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Unity and Diversity: Indonesia’s Development as a Nation and Sukarno’s Influence

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For Australia, the countries of Asia, and particularly Indonesia, are of critical importance as neighbours, trading partners and increasingly[[1]](#footnote-1) destinations for young Australians to gain education and employment. Often the relationship has been fraught with misunderstandings. Some of these could conceivably be avoided or ameliorated with more understanding, including historical understanding, between the two countries.

Indonesian history, though recognised in theory in the current (2010) Stage 6 Modern History Syllabus and the Stage 5 History Syllabus (2015), has been largely disregarded in programming[[2]](#footnote-2) in schools. Students’ exposure to Indonesia is generally Bali-centric and taught as the ‘exotic’ other, often limited to its geographical location and perhaps its society/culture. Hindu temples, golden beaches, rice paddies and ceremonies are the common narrative of Indonesia, yet its history is complex and exciting and should attract both teachers and students. It is clear that there is a disincentive to teach Indonesian history due to lack of resources and teacher knowledge. This leads teachers to focus on case studies of Western Europe and North America, thus potentially limiting students’ horizons and, at worst, developing eurocentrism. At best, most students leave high school in NSW with an inadequate, tokenistic understanding of Indonesia.

My proposal was to travel to Indonesia to gather resources that focused on persons, places and events relating to the Indonesian independence movement, Sukarno, and Indonesia from 1958 to 1999, and to further develop my own understanding of Indonesian history. My intent was to then digitalise the resources to make them available to history teachers and to present options for studying Indonesian history at appropriate forums

My time in Indonesia was divided between Surabaya, Blitar, Yogyakarta and Jakarta in Java, and Denpasar in Bali. At each location I endeavoured to visit sites related to the areas of study and to discuss those areas with experts, teachers, students and whomever else I crossed paths with on my journey.

Colonisation

One cannot study modern history without facing the issue of colonisation and its ongoing impact, and indeed in the Stage 4 NSW syllabus there is a study of contact and colonisation and impact on indigenous peoples. That the Netherlands colonised and occupied Indonesia for more than 300 years is not disregarded in Indonesia; rather, it is understated. In much of Indonesia the wide boulevards and tree-lined avenues of the Dutch East Indies have been taken over through modernisation with no sentimentality.

At sites around Indonesia the Dutch are mainly considered as a colonising force that was overcome by the Independence movement. Few positive legacies are mentioned, although when I was visiting the Fort in Yogjakarta, a visitor said he thought that some good things came out of colonisation and identified that it brought people together through nationalism. School students I spoke to throughout my visit said it was a bad time for Indonesia. That sums up the level of discourse about colonisation for the majority of Indonesians – it’s old news.

One exception to the understatement of the Dutch, in part, is at Kota Tua, the Old City in Jakarta, which is a time capsule of colonial architecture where museums of Indonesian history are housed. In Fatahilla Square in Kota Tua the buildings are grandiose and it can be imagined awe inspiring to Indonesians of the day for their style. They are largely European in their size and their functions, with the occasional local feature. Many buildings were designed for administrative functions to manage the city and its inhabitants and the plans of the Dutch.

Although the buildings remain, the link with the Dutch is not overly emphasised. In fact, little about them is mentioned at all; they have largely been wiped from history. One can stand in a Dutch colonial building reading about the steps and struggles to independence and significant personalities of the period with limited mention of the Dutch. This is not accidental; local buildings of the era did not stand up well to the ravages of time and weather, but colonial buildings were designed to do so. After all, that was the period of empire building for the long term and the focus is now on the Indonesian in Indonesian history, not the Dutch.

Some sites had some focus on the Dutch in the East Indies. Museum Fatahillah in Kota Tua has a small though interesting collection of well maintained objects from the Dutch East India Company, including maps and paintings. Taman Passat Museum, which is the oldest cemetery in Jakarta dating from 1795, is the resting place for Dutch nobles, and at various sites throughout Jakarta there are tombstones collected from the 16th and 17th centuries. Neither site had significant information about the period, and there is little apparent interest in general in Indonesia in the colonial past. Students and teachers I spent time with knew little about the era; if they did, it was a negative view. Many visitors from Europe seemed to be seeking historical insight in to the era of colonisation, but to Indonesians, Kota Tua is a theme park that meets the need for entertainment.

The Budi Utomo Museum in Jakarta was one site that presented a little of the history of the era of colonisation. The building was a school for medicine, introduced through the Dutch Ethical Policy as liberalism took hold in Europe, but was also a site of ferment for Indonesian nationalism. Recognition of the Dutch here is noted in terms of the discourse allowed on the campus that housed the first indigenous nationalist group. In hindsight, the Dutch may have inhibited the education of locals, given that that was one of the primary factors leading to independence.

In Yogyakarta the History Museum houses limited artifacts from the colonial period that give any insight into the impact of colonisation. One set of Wayang puppets in the shape of Belanda (Dutch) is particularly noteworthy in terms of how unflattering they are to the Dutch.

In Yogyakarta I also visited an old, though still operating, sugar factory and was rewarded by the step back in time to the colonial era that one gets on entering. Still operated by steam-powered machines, it is not difficult when watching the workers go about their chores to empathise with how difficult conditions would have been in the 1800s to 1900s and how, when a group was able to strike back at their colonial masters it was warranted.

Indonesian Independence Movement and Subsequent Events

Indonesian independence, the process to obtain it and the significant personalities involved are celebrated throughout Indonesia and, whereas colonisation is a large unknown to Indonesian students and teachers of today, the struggle for independence is glorified.

The Battle of Surabaya (Battle for Independence) in October–November of 1946 equates in the minds of Indonesians to Gallipoli for Australians. It was *the* battle for independence and the fortitude of the Indonesians, weakened by years of Japanese Occupation and by the ongoing battle against the Dutch, is marked in numerous ways in Surabaya. The Red Bridge, Hero’s Monument, and the Museum of Independence are among some of the reminders of the battle that may have been lost, but a war that was won. What was notable at each of those sites was the number of school students visiting and the depth of their knowledge regarding the battle. Most were fascinated and delighted that an Australian teacher would be studying the Indonesian independence movement.

Fort Vredeburg is a former colonial fortress located in Yogyakarta that was converted into the Independence Struggle Museum and opened in 1992. As with many museums I visited, the information was mainly presented in dioramas with limited textual information. While useful, the dioramas present a view of events that have been crafted and that may, in some instances, have been prepared with some poetic license. Without the textual support, a narrative of history can be represented which may be incomplete and/or untrue.

A highlight of my time in Jakarta was the Museum of the Manuscript of the Proclamation and Gedung Joang 45. Both were interesting in terms of the historical collections relating to the events leading up to the proclamation of independence in August 1945. Among its displays of historical artefacts, Gedung Joang 45 includes a collection of Japanese propaganda which I had not seen before and which I was allowed to photograph. At both museums, however, it was easy to reflect that funds for museums in a developing nation are not necessarily a priority.

Sukarno

To explore Sukarno, I started in Surabaya at the house said to have been Sukarno’s birthplace and the kos (boarding house) he lived in for a number of years (deemed to be the home of Indonesian nationalists). Neither site appears to have a great deal of significance for Indonesians; I was the only person at either site. Significantly, the two locations were not even marked until his daughter Megawati became president in 2001. Though not in any way exceptional, they were a good starting point as they created a sense of time and place for my tour.

From Surabaya I travelled to Blitar, a city in East Java where Sukarno lived with his parents and where he was eventually buried. Blitar is much wealthier in its Sukarno history than Surabaya; however, there is a sense that as the Sukarno legend is an important part of Blitar’s economy, perhaps some historical facts may be skewed.

Makam Bung Karno (Sukarno’s grave) and the Sukarno museum and library in Blitar receive 150,000 visitors per year, mostly domestic. It is an impressive site; The Great Gate, Mosque and the tomb itself are located in a traditional style Indonesian building. In line with the downplaying of Sukarno in Suharto’s reimagining of Indonesian history, the tomb was fenced off until Suharto’s death to prevent it from becoming a pilgrimage site. Despite that, in the first year alone it is said that over a million people visited. Following Suharto’s death, and particularly after Megawati became president (2001–2004) the site was enhanced and there is now a museum incorporating statues of Sukarno and a significant relief with scenes of Sukarno’s life. Statues, archival photographs and newspaper clippings attest to Sukarno’s early years, his fight for independence and his role as first president. On the day I visited the site was very busy and it was evident in discussions that Sukarno’s reputation has undergone rehabilitation since Suharto’s era and his worthiness as a hero is being established. Despite that, there is still some hesitation in discussing the period of the coup and its aftermath or anything controversial.

I also visited Sukarno’s family home, which houses a small museum. While interesting, I held some strong doubts regarding the authenticity of the historical artefacts, though the genuine love of Sukarno was evident. Reflecting on Sukarno’s words regarding his upbringing here, it was evident that, whether or not the artefacts are genuine, the family home was significant in his life and, for that, it should remain.

At the end of my study tour I visited the Sukarno museum in Denpasar. After Blitar, it had little to offer, though it did have a range of personal memorabilia and family photographs that rounded out the picture of the first president.

Indonesia 1958 to 1999

One of the most alarming, and to an extent distressing, aspects of my study tour was the lack of knowledge in Indonesia of modern Indonesian history and/or any real discussion about significant events amongst the general population. Academicswould discuss controversial aspects of Indonesian history, but most people, while happy to discuss the independence movement, are reluctant to engage in other, perhaps more interesting, areas of historical analysis.

This is explained by the authoritarian nature of Indonesia following the ascent of Suharto from 1965. Indonesia’s New Order period began following the 1965 ‘coup’ and affected civil society for more than 30 years. The impact, in Indonesia, on the history narrative and therefore the understanding of history is significant. One person explained to me that, ‘There was no Old Order till we had a New Order; they created the Old Order. Eventually things were accepted as truth and then became a reality…then eventually no one cares, no one asks questions.’ Another expressed the view that, ‘History since 1965 is like a blank page in a book; we don’t really know what happened and we don’t really ask. Indonesians learnt to not trust and not to ask questions.’

Without exception, everyone I spoke to indicated that, in Indonesia, little is taught about the period between 1949 and the events leading up to 1965 other than some basics about the changes of government and the defeat of the PKI (Communist Party) in 1965. After 1965, Suharto reinvented Indonesian history. Monuments, museums and statues were erected to tell the story of the ‘winner’. Generations of Indonesians were taught one ‘truth’ about their past and dissent was dealt with sharply.

What was disappointing is that since the demise of the Suharto regime this disinformation is still promulgated to the many thousands of school children who visit such sites as the PKI museum and generals statue outside Jakarta on a weekly basis. I did take a day to visit the Museum of Communist Treachery and found to my dismay that the Suharto era’s propaganda continues to present a somewhat simplistic and largely unsubstantiated narrative of the period. Not only is much of the display through the dioramas without context, in many cases much of the information is incorrect and always was. Sadder still, were the busloads of school children being set down and let walk through the museum, largely unsupervised by teachers, to view this twisted view of history.

As Joshua Oppenheimer said, ‘There needs to be a thorough rewriting of the nation’s history, its history curriculum in the schools. They need to close all the museums and monuments that celebrate the genocide, and turn those into exhibits in a much larger network of Indonesian holocaust museums.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Of the 3.7 million yearly visitors to Bali (250,000 Australians), few visit Denpasar, which is a pity as it is home to the Balinese Peoples Struggles Monument and a national museum. While the museum is worthy of only a quick visit – it is dusty and disorganised, the monument is a memorial to the fight for Independence from the early days of rule by the Dutch East Indies and tells a localised version of the struggle as opposed to the national story. Of particular interest was the collection of (copies) of photographs from the puputan (mass ritual suicide in preference to facing the humiliation of surrender) period in 1906, which the curator allowed me to photography. Again dioramas with limited text tell a story that is worthy of greater things.

Reflections

One of my key focuses during my study was how to engage both teachers and students with Indonesian history. Over the time I travelled I held a question that I had been asked in Jogjakarta in the first week constantly in my thoughts: ‘Why would your students be interested? What history do we have in common? The Dutch I can see having an interest, but Australia?’

Towards the end of my tour I was very fortunate in Jakarta to be invited to the launch of Bitter Spice: Indonesia and the Netherlands from 1600, to meet the author Harm Stevens and to be a part of the discussion that followed. From an academic perspective, the developing relationships between the Netherlands and Indonesian scholars is ongoing. Indonesian scholars frequently go to Holland to study. The study of the period of colonisation is being undertaken in both countries and academics I spoke to discussed that it is the negatives of the period that are most frequently understood; however, there were some positives in terms of the Ethical Policy and they would like to get that information across to others.

That conference led me back to the discussion in Jogjakarta, that of shared history, and it reinforced my view that it is our shared history with Indonesia that must be used to engage teachers and students with Indonesian history. We have a shared global history, a shared history of colonialism, world wars, and increasingly we are tied together through political, social and economic links. As well, there is a complex relationship between early Australians and Indonesians through the Makassar trade route and the pearling industry that has shaped history.[[4]](#footnote-4) During and after WWII, Australian troops were laid to rest in Jakarta, Ambon and other areas of Indonesia. Following WWII, Australian troops were part of the allied force in Indonesia, but our shared history also includes trade union and public support for Indonesian independence through the boycotts on Dutch shipping from Australia to Indonesia to participate in the Java War.[[5]](#footnote-5) When the Dutch formally recognised Indonesia in December 1949, Sukarno paid tribute to the Australian labour movement. Over the years after 1949, other issues contribute to create a shared history, more recently the tragedy of East Timor, the Bali Nine and the issue of West Papua. It is by focusing on this shared history that we can better engage teachers and students in Indonesian modern history.

I also came to understand how fortunate we are in our teaching of history in Australia. History itself is controversial in Indonesia; people learned to ‘keep their mouth shut and their eyes open’, so it is no surprise to find out that the teaching of history comes with some warnings. During the Suharto regime, there was only one version of history, that decreed by Suharto himself, complete with propaganda in the form of museums, textbooks and teacher training. In Indonesian schools, the teaching of modern Indonesia history is problematic as teachers mainly have grown up and studied during the reinvented history period and/or are wary of teaching controversial issues. UGM staff discussed how they would be working with 200 teachers in the Jogjakarta area to attempt to assist them with teaching history. Both content and methods are an issue, as many teachers themselves learned by rote and learned little of modern history. We discussed how the narrative of Australian Aboriginal history has changed in the Australian Curriculum and they were very interested in this process.

Conclusion

The opportunity to spend this period of time studying Indonesian history has been significant in developing my understanding of Indonesian modern history and its place in both Indonesia and Australia.

The Stage 6 Modern History syllabus is currently under review. Sukarno has lost his place amongst the reduced personality studies, while National Study–Indonesia has been retained, although a different time period has been chosen. It is still possible to study the Dutch East Indies in Indonesia as a case study in Year 11, and there continues to be an opportunity for school-based case studies to be developed – Indonesia’s’ independence movement, Sukarno’s rise and fall, the coup of 1965 and other aspects of Indonesia history may all fall within that scope. In Stage 5 it is possible to study Indonesia in one in-depth study.

From here, I see it as my role to share experiences and understanding as well as resources to build on the body of knowledge about Indonesian modern history. The thousands of photographs I took are slowly being culled, referenced and annotated. It is my intention to make those available to teachers interested in programming Indonesia. In addition, I intend to develop resources on various aspects of Indonesian history and to be available for speaking to teachers interested in Indonesian history.

1. [Sydney Morning Herald article](http://www.smh.com.au/national/young-aussies-hit-asia-by-the-thousands-to-study-while-unis-slash-asia-jobs-20160617-gpljnl.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Personal research- when starting to teach Modern History National Study –Indonesia and Personality Study-Sukarno no other schools were teaching it in NSW. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joshua Oppenheimer’s maker of the documentary The Act of Killing quoted in article Massacring the truth, Jakarta Post 19/8/13. Article by Phillip Jacobson [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia’s Northern Trading Network, Author: Martínez, Julia; Vickers, Adrian. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.anmm.gov.au/blackarmada [↑](#footnote-ref-5)