

***The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics.* Edited by Tineke Hellwig and Eric Tagliacozzo. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009. Softcover: 465pp.**

The Indonesia Reader offers its audience an overview of the cultural, political and historical transformations which have shaped Indonesia over the last 1,500 years. Unlike conventional academic manuscripts, the volume is a collection of purely primary source documents, namely excerpts from personal documents, government reports, newspaper editorials and the like. As such, the only criterion for judging this book is the dexterity of the authors in selecting and compiling their material. Assessed on this standard, the editors of the *Indonesia Reader* have created a manuscript which should be of interest to a small audience consisting mainly of historians.

Hellwig and Tagliacozzo have arranged their sources in ten chapters. These chapters broadly follow the chronology of Indonesian history, from the earliest recorded writings on stone inscriptions dating from AD400 to the discourses of contemporary times. Within this chronological framework, the editors offer several thematic chapters which explore especially pertinent historical issues.

Chapter One examines Indonesian history from the first millennia to the end of the medieval period. Given the paucity of written material from this era, the editors have relied largely on secondary source analyses from archaeologists and historians. Chapter Two offers a glimpse of Indonesia in the early modern period, roughly spanning the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and the foreign visitors who began arriving on its shores during this period. Chapter Three focuses on the events of the nineteenth century. Titled “Cultures in Collision”, its contents are set against the backdrop of the expanding rule of colonial powers over the archipelago. In this chapter, the editors begin to introduce sources drawn from Indo-Malay perspectives. Due to the nature of the historical record however, western writers and western viewpoints dominate Chapter Three. Chapter Four details foreign traveller’s accounts of Indonesia during colonial times, giving way to Chapter Five, an exposition of the high colonial period. Chapter Six continues the review of colonial rule, examining the final decades of Dutch administration.

The remaining chapters seven to ten, cover the final half of the twentieth century up to the present day. Chapter Seven reviews the violent turmoil of the Japanese occupation followed by the Indonesian revolution. Chapter Eight and Nine run together sources describing

political events of the Old Order (1949–65) and Soeharto's New Order (1965–98). Chapter Ten provides sources which discuss the state of Indonesia in the twenty-first century.

In making my analysis of *The Indonesia Reader*, arguably the aphorism that “one's greatest strength is also one's greatest weakness” is perhaps an apt shorthand description for Hellwig and Tagliacozzo's book. *The Indonesia Reader's* greatest appeal probably lies with scholars of history, who would be drawn to the depth and breadth of the historical accounts contained within. The editors have put a great deal of effort into compiling a diverse, colourful, multi-disciplinary collection of sources stretching far into Indonesia's past. These sources reveal, in engaging detail, much about Indonesian history. Social historians, historians of economics, scholars of feminist histories and historians of the early modern and modern periods would greatly appreciate the material. I thoroughly commend the book to such audiences.

Scholars of the social sciences whose interests lie in the contemporary period however, are likely to be disappointed with Hellwig and Tagliacozzo's book. As a note of caution concerning my own biases, I identify myself with this latter group. *The Indonesia Reader's* extensive coverage of distant history unfortunately comes at the expense of source material from the recent past. A historian could justifiably argue that the full breadth of Indonesia's fifteen centuries deserves to be covered in a book like *The Indonesia Reader*. A social scientist however, would probably consider seven entire chapters devoted to the period from AD500 to 1950 to be an indulgence. With this decision, the editors have left only three chapters to cover the period 1950 to 2009. Even these chapters are arguably not well organized. Chapters Eight and Nine combine material from the Old and the New Order — the sheer dichotomy between these periods should yield to the judgement that such material is best divided into two separate chapters, one on the 1949–65 period, another on the 1966–98 era enabling the differences between these periods to be contrasted.

The material for the final chapter on the twenty-first century could have been better selected. For example, readings have been provided on environmental protection of the Komodo Dragons and the situation of gays and lesbians in contemporary Indonesia. Yet other age defining issues have been avoided or covered poorly. Corruption has emerged as a defining issue in modern Indonesia, yet *The Indonesia Reader* does not address this issue. A new culture of democracy has transformed Indonesia's political and social landscape,

empowering society *vis-à-vis* the state, but no source explores this topic.

In the final analysis, the only criteria to judge *The Indonesia Reader* is on how well its editors have selected their material. Hellwig and Tagliacozzo have achieved partial success. They have collected a rich, engaging and broad array of sources which reveal Indonesia's distant past and this makes *The Indonesia Reader* of immense value to historians of all kinds. Coverage of the contemporary period, however, leaves a lot to be desired.