheim.

habits of thought, and their expectations of continued Dutch power. And even when scientific objectivity was striven for, it remained at best an objectivity within the cultural group subjectivity of the European historians and their public. All this inevitably leads the Indonesian historian to reflect upon the nature of history, its method, and the subjectivity of its results, both with regard to the establishment of so-called historical facts and to its general presentation. Through these reflections he must also become more aware of the relativist propensities of his own syncretistic culture, reinforced as these are by the ethnic heterogeneity of his present cultural situation. While in Western historiography the question of historical subjectivity and objectivity became an issue only at the end of a long period of development, modern Indonesian historiography, in its infancy still, is already possibly too familiar with the subjectivity of man's thought and vision. Such reflection will undoubtedly facilitate the Indonesian historian's search for an independent and new interpretation and presentation of his material. But the point is that he cannot escape confrontation with this problem. In order to write his Indonesian history he will have to reconcile or transcend the different regional historical traditions, and their conflicting versions of the same events, in a way that is acceptable not only to most modern Indonesians but also to those from the regions concerned. In many cases additional research that uncovers new data will enable him to do so. However, this "relational objectivity"⁴ within the larger group subjectivity of the nation is not enough.

As has been stated earlier, the Indonesia-centric historical narrative will have to be able to stand up against other, non-Indonesian versions of historical events in Indonesia. Now our attempts to rewrite Indonesian history, or to write it anew, coincide with attempts elsewhere to write a universal history of mankind, or aspects of it. To mention two striking instances, there is, first, the more limited approach of an international commission under the auspices of UNESCO to prepare a *History of the Scientific and Cultural Development of Mankind*. Second, there is also the ambitious project decided upon by the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences to prepare a ten-volume *World History* "based on Marxist-Leninist methodology, treating the main events in the history of mankind and portraying the world process of historical growth in all its unity and diversity."⁵ It is much too early to

⁴ Ernest Nagel, "The Logic of Historical Analysis," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Feigl and Brodbeck (New York, 1953), pp. 695-696.

⁵ Y. M. Zhukov in *Voprosy istorii*, no. 5 (1954), pp. 175-178; translated in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. VI, no. 22 (1954), and reprinted in *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale*, II, no. 2, 489-493.

speculate on the effects both these endeavors will have on historical categories, periodization, and other tools for analysis or on criteria for organizing historical material, and nothing can as yet be said about the new historical images which will emerge from them. But it is clear that the Indonesian search for self-image and self-understanding through the study of Indonesian history is taking place in a period of rapid change and of shifting historical images the world over. It will be a difficult though not an impossible task to achieve that kind of presentation which can rightly claim at least "intersubjective value"⁶ in this now much wider setting.

There is another difficulty for the Indonesian historian who wants to satisfy his society's demand for early production of a new nationalistic Indonesian history, or for simply a new Indonesia-centric history. This difficulty stems from the transitional character of the situation in which he and his society find themselves.⁷ The patterns which we see in the unfolding of the historical process, or rather our choices from the possible patterns which we might discern, and the meaning which we see in history are intimately connected with our awareness of the present. This is influenced too by the conscious or subconscious expectations we have concerning the emerging future. As Karl Jaspers rightly says: "Without a perspective on the future, the historical vision of the past is final and completed, and therefore false."⁸ And as that future materializes and this present changes, our awareness of this present changes also, including the viewpoint from which we regard the past and assess its significance. As a result of our changing perspective on the future, our system of periodization as the expression of a pattern of meaning which we discern has to change too. The two cannot be dissociated. The fact that at the Jogjakarta History Seminar at least five systems of periodization were presented, with no agreement reached on any one of them, reflects not only an insufficiency of data but also the present uncertainty of the historian's perspectives.

Thus we see the problem of the Indonesian historian: he cannot speak with the finality expected of him by his public. His professional training, so to say, has robbed him of the historical innocence which would enable him to write the kind of patriotic history many of his countrymen want. In that sense he is unable fully to meet the public's

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Aventures de la dialectique* (Paris, 1955), p. 16.

⁷ President Soekarno's favorite theme, "The Revolution is not yet over!" has some possibly unintended relevance here.

⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich, 1949), p. 181.

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need for certainty and emotional security. Nevertheless, he cannot withdraw into a splendid isolation from his society. Nor does he want to. On the contrary, he knows himself to be part of his society, caught in the same broad stream of historical events, moved by the same general impulses, committed to and fully engaged in the pursuit of the same goals. And while he might decide to postpone writing his definitive history and concentrate on his researches, he still has to play a major part in the writing of history textbooks for primary and secondary schools as his contribution to the building of his nation. This, however, he can do only with a great deal of inner reservation, realizing full well the very provisional nature of any historical narrative written now. Despite himself, he may often find that he is playing the role of the hewer of stones from which historical myths will eventually be built. But while playing this role, as a historian he is at the same time detached from it by his knowledge that through the study of history, in other words through his own work, the very same myths will in due course be destroyed and replaced by new images that reveal different, and, for another time, possibly more meaningful, aspects of historical reality.

All this is bound to create considerable tension between the historian and his society as well as within himself. The modern Indonesian historian's predicament is compounded by another aspect of his relationship to his society, and this is our second problem—i.e., that he is trying to establish the study of history as a scholarly discipline in what is, to a large extent, still an ahistorical culture. Man's attitude to history is an expression of the way in which he conceives time and his relationship with it. But one's concept of time is inextricably linked to one's view of the significance of life in this world and life's relationship to the universe. Therefore, when one speaks about history and one's attitude toward history, one speaks in the final analysis of the metaphysical presuppositions of his culture. The ahistorical outlook on life, closely connected with traditional agrarian society, perceives life and the flow of human events as a process beyond human control and therefore beyond human responsibility. The meaning of man's life is not in this world, but beyond it. Man has to live his life in harmony with the moral and esthetic order of the cosmos, the nature and meaning of which are to be known through symbols, myths, and analogies that reflect the relationships and correspondences of the cosmic order. In such a world, knowledge of the past is meaningful only to the extent that it provides the raw material for these myths, legends, and parables

which remind man of how he is related to the cosmic order and provide clues to guide him as a human being who seeks security and strives for spiritual perfection.

The succession of events to which man is exposed in this world follows its own channel in recurring cycles of time. But especially in the face of great events and crises, man can sometimes orient himself through analogies with real or mythical events of the past, so that these crises lose much of their bewildering and terrifying aspect and become recognizable, though still awesome. History then becomes something that is humanly possible to endure and not entirely meaningless, because it is somehow related to events and conflicts at the cosmic level. Caught in the historical process, the question of man's ability and responsibility to influence the further course of events becomes irrelevant and unimportant. The only thing he can do is *derma-nglakoni*,⁹ play out the part assigned to him in accord with that station in the order of things into which he is born and with the inner detachment¹⁰ which is the precondition for his spiritual salvation. And thus, fearfully sometimes, but heroically, if he can generate that inner detachment, he seeks his acceptance of and adjustment to historical inevitability and to the not always intelligible succession of "situations." His knowledge of history then governs his inner attitude,¹¹ rather than his choice of action. His freedom, however, as well as his assessment of his own value as a human being, lies not in influencing or directing the predetermined course of events but in transcending it, by living in an eternal present, through self-knowledge and identification¹² with the essential unity of the permanent order beyond time and transient things.¹³

This sketch of the ahistorical view of life is couched in terms commonly used in the Javanese cultural tradition, where they are stated more explicitly than elsewhere in Indonesia. But there is little doubt that this type of outlook constitutes in large measure the cultural subsoil throughout Indonesia, which such later cultural influences as Islam,

⁹ *derma* (Jav.) = *dharma* (Skt.). *nglakoni* (Jav.) = to fulfill, to implement.

¹⁰ *Sepi ing pamrih, ramé ing gawé* (Jav.): inwardly quiet, outwardly active.

¹¹ *Mèsem sadjeroning wardoyo* (Jav.): with an inner smile.

¹² *Nggolek banju pepikulan warih* (Jav.): to look for water with water, and *nggolek geni dedamaran* (Jav.): to look for fire with light. These are two favorite expressions in Javanese mysticism in connection with the concept of knowledge through self-identification.

¹³ Or, less nobly, in trying to secure his personal safety, while the historical process takes its inexorable course, through magical manipulation of the cosmic relationships affecting his life (through fasting and meditation or, with the help of a *dukun*, through white or black magic).

Christianity, and modern secular education have not been able entirely to destroy or replace.¹⁴ In short, the fact that the ahistorical view of life in Indonesia is nowhere systematically formulated, and has not yet been adequately described or studied, does not in any way diminish its reality and pervasiveness in Indonesian society today. Nor is it contradicted by the existence of indigenous historiographies. The papers on Malay and Javanese historiography in this book indicate their nonhistorical function. Neither is the undoubted interest of the Javanese *prijaji* or the Buginese-Macassarese noblemen in their own history proof of the "historical" nature of that interest as we now understand it.

It is almost impossible in our concern for the modern study of Indonesian history not to feel the impact of the ahistorical attitude of Indonesian traditional culture on its students, as well as on that part of the general public interested in history. This influence can be seen in the strong disposition to mythologize, the precipitous inclination to see relationships of a moral significance between events that are not necessarily related at all.¹⁵ The popularity of pseudo-Marxist teleology may be indicative of a predisposition rooted in traditional Indonesian culture toward deterministic or eschatological forms of the historical process.¹⁶ It is at this point that nationalism and the older layers of cultural tradition intersect. For although the nationalist movement in former colonies is in many ways a modern form of an old political struggle, once its main objective is achieved and unless it can outgrow its own limitations, it is increasingly compelled to turn in upon itself, to exalt the presumed uniqueness of the nation with a manifest destiny, and to elevate certain traits of its traditional agrarian culture into immutable virtues. Therefore, though certainly a modernizing force, nationalism by itself does not necessarily mean a break with the *Weltanschauung* of the closed agrarian society. On the contrary, it often tends to reinforce and revive elements of its traditional culture.

How, then, should the Indonesian historian cope with these pressures, which we have seen stem both from the nationalist upsurge and from the ahistorical outlook on life? How can he preserve the study of

¹⁴ Probably in no culture, even in the most advanced industrial societies, has this type of outlook been supplanted completely.

¹⁵ E.g., between the moral behavior of the Ruler and the condition of the Realm.

¹⁶ The deterministic historical view apparently gives the same kind of comfort and emotional security which the closed cosmic order accords traditional ahistoric man. The "open" view of history, on the other hand, leaves man little comfort. It only makes "sense" in connection with man's freedom.

history as a scholarly discipline and ensure its healthy development? He can do so only through the strictest adherence to the disciplinary requirements of his branch of science: faithful observance of the critical method in dealing with his material, meticulous attention to detail, and the disciplining of his historical imagination. It will also be necessary for him to be constantly alert for the possible intrusion into his judgment and historical vision of elements which derive from the ahistorical attitude of his traditional culture, and for his unconscious adjustment or surrender to them. To this end, what is called for is a much fuller and more accurate description and clearer understanding than is yet available¹⁷ of the Indonesian ahistorical *Weltanschauung* including its cyclical and eschatological elements. This investigation should also encompass the effect of Moslem and Christian influence on it, for to both of these, though in differing ways, history is religiously significant. At the same time, the clearer awareness which such a study will give him of the relativistic and syncretic propensity in his own cultural heritage should not lead the historian into a nihilistic paralysis of his yearning for historical knowledge and of his creative powers of interpretation and reconstruction. These problems force him, regardless of whether he wishes it, not to limit his reflection to the nature of historical knowledge and to the study of history as a specific search for truth alone, but to include also a consideration of the philosophical implications of his discipline and the question of the significance of what he is doing in relation to his own society and the situation in which he finds himself. He will then realize that the study of history can only be meaningful and is only possible if the historical process is seen as being essentially indeterminate and open to man's deliberate participation in it. History becomes important only when man realizes that he can make it. It is in his choice among the alternatives which he perceives, and which will affect the course of events, that his freedom and also his responsibility lie. In facing the choices he has to make, it is his vision of the meaning of history and his understanding of the historical process that guide him. At the same time, he cannot escape the realization of the inherent inadequacy of historical knowledge, its provisional character, and its subjectivity in relation to the multidimensionality of historical reality. He also becomes aware that with the emergence of historical consciousness in the life of a nation the comfort usually found in a final judgment on the meaning of life and history, as well as the

¹⁷ For an Indonesian attempt in this direction, see Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Tjatan tentang Segi² Messianistis dalam Sedjarah Indonesia* (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 1959).

security of the closed society, is forever denied to that nation. He must bear as the eternal burden of "historical man" the realization that he has constantly to work for a new, but still limited, understanding of his situation as it is brought about by the events of the past. In this historical vision of life, it is the task of the historian, with the fruits of his endless efforts, constantly to feed and refresh historical consciousness as a creative impulse in the life of his nation.

This is especially true for the Indonesian historian in the particular situation in which he finds himself. By strict adherence to his scholarly discipline he cannot avoid the tension between what he can do and what his society expects of him. Partly, this tension between the professional historian and his commitment to his time is rooted in the disjunction between knowledge and living, and to that extent he can only resign himself to it as part of the human condition. As Merleau-Ponty points out: "Le savoir et la pratique affrontent la même infinité du réel historique, mais ils répondent de deux façons opposées: le savoir en multipliant les vues, par des conclusions provisoires, ouvertes, motivées, c'est à dire conditionnelles, la pratique par des décisions absolues, partiales, injustifiables."¹⁸ But in part this tension also stems from the condition that the historian's concerns as a historian are not unlike a contrapuntal accompaniment to the preoccupations of his society, different but always related. Following its own course, it sometimes trails, sometimes anticipates, but always enriches the main theme. In this realization he may find some degree of justification for his faithfulness to the rigid and critical requirements of his discipline. Moreover, even though he cannot satisfy all the needs of his contemporary society in this respect, the value of his function as a historian is determined not only by his writings and by the contribution he makes to the cycle of creation and demolition of historical myths. He is not simply the artisan constructing socially useful images. The significance of single-minded devotion to his discipline lies at a more fundamental level—in injecting into the life and thinking of his nation the element of historical consciousness. Put in Namier's words: "The aim [of the historical approach] is to comprehend situations, to study trends, to discover how things work; and the crowning attainment of historical study is a historical sense—an intuitive understanding of how things do not happen (how they did happen is a matter of specific knowledge)."¹⁹ Historical sense therefore gives man a greater regard for the

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, p. 17.

¹⁹ L. B. Namier, "History and Political Culture," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (New York, 1957), p. 375.

complexity of the gradual unfolding of human events in time and the relationship of human interaction with it.

It gives him a deeper respect for the uniqueness of each situation, even within the trend discerned, and it therefore helps him to guard against too simple reasoning, too superficial analogies, and too facile acceptance of patterns or laws governing the course of history. In this way man stands between the two extremes of historical determinism on the one hand and wishful thinking in choosing his course of action on the other. He becomes more aware of the distance and even disjunction between intention and realization in history.²⁰ Against the background of an ahistorical tradition, however, the concept of historical consciousness acquires a deeper meaning than Namier, speaking from a longer Western European historical tradition, probably had in mind. For historical consciousness relates man to the world differently from the way the ahistorical *Weltanschauung* does. It shows him that his situation is to a much larger, and indeed ever larger, extent open to his rational comprehension. It shows him that to the extent that he understands his situation as it has developed from past events, the scope of his freedom which enables him to act in a meaningful way in relation to the course of events and the scope of his personal responsibility to do so have widened. Historical consciousness therefore changes man's relationship to reality, changes and enlarges the area of meaningful interaction with the world, and to that extent increases the possibilities that he will master his destiny. It signifies man's freedom from historical inevitability and from the tyranny of conditions to which he is subjected, without recourse. It signifies his freedom to determine his own attitude toward and relationship with his situation. For though his freedom is limited because his situation is a historical datum, in the extreme he can still assert his freedom through his rational, moral, or, in a more relativistic setting, esthetic choice, to work within or without what seems at a particular time to be the mainstream of the historical process.

Historical consciousness, then, will bring a nation closer to understanding the realities of its historical situation. The modern historian's usefulness in this respect lies in widening the dimensions of his society's understanding of the present and of the possibilities for the future, thus opening the way to a positive and creative relationship to reality and therefore to history.

In conclusion, it may be said that only by his passionate but con-

²⁰ See Wilhelm Wundt, *System der Philosophie*, I (4th ed.; Leipzig, 1919), 326-327.

trolled dedication to the search for historical truth while knowing its ultimate elusiveness, by accepting the constant need for reinterpretation as part of the unending labor of the study of history, and finally by a constant awareness of his own cultural background will it be possible for the Indonesian historian to maintain and develop the study of history as a scholarly discipline in his country. The inner detachment which this ethos brings him in relation to his own total human situation, at a time when such fierce and exclusive loyalties are demanded, is bound to create many problems for him, leaving him, fully committed as he is, sometimes with a keen sense of inadequacy. Yet he may find sustenance in the awareness that he is leading a breakthrough to a new vision of life and society for his nation, based on man's willing assumption of his freedom and responsibility in relation to history. For it is only when man has accepted the possibility of at least helping to shape his future that he can assume his responsibility for it, as part of the assertion of his freedom. Then history ceases to be the mere fulfillment of man's curiosity, a mirror for his moral enlightenment or a fountain for narcissistic admiration, but becomes essential for man's orientation and meaningful participation in the modern world.

It is in this sense that the Indonesian historian will then become a small but important part of, to use Reinhold Niebuhr's words,²¹ the emancipating force which is history.

²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York, 1949), p. 29.