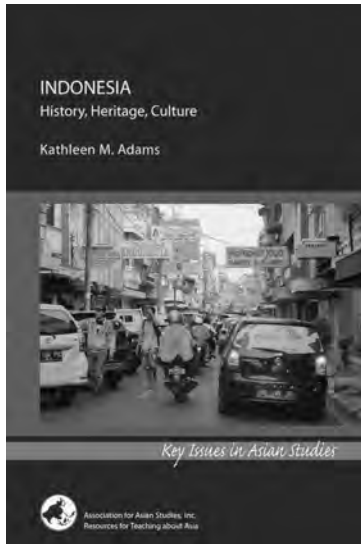


KEY ISSUES IN ASIAN STUDIES

Indonesia: History, Heritage, Culture

A Short Interview with Kathleen M. Adams



Key Issues in Asian Studies (KIAS) books complement *Education About Asia* and are succinct, well-written, practical resources for university, college, and high school instructors and students. Indonesia, long important in Southeast Asia, now has a global impact and for a variety of reasons deserves more attention in higher education, as well as secondary schools. The archipelago's significance notwithstanding, Professor Kathleen Adams has authored a highly readable *good story* about the peoples of what is now Indonesia from the earliest times to the present. Increasingly, anthropologists and historians have ventured into each other's academic areas, and Adams has managed to represent the best of both fields in this volume.



Kathleen M. Adams.
Source: Image courtesy of the author.

Adams is Professor of Anthropology at Loyola University–Chicago and Adjunct Curator at the Field Museum of Natural History. Previously, she held the Mouat Family Junior Endowed Chair in International Studies at Beloit College. She is the author of the award-winning *Art as Politics: Re-crafting Identities, Tourism, and Power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia* (2006), and has coedited three books: *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* (with Kathleen Gillogly, 2011), *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Work and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia* (with Sara Dickey, 2000), and *The Ethnography of Tourism: Edward Bruner and Beyond* (with Naomi Leite and Quetzil Castañeda, in press). Her anthropological research in Indonesia began with a Fulbright Fellowship in 1984–1985 and is certainly still evident today.

The following interview is short, but Kathleen's responses to the questions are virtually guaranteed to stimulate curiosity about Indonesia on the part of readers who are unfamiliar with its history and culture.

Lucien Ellington: *How did you become interested in Indonesia?*

Kathleen Adams: My interest in Indonesia was sparked by an accidental encounter far from Asia. I was spending my junior year studying at a university in France, imagining that I would one day study art and ethnic relations in a Francophone country. I was nineteen, and, as I'm now a bit ashamed to confess, I knew almost nothing about Indonesia. But all that changed when I boarded a train in Paris. This was years ago, when trains still had little compartments, as in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. During a ride to Belgium, I shared a compartment with an Indonesian family. When they learned I was studying anthropology and art, they regaled me with stories of Indonesia's cultural and artistic riches. To illustrate, they pulled mesmerizing photos of homeland villages from their suitcases, as well as brilliantly dyed batik sarongs. After six hours of lively conversation with this Indonesian family, I was completely captivated: when I returned to the University of California–Santa Cruz the following year, I enrolled in an undergraduate anthropology seminar on Southeast Asia. In the seminar, we read Clifford Geertz's *The Religion of Java* and

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Clark Cunningham's classic article on symbolism and order in the Atoni house, and my fate was sealed—from then on, my studies were oriented toward Indonesia. When I look back, it amazes me how one train ride made such a momentous impact on the course of my life.

Lucien: *Why do you think it is important for readers in general, and teachers and students in particular, to have a basic understanding of Indonesia?*

Kathleen: As the world's fourth-most populous nation, the country with the world's largest number of Muslims, and the largest economy in Southeast Asia, it is essential for anyone who aspires to be globally aware to have an understanding of Indonesia's history and contemporary cultural dynamics. Indonesia is poised to play key strategic and economic roles not

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only within Southeast Asia but beyond. The country's vast natural resources have long been a magnet for foreign powers, drawing Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern, and European traders in the past and, in more recent years, global mining and timber corporations—all these groups left their mark on the archipelago. And today, growing numbers of Indonesians are living abroad, not just as laborers, though the country is rapidly becoming a key source of global labor, but also as students, entrepreneurs, scholars, and diplomats. These historical and contemporary dynamics make Indonesia an excellent case study for understanding globalization past and present. And finally, as one of the world's most ethnically and religiously diverse nations that has managed to endure when other diverse nations, such as the former Yugoslavia, have not fared as well, Indonesia offers potentially useful insights into strategies for building a unified national identity.

Lucien: *You've studied Indonesia for a long time. I know this question is difficult to impossible to answer, but please share one or two of your most memorable Indonesia-related experiences in the course of your work.*

Kathleen: I think, for me, the most meaningful experiences are rooted in the lifelong friendships that grew out of my long-term field research in the rural highlands of Sulawesi. When I first arrived there at age twenty-five to conduct two years of dissertation field research on tourism and ethnic and artistic change, I was fortunate to have found housing with a wonderful Toraja family in a frequently toured village. The family became, and remains, a second family for me. One of the relatives, Stanislaus Sandarupa, was a brilliant part-time guide whom I often interviewed, as he had wonderful insights. He frequently brought his tourist charges to meet me, since he recognized that seeing an anthropologist authenticated their experiences of encountering exotic cultural others. He also often chided me, in front of his tourist charges, for not wearing a "khaki uniform," noting that he wore his guide uniform and I should be wearing mine so that locals could distinguish me from tourists. Some years later, Stanis received a Fulbright Fellowship to study for an anthropology PhD at the University of Chicago, where I live. During the years he lived here, when he and his family visited my family, it was my turn to chide him for not wearing a khaki uniform. After he returned to Indonesia and became an established professor, he asked me to serve as the foreign member of Indonesia's committee to prepare a dossier for Toraja villages to be considered for recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A small group of us, including Stanis, spent five days holed up in a Jakarta hotel, discussing Toraja culture, brainstorming about what made it worthy of UNESCO recognition, and writing far into the night. It was an exhausting but exhilarating process. Today, Toraja villages are on the official candidate list for UNESCO recognition. Though I worry about the new challenges such recognition may bring for Torajan villagers, it's clear that this is something Torajans very much desire. So it was satisfying to be a part of the process. Tragically, Stanis passed away last year, but the relationship with his family continues. In fact, his son and I just coauthored an article.

Lucien: *Kathleen, thanks for the interview!* ■

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