



Key Issues in Asian Studies

Indonesia
History, Heritage, Culture

BY KATHLEEN M. ADAMS

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Reviewed by Paul A. Rodell

With this contribution to the *Key Issues in Asian Studies* series, Kathleen M. Adams has maintained and even enhanced its well-established reputation for quality. Writing a brief yet comprehensive book is challenging because specialists must restrain themselves from delving too far into their area of expertise. Instead of presenting an in-depth look at the specific, they must focus on engaging intelligent but uninformed readers so they can grasp the basics of a broad topic. For this effort to work, the reader must be encouraged to leave their comfort zone and enter a new world. The short book is, therefore, a small needle that must be thread very finely. Adams has threaded that needle.

Adams is well-qualified as our author/guide, with several relevant and award-winning books and quality articles to her credit, plus a wide range of teaching and field experiences. Her communication ability comes to the fore with the use of “hooks” for her chapters that grab the reader’s attention

while giving coherence to the content of each chapter. Without these hooks, the narrative might otherwise seem to be little more than unconnected bits of data or events. Perhaps it is her anthropological discipline that serves Adams especially well, as folks in that field frequently use material culture to interpret societies, just as she uses a variety of objects in this volume.

Adams begins her first chapter with a description of Dongson drums, which got their name from the village in Việt Nam where they originated. The bronze drums spread throughout premodern Southeast Asia, as revealed by numerous archaeological digs, where they were used for ceremonial and religious purposes. Also unearthed have been the remains of extinct humanoids, including a three-foot-tall individual found on Flores Island in Indonesia and nicknamed “the Hobbit.” Through both the Dongson drums and the Hobbit, readers are intrigued enough to read about and better understand the significance of prehistoric migration and linguistic patterns, kinship variations, the role of ancestor reverence, and the belief in spirits. Adams demonstrates that premodern culture continues to influence Indonesia by citing a recent survey that found more than half its Muslim respondents believe in supernatural beings. The chapter concludes with a story Adams recounts from a field trip about the spirit of a drum owned by a Catholic Chinese–Indonesian family. The drum’s spirit banged and caused so much noise at night that the family had to put a statue of the Virgin Mary atop it so the spirit could be contained, and the noise stopped. Wow!

Most of the book’s six other chapters have similarly appropriate hooks, such as the localization of Indian influences in chapter 2 as seen in *wayang kulit* shadow puppet performances. The Hindu epic stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* became important to Indonesian culture thanks to their syncretic adoption by the puppet masters. In their performances, the puppeteers introduced uniquely local characters such as Semar the clown, who frequently outshines Hindu gods. Within this context, Adams reviews imported South Asian influences that have been acculturated by Indonesian society, while concepts that were too alien such as caste were not entertained.

Her third chapter is on the influence of Islam beginning in the fifteenth century and uses two hooks, including the story of the Nine Walis (saints) and the architecture of Demak’s mosque, the oldest in the archipelago. Both illustrate Islam’s syncretic acculturation to earlier Hindu–Buddhist religious influences and even earlier notions of animistic supernatural spirits. What follows is an explanation of the probable methods of cultural–religious transmission, including Sufi mysticism; commercial links to India, Persia, and beyond; and Islam as a counterweight to unwelcome Portuguese attempts to forcefully introduce Christianity. The chapter concludes with the story of Islam’s absorption of the traditional animistic tale of the queen of the Java’s South Sea, Nyai Loro Kidul. She supported the legendary founder of the Muslim kingdom of Mataram, with whom she became enchanted.

The entry of Chinese and European merchants and the establishment of the earliest Dutch colonial control is detailed in the fourth chapter, starting with a description of Jakarta’s bustling port, developed by the Dutch maritime trading company, the VOC. The chapter goes on to note the symbiotic relationship between the Europeans and the Chinese who preceded them, where their mutual fortunes became locked. Tragically, the relationship was not always congenial, most tragically in 1740 when the Dutch, assisted by non-Chinese locals, massacred thousands of Chinese. Another hook Adams uses in this chapter is the evolution of Indonesia’s batik cloth industry, thanks to the global economy. Especially impressive is an example of batik cloth from the 1880s, featuring a Dutch crest symbolizing both the rise of Dutch dominance and their acculturation to Indonesia.





Adams opens each chapter of *Indonesia: History, Heritage, Culture* with a focal image or artifact from which the chapter's narrative flows, such as this photograph of one of Indonesia's oldest mosques—a starting point for a discussion of the arrival and spread of Islam across the islands. Source: AAS, #AsiaNow web page at <https://tinyurl.com/y5yemj7>.

In this fourth chapter, Adams departs from her anthropologically based hooks to a historical detailing of the many unfortunate turns the Dutch–Indonesian story would take. The problem was the single-minded VOC focus on controlling both markets and prices of the islands' lucrative spice trade. Too often the impulse for market dominance led to violence against a hapless indigenous population. Later, after the 1799 collapse of the VOC and the market decline for spices, Dutch colonial administrators shifted to more profitable crops. Java soon contained large coffee plantations and was straddled with a huge opium trade. Both enterprises yielded tremendous profits for the Netherlands but resulted in horrific consequences for the local population.

Countering the bleak fourth chapter is the Dutch public's reaction against the excesses of the Cultivation System's forced cultivation of profitable export crops—especially the 1860 exposé by E. Douwes Dekker titled *Multatuli* (*Much I Have Suffered*) that led to well-meaning, though too often ineffective, attempts to improve the lives of the Indonesian people. Meanwhile, Indonesians challenged the Dutch hold with uprisings by Javanese Prince Diponegoro in 1825–1830 and the especially long and costly war in Aceh from 1873 to 1904 that resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of Acehnese and Dutch soldiers. The tragedy of the imposition of total Dutch imperial rule was nowhere worse than on the island of Bali, where hundreds of men and women of the royal court committed mass suicide in front of shocked Dutch troops rather than surrendering.

Adams incorporates an imaginative hook in chapter 5 that describes the rise of the Indonesian independence movement and the fall of the Dutch during the Second World War. Adams takes readers to the colonial National Museum with its huge map of the archipelago surrounded by portraits of idealized images of the country's numerous ethnic groups. She uses the map to discuss the independent nation that more and more Indonesians were beginning to consider and the new colonial education system that began as part of the government's new Ethical Policy. This initiative opened education to nonelites, thereby aiding in the rise of a modern nationalist generation of leaders who would create a new nation. This educational movement spread to include women, study in Europe, and the rise of a national language based on Malay rather than Javanese. Nationalist movements started with the relatively mild Budi Utomo and then evolved to the *Parti Nasional Indonesia* (the Indonesian Nationalist Party, PNI), led by a young firebrand, Sukarno. The Japanese invasion toppled the Dutch

from power and brought these new nationalists into positions they would use to fight for their country's liberty after the war.

Adam's hook to start chapter 6 is another map, this time a large, contemporary, three-dimensional natural map of Indonesia made of water and soil in a national park in Jakarta. Though inaugurated recently, this natural map continues the nationalist generation's efforts to foster a sense of common destiny. This is an excellent starting point for the Sukarno and Suharto years, but the sheer amount of material that must be covered in about nine pages of the chapter's remaining text is overwhelming. The short chapter covers everything from Sukarno's Pancasila through the independence struggle and subsequent destabilizing events. It then moves to the downward trajectory of Sukarno's last years, the bloody coup attempt of September 1965, and the Suharto years that ended in 1997 with the Asian economic meltdown.

It is regrettable that this chapter is so short because additional information would better aid a student's understanding of this dynamic and sometimes-violent era. For example, the treatment of the ethnic Chinese is one area that needs more discussion. Adams does mention that the Chinese suffered discrimination under both Sukarno and Suharto, but its severity could have been clarified and, perhaps, brought into parallel with Dutch actions from a century earlier. As an example, when Suharto fell from power, it was not only Chinese businesses that were attacked, the Chinese population suffered and there were numerous reports of rape and killings, just as what happened during the Dutch reign.

So where is Indonesia now? Adams uses a photograph of a family in front of three statues in a park in Makassar to frame her final chapter that carries Indonesia's story to the present. The statues are of Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and, in the middle, Syekh Yusuf, an early opponent of the Dutch who died in exile in South Africa in 1699. The statues allude to Indonesia in a broader global context, which is increasingly the country's story.

The chapter then offers brief recaps of the presidential terms of J. B. Habibie through Joko "Kokowi" Widodo. Adams then shifts to a truly interesting discussion of the current increase in Islamic orthodoxy in Indonesia and its future implications. Today's contest for the country's hearts and minds is part of a global Islamic phenomenon. Muslim activists are influencing Indonesia's political life, and Islam culturally is more evident in women's dress, the media, and pilgrimage participation. Against this tide of invigorated Islam are Indonesia's women and how they choose to live in their daily lives, as well today's global culture, technology, and the daily personal choices of many Indonesians.

For now, Indonesia remains diverse and vibrant, and this short book by Adams will bring this complex and fascinating country to life for its readers. This book would work quite well for courses that examine numerous countries or cultures in a variety of disciplines. Quite beyond anthropology, course offerings in history, political science, and many others would do well to have Kathleen Adams's book on their required reading list. ■

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