
INDONESIA: A PARTIAL APPRAISAL

James Siegel

When Ben Anderson founded *Indonesia*, Indonesia the country was far away. Most of us (Ben not included) felt it was unknown and would remain so until we got there. That called for a journal of a sort that had not yet come into being. Ben made this occur. He wanted a publication that would not be limited by the boundaries of the academic disciplines. Of course, the writing of historians, political analysts, anthropologists, linguists, and so on were welcome. But people who simply had experience, or professionals who wrote outside their professional competence, were also welcome. I think Ben felt that such breadth would re-inflect Indonesian studies as they had been left by Dutch scholarship. The latter were invaluable and even had masterpieces of idiosyncratic writing, such as Pigeaud's *Javaanse volksvertoningen*, never matched by anything in English on the Indies or on Indonesia for its style and the insistence that learning about the place depended on meticulous reading of texts. Pigeaud could count on others who thought Indonesia was static and that reading a classic text (there unquestionably were such) would tell anyone interested in the Indies much they should know. Ben certainly honored such studies, but the title he chose for the journal made the revolution central to the place. Compare it, for instance, with *Archipel* (founded some five years after *Indonesia*), whose title tells us that the revolution was just one more event in the *long durée*. It was not that prerevolutionary Indonesia was to be ignored. Far from it. But the revolution showed that there were revelations to be made by ways of thinking that had yet to be tried out. Everything written intently, including something that might resemble Pigeaud's masterwork, if that were possible, would be welcome. Even those pieces without the support of a method of any sort and that seemed therefore to lack seriousness, could tell us something, giving freer thinking

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a place. In any case, for those of us who were more naïve, the new journal seemed to make a distant place accessible.

I think the usefulness of the original formulation of *Indonesia* has not yet worn out. Just for that reason I ask myself now, what were the limitations of the original vision, drawn up in 1965, when the journal was founded? Hippies were at large, the contributors were immersed in worldwide struggles for independence, while the singular views, unique to the contributors, were not rejected out of hand. We were prepared to hear them because we did not know what was to be found. I ask myself how the journal would have appeared if the massive killings of 1965 had been left to the ordinary workings of political life. As it was, *Indonesia* was poised to examine whatever bore on that subject. It was also ready for the Suharto-imposed normality that followed. The journal's original formulation gave a large place to speculative pieces. They seemed called for. The normality that replaced Suharto's has not stimulated the same kind of response. It takes professional competence to comprehend the oligarchs and cartels of liberal Indonesia. Or at least to see their daily operations. The climate that they work in, dominated by economic questions, is taken for granted. Nothing within Indonesia seems to ask whether its cultures and languages could give us another view, one that makes the installation of liberalism problematic. Add to that the blandness of character that goes with such a climate and one understands why the speculative bent of the beginning is less apparent today

Habits of reading broadly have changed, too. *Indonesia* is the only journal I am likely to read all of. But I sometimes balk at the book reviews. These too often reveal a narrow perspective, one no doubt influenced by the academic job market. The reviews are too often laudatory and surprisingly without historical perspective. When they are critical, they tend to be dismissive of approaches rather than evaluating what the author adds by his or her own way of looking. Either the review is favorable or it is the contrary; that seems to be enough. I exaggerate and ignore the useful reviews that tell us what is in the book. But I wish for broader horizons.

The installation of English as a lingua franca has limited the eccentricity of those I label "Pigeaudists." The uniqueness of expression in regional languages counts for less reflecting, of course, the current situation. For instance, talking with Ben, Audrey Kahin, and Anne Berger about the death sentences handed out to Europeans convicted of drug offenses, Ben pointed out that these sentences were popular for moral as well as political reasons. Europeans demand that Indonesian justice be reformed when Europeans are its subjects, but not otherwise. Do they want justice of special treatment for themselves? As a description of popular attitudes, probably Ben is on to something. If so, it shows the continuation of attitudes formed during the time of the New Emerging Forces. Somehow a mind set has survived the killings of 1965 and the blossoming of corruption that has accompanied development.

I am in favor of less professionalism, resistance to the academic market, more amateur views, and more intellectually informed book reviews. On the other hand, I also am aware that the continuation of the original idea of the journal might now no longer be possible. Certainly what has replaced it is of substantial value. We get a look at the country from people who know what they are talking about.

For me, the limitation of the journal can be seen in the failure to have a review of Joshua Oppenheimer's film, *The Act of Killing*. This oversight was not for lack of effort but because dismantling the assumptions of the film is an enormous task. The film assumes that the killings were hidden. Yet they were, rather, local and known to the people of the area. The film shows sadists, pathological types as though they reveal the necessary characteristics for a massacre. In fact, most killings in 1965 (I speak from talking with quite a few killers in East Java and in Aceh) were not sadistic. In the film, lurid stories stand in place of scenes that might put into question the immense popular support for the killings by everyday, sympathetic, normal Indonesians. It underestimates the authority of the military, not only in recruiting killers, but in convincing Indonesians of their high moral purpose, fairness, and limitations. Oppenheimer had the holocaust in mind. "Anti-PKI = Nazi anti-Semitism" is close to describing the idea behind *The Act of Killing*. It furnished a template which, applied to 1965, left out everything in Indonesian history that could lead to this terrible, despicable event, and that made it acceptable to local residents. The movie assumes that it reveals a truth. Maybe, but the truth could just as well be not a propensity for the act of killing but the normalization of the massacre. The current outcries by certain Indonesians against the killings insists on pathology and closes off a wider investigation into Indonesian history and culture.

We might do well to return to revolution as our starting point. Its bloodiness is like that of 1965: a secret everyone knows. The journal began by showing that there were important topics reachable outside textual study and edging over the methodology of established disciplines. A return to what we see, not taking our observations at face value, seems to me still a valuable effort.

