

SOJOURN Symposium

***Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence.* By Mary Margaret Steedly. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.**

Review essays by Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and Leslie Dwyer, with a response from Mary Margaret Steedly

Keywords: Indonesia, Karo Batak, gender, nationalism, decolonization, violence, narrative, memory, ethnographic history, storytelling practice.

Review Essay I: Benedict Anderson

Mary Steedly’s new book, *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence*, is one of a kind and will continue to be so. The Republic of Indonesia tries to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of Sukarno’s and Hatta’s proclamation of the country’s independence this year, but will have serious difficulties in commemorating the Revolution that followed, ending only in December 1949. The still living persons who directly experienced the Revolution are almost all more than eighty years old. Once they are gone, Indonesians and Indonesianists will have to rely on myths and documents, which rarely provide readers with any frisson. Thus Mary’s work may well be the last on the “living Revolution”.

She came to do anthropology in the highland home of the Karo Bataks in North Sumatra as early as the middle 1980s, when today’s eighty-year-olds were in their fifties. Out of her fieldwork came the wonderful book *Hanging without a Rope: Narrative Experience in Colonial and Post-Colonial Karoland* (1993). But the Revolution was neither colonial nor post-colonial. In the middle 1990s, she did further

extensive fieldwork, focused again on “narrative experience”, which seems to tackle the “missing period”. Here anthropology outdoes history (usually concerned with the dead) and political science (usually focused on politicians, bureaucracies, and generals), by studying living popular memories and myths among local communities.

As early as the first few weeks after the Total Collapse of the Japanese Empire and the surrender of its soldiers, Indonesian newspapers were already describing Indonesia’s coming struggle with the British and above all the Dutch as “our Revolusi”, which had a strong utopian tonality. But the term had a double meaning. Alongside a nationalist Revolution against the foreign colonialists, there was also a populist “social” Revolution against collaborationist bureaucrats, oppressive local monarchies and aristocracies, odious village headmen, spies of the Dutch, sometimes also “traitors” (mostly Christian Indonesians), and of course the much disliked Sino-Indonesian merchants, moneylenders and so on. The most well-known examples of such bloody social revolutions were Atjeh, North Sumatra, North Coast Java, Banten and Surakarta in 1945 and 1946, and the Madiun Uprising in 1948. In the time of Post-Revolutionary Indonesia, 1950–65, foreign and Indonesian historians and political scientists tended to obscure such “social revolutions” in the name of the Nation. It was “we against the foreigners” above all. But with the deepening Cold War, *Revolusi* was increasingly identified by right-wingers, the military, Muslims, etc. as communist. With the vast campaign of slaughter, torture and endless imprisonment against the Communist Party and its allies, along with the rise of the military dictatorship of Soeharto, *Revolusi* more or less “disappeared”, to be replaced by the deceitful “War for Independence” in which only the military were proclaimed as national heroes.

Even today, seventeen years after Soeharto’s fall, *Revolusi* is an emotional term. That Mary titles her book with the flat phrase “Indonesian Independence” shows her caution, though inside the book *Revolusi* (given as “*Repolusi*”) shows up all over the place.

If one looks at the well-known scholarly books about the Revolution one sees at once that ninety-five per cent scarcely

mention any women. Popular books, autobiographies and comic-books written by Indonesians follow this pattern. The signal beauty of Mary's work is that she writes about all kinds of Karo women, whether individuals or groups — without neglecting the Karo males. In 1945, the Karo were still mostly animist, mostly illiterate, mostly patriarchal and often regarded by comparison with other Bataks (Toba, Simelungun, Angkola and Mandailing) as extremely "backward". (But the Karo have the most beautiful buildings and women.) In 1945, the most magical word was certainly *Merdeka*, interpreted variously as independence (of the nation), freedom (from the yoke of feudalism) and liberation (a new egalitarian way to live). Old women tell Mary about the excitement they experienced at the time, when they were still girls and young women with some education, working as teachers, propagandists, nurses, organizers, writers and couriers, free of subjection to fathers, brothers and husbands.

Many young men of their generation were recruited into wild local militias and official military units, all of which were mobile as part of the guerilla strategy used in facing the Dutch. Some young women followed them as nurses, cooks and couriers, and enjoyed the experience. But the immediate outcome of this male recruitment was punishing. The "heroes", when home for relaxation, refused to carry out their village roles as farmers, tillers and harvesters, leaving them to their already overloaded females. Without the "heroes", these latter no longer had effective guards against robbers and gangsters. When heavy Dutch bombing began, many had to move fast with their elderly and small children to distant relatives who rarely sheltered them for more than a day or two because of near-famine conditions. Nothing is more honest and painful than Mary's chapter on what later happened, when large numbers of people in the flat area near Medan fled the warfare for the highland villages of the Karo. As in other parts of Revolutionary Indonesia, scared and paranoid male groups decided that many of these refugees must have been spies for the Dutch, and therefore should be tortured and killed in large numbers. From Mary's many quotations of women's

songs from that period, the reader will feel all the excitement and the deep pain of the singers. Pramoedya Anantara Toer once wrote that in a time of revolution, everyone is “completely swept away”, as if propelled by gigantic floods which no one can resist (Pramoedya 2000, p. 196).

The conversations that Mary had with old women in the mid-1990s, shortly before the end of the dictatorship, show something that one will never find in writings by men — perhaps like giving birth, where great pain leads to a baby and a new life. They recount the misery and brutality that the women endured, but, as they see it, *Merdeka* is still on the horizon. For in the end *Revolusi* changed so much. In Independent Indonesia, women became citizens just like the males. Girls started to be educated en masse. A Karo girl could be the best singer in the whole country. Modern hospitals for pregnant women spread rapidly. Girls could become teachers, businesswomen, pharmacists, and often marry the man they wanted, even if he was not Karo. The debits: a pool of prostitutes far greater than in colonial times, along with plenty of corrupt female operators in the sewage of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presidency. Mary has written a terrific book on Indonesia unlike anything in the past, present and easy future: half grief and half utopian. In an old-fashioned way, I take my hat off to her path-breaking work.

Review Essay II: Leslie Dwyer

Mary Margaret Steedly’s book, *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence*, is — by any measure — an extraordinary accomplishment. An ethnographic history of the Indonesian independence movement from the standpoint of people from the Karo highlands of North Sumatra, the book contributes powerfully to the long ongoing project of decentring dominant narratives of Indonesian nationalism, placing context-driven practices of storytelling, imagination and audiencing at the core of our understanding of anti-colonial transformations. Complicating the heroic and homogenous

tropes that have organized the *ex post facto* memorialization of the Indonesian independence struggle, Steedly's interlocutors detail the winding and often ambiguous routes by which Karo women and men, living on the "outskirts" (p. 1) of an emergent nation, came to understand their place in an envisioned post-colonial polity. They also make clear the localizing practices that they used to encompass "Indonesia" within intimate spheres of home, kin, community and moral self-making.

Drawing upon a diverse range of materials, including oral histories, documents, testimonials, memoirs, photographs and songs (including the song that gives the book its title), Steedly weaves a rich and compelling history that extends our understanding of this crucial time in Indonesia. In the process, she upends many of the conventions of Indonesian historiography. This is not just a story of the past, but of the storying practices that give history its force and meaning. Deeply attentive to the circumstances of telling, retelling and in some cases, silencing in which tales of war and nation and the subjectivities of their narrators emerge, Steedly's volume offers incisive theoretical contributions to studies of narrativity, memory and the violence that haunts nationalist imaginaries. The book also offers a lyrical and profound meditation on the doing of ethnography itself. A sharply reflexive sensibility, honed by long-term field engagements with Karo communities, provides Steedly with insight into what she calls the pleasures of ethnography, including its production of granular detail and plausibility. It also attunes her to its risks, including the danger of being seduced into a foreclosed facticity that fails to account for multiple storylines, some of which fail to circulate socially. Steedly leaves the fragments of Karo visions and memories visible in her text, arguing for the need to "retain a sense of puzzlement, to use it as a guide in tracking both the unaccounted-for events of the independence struggle and the memories and stories that have been produced around them" (p. 25).

While there is much to be said about Steedly's many and diverse theoretical contributions, here I am most interested in one trajectory that Steedly maps through the narrative thickets of

Indonesian nationalism — that of gender. Over the past decade, driven by multiple imperatives — including a need to consider new civilian-targeting patterns in war and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the landmark call for the integration of women’s participation into all aspects of conflict and post-conflict programming — gender has become an increasingly central focus of scholarship and practice in conflict and post-conflict settings. Empirical evidence of the effects of conflict on women’s bodies and lives has resoundingly challenged assumptions that war is the natural province of male combatants, or that conflicts and their transformation take place in a public political sphere inhabited primarily by men. Analytic approaches that link militarization to gendered inequalities, cultural narratives of gendered personhood, and the struggles of women and men in their everyday social worlds have only reinforced that challenge. With conflict viewed through a gendered lens, a recognition of women’s important roles in articulating strategies for cultural transformation and in remaking social and material worlds during and after war has undermined stereotypes of passive, feminine victims of violence. From an acknowledgment of the particular harms done to women to a recognition of women’s agency in the work of social repair and reimagining, gendered perspectives have enriched our understanding of the complex contours of violent conflict and post-conflict social life.

Much of this work has emerged at the intersection of theory and practice, a circumstance injecting it with the energy of what Pierre Bourdieu called “a scholarship with commitment” (2000). It has provided an essential corrective to post-conflict projects that exclude women from negotiations, narrowly define war crimes and the bases for criminal justice and reparations, or assume that “reconstruction” means restoring the status quo antebellum rather than questioning how gendered matrices of injustice give form and force to conflict. At the same time, much of the analysis that has been offered in support of such commitments has been additive, focused on expanding our breadth of focus to include women, rather than asking how a gendered perspective might transform the basic

assumptions that undergird interventions into conflict. This focus on the inclusion of women, rather than on the transformation of our understandings of conflict, has narrowed opportunities for leveraging the critical potential of women's voices when, for example, they question the liberatory promise of truth-telling mechanisms, ask whose definitions of "culture" prevail in programming designed to be "culturally sensitive", seek justice in the reordering of community relationships rather than through formal judicial means, or draw links between resurgent violent conflict and unaddressed structural violence and socio-economic inequality. Translated into practice, this limited focus on inclusion has often meant recruiting women for participation in programmes that, while overtly eschewing a generic male subject, nevertheless fail seriously to consider how reconciliation, community repair or reparations for past harms might look substantially different, were they designed in deeper dialogue with the complex realities of local women's lives.

Steadly's book, while not explicitly directed towards addressing these contemporary policy issues, nevertheless poses important challenges to prevalent assumptions about gender and conflict. While *Rifle Reports* adds substantially to our knowledge of the experiences of women during the Indonesian independence struggle — and in so doing highlights the hegemonic qualities of Indonesian nationalist discourses that sideline women's narratives — it goes far beyond any simple accounting of gendered difference or women's marginalization during wartime. To be sure, Karo women and men often saw themselves taking on distinct roles in the nationalist movement, with women frequently tasked with supporting male frontline fighters as cooks, nurses and caretakers of home and fields. However, Karo women did not express such experiences to Steedly as reflective of either discrimination or "tradition". Rather, as Steedly points out, during the era of "Independence",

Karo did not associate women with traditional values in need of protection from the influences of a foreign modernity, for the simple reason that in the 1940s they did not see tradition and modernity as antithetical conditions. Nor did they associate

traditional values with the domestic sphere. Upholding customary lifeways and preserving an essential Karo identity were not thought of as responsibilities for women. These were understood to be located in the wide network of kin relations constructed and performed through public rituals, customary negotiations, and formal oratory — in other words, in the male-identified world of kinship and politics. Nor was the gender of the agents of national modernity clearly marked. If women were naturally atavistic and socially conservative — or soft and inexperienced — then special efforts of education and indoctrination were needed in order to bring them, too, into the state of national modernity. (pp. 175–76)

For many Karo women, wartime was also a moment when they began to taste new and “delicious” freedoms like travel and education, and to feel themselves called to join a broad struggle that extended the boundaries of the known and silhouetted everyday routines in the light of the extraordinary. Young women who joined the elite Srikandi Corps were trained in military and political skills, ranging from first aid to cleaning and shooting guns to fluency in the novel, exciting language of nationalist propaganda. They, along with other nationalist women, travelled throughout North Sumatra and beyond, sharing their fresh knowledge and engaging in political speech-making. Yet the story that Steedly tells is not a simple, easily recognizable one of women’s participation and agency. Gender was also central to the way in which Karo highlanders narrated the nation into compelling form, and later, to their enjoyment in detailing this past. While romantic genres of nationalist heroism and progress — genres that placed individual male revolutionaries at the centre of the action — dominated public discourse, many Karo women, as well as men, saw in women’s diligent labours on behalf of an emergent Indonesia another persuasive narrative. Women’s experiences, Steedly suggests, underwrote a “counterhistory that shifts the moral balance toward a sacrificial model of citizenship and sociality grounded in domestic values” (p. 51) — an alternate vision that later could be mined for a critique of the failures of Soeharto’s corrupt New Order regime to live up to the promise of revolution.

These kinds of moral tales became crucial to gendered processes of shaping nationalist subjectivities. In distinction to the narratives told by men, the stories told by Karo women did not hinge on a trajectory of personal and national development and agency. They drew instead on “parables of community” (p. 167) and idioms of women’s shared diligence, responsibility and even exhaustion on behalf of the emergent nation. As Steedly acknowledges, for a reader attuned to listening for signs of women’s resistance and empowerment, these Karo women’s narratives may read as “flat”, but for their narrators themselves they were anything but. Many Karo women’s memories were saturated with a feeling of having been *meliar* — an “eagerness” that Steedly describes as evoking an “edgy adolescent sensibility” (p. 167). At the same time, these memories inflected nationalism itself with moral valence and embedded it in a gendered valuation of home and generosity. Here Steedly complicates the very idea of nation-making, by highlighting the gendered discourses through which Karo came to view themselves part of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) of Indonesia. She notes, “most often it is assumed that an educated (and mostly male) elite has already done the initial work of imagining for the community as a whole” (p. 117). Steedly identifies a very different kind of imaginative process, “a historical process of subject formation through specific, repeated, sometimes contested, and always mutable patterns of gendered action” (p. 173), in which Karo women and men folded the nation back into everyday practices of ethical self- and community-making.

By refusing to write history as a foreclosed linear movement from colonialism to independence, tradition to modernity or oppression to liberation, Steedly offers a text that also provokes curiosity about the ongoing circulation of these stories. What happened to the “eager girls” (Chapter Four) of independence who invested the new idea of a nation with familiar moral narratives of sacrifice and diligence while dreaming it out to encompass both kin and strangers? Over the long years between independence and the time of Steedly’s fieldwork, how and where did their memories move? What did the daughters

and sons and grandchildren of this first generation of “Indonesian women” make of these tales? Neither Steedly’s interlocutors nor Steedly herself craft classic fables of “women’s empowerment” in which the “capacity” of naive young women develops into an ability to act decisively for their own benefit. Indeed, Steedly challenges the applicability of such common tropes to Karo women, who eschewed precisely this kind of self-authoring storyline. But did these women’s experiences during wartime alter the gendered dynamics of their lives and communities over the years that followed? As Steedly notes, Soeharto’s New Order regime worked an extraordinary sleight of hand in recoding Indonesian women as “traditional”, subjecting them to a coercive regime of gendered constraint. The images that Steedly’s interlocutors offer — of young women draped in the camouflage of passion fruit vines, crawling through the underbrush on skinned hands and knees, clad only in their sarongs; of a young wife burying guns in her rice field when her husband did not know how to swing a hoe; of a mother’s lament for the child that she lost to the demands of the struggle — stand in stark contrast to the romantic portrayals of male heroism and female domesticity sunk deep into Indonesian public culture. These gendered disruptions, and the pleasures of questioning that they provoke, are yet another gift that Steedly offers to her readers.

Author’s Response: Mary Margaret Steedly

One of the greatest pleasures for an author is to find readers who appreciate not only the content of one’s writing, but also the intention behind it. How doubly pleasurable it is, then, when those readers are themselves such admirable scholars as Benedict Anderson and Leslie Dwyer. I thus come to this response with humility and regard for their thoughtful consideration of *Rifle Reports*.

Ben Anderson ends his review of *Rifle Reports* by describing the book as “half grief and half utopian”. I couldn’t have said it better. From the beginning of my acquaintance with Karoland — a

highland district in North Sumatra province — and its people in the early 1980s, I was struck by the relentless enthusiasm and pride with which older women and men recounted their wartime experiences in the “independence struggle” of 1945–50. Yet, outside Karoland and its diasporic urban satellites, these events were virtually unknown and unregarded. Instead, a national narrative of disciplined military action and individual bravery, focused on a series of heroic (male) figures and iconic (Javanese) battles, covered the mythical ground of national origins.

Rifle Reports began with the idea that there was something important — and, to their narrators, profoundly meaningful — in these stories of independence told by Karo women and men. They were, of course, staking a claim to full membership in a national community, wherein contributions to the cause of independence were the benchmark of collective national belonging. Beyond that, however, it seemed to me that these stories offered a ground for rethinking what such a community might be and how its members might have come to recognize themselves as such. In 1993, with the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of Indonesian national independence approaching and with the recognition that “human archives” may last no longer than a lifetime, I began recording these stories of independence from the nation’s outskirts.

As much as *Rifle Reports* aspires to be a localized history of Indonesian nationalism, it is also an inquiry into the work of storytelling as memory practice. I describe it as an “ethnographic history”, by which I mean an account that emerges from direct engagement between the ethnographer and her subjects, one thoroughly entrenched in and attentive to Karo views and understandings, and aware of the subtle and shifting micropolitics of such encounters, including its mistakes, failures and missed opportunities. Ethnographic history embeds narrative experience in a complex temporal field which is not simply the “then” of the story and the “now” of the telling. It recognizes all the cumulative reworkings that narrative experience has undergone in between, through the array of audiences to which it has been presented and the broader storied field that

it has occupied and may occupy in the future. Over time, stories are polished and revised or sometimes misplaced; they may be reinterpreted in the light of subsequent events, suppressed by the personal or political demands of the moment, redacted into acceptable form in accordance with official discourses of the state and its ideological apparatuses. In the interviews that my research assistants and I conducted there were silences and refusals as profound as the exaggerations and overstatements that no doubt turned “what was” into what would support a memorable story. These are not, in other words, unadulterated, truth-speaking “voices” but rather narratives deeply implicated in the various workings of power and the subtle mechanics of remembrance.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the word “revolution” and the acts to which this term refers. Ben Anderson points to a terminological conundrum: in Western academic writing — and indeed in early political writing by Indonesian nationalists, Sukarno included — “revolution” (or, in Indonesian, *revolusi*) is the term commonly used to name the Indonesian fight for independence from Dutch colonial rule. As a result of its overtly political (and primarily leftist) connotations, the term fell into disfavour under Soeharto’s New Order regime. It was replaced by a bland and sanitized version of “struggle” (*perjuangan*), which celebrated the army as the nation’s defenders and relegated the rest of the civilian population to the secondary role of passive supporters of the military’s heroic action. Popular “youth” militias, unless they had been absorbed into the formal structures of the military chain of command, were regarded as undisciplined troublemakers at best, and bandit bands or political terrorists at worst, responsible for a range of violent attacks on civilians as well as on other nationalist fighting forces. *Revolusi* has come to signify these latter actions.

In our first interviews with Karo veterans of the independence struggle, my research assistants and I followed common academic practice by using the term “revolution” to cover the entire wartime period. We soon realized that for our informants the term meant something different. *Revolusi*, they said, “was just about people

hating each other” (p. 60). It was an almost preternatural force that could “step forward” at any time and then recede, to reappear later, perhaps in a different form. *Revolusi* covered a diverse range of actions in which, as one woman put it, “we were our own enemies” (p. 152). These actions included such forms of internal violence as brawls between rival militias and army units; opportunistic theft and brigandry; organized assaults on lowland refugees, Malay royalists and pro-Dutch sympathizers, including rape and robbery; the lynching of those who had collaborated with the Japanese and imagined “spies”; localized ethnic wars; personal vendettas; violent attacks on resource hoarders, Chinese shopkeepers, wealthy villagers or urban outsiders; and the assassination of political adversaries.

Such a Manichean distinction, which was reinforced if not created during the period of New Order rule, allowed the “struggle” to assert an apolitical purity while it demonized virtually any form of political dissent or popular action as a dangerous and uncontrolled force. *Revolusi*, in this generalized sense, figured as a retroactive precursor of all subsequent betrayals and disruptions of order, and as a harsh justification of the state’s capacity — and willingness — brutally to crush any perceived form of popular opposition to existing forms of power.

Despite these disturbing New Order resonances, I chose to retain my informants’ distinction between *perjuangan* and *revolusi*. This was a matter not of “caution” on my part but rather of following local usage, as is standard anthropological practice. It permitted me to stay true to my informants’ reckoning of events even while marking the hard semantic and conceptual work that went into sustaining this (fictive) separation between the acceptable, patriotic, unifying struggle for independence, and the divisive, dangerous and undisciplined forces of revolution. I have thus also tried to peel back the screen of struggle to show its Janus face, which my informants called “revolution”.

These political considerations aside, I also liked the way that the idiom of “struggle” could support a broad, inclusive sense of participatory agency, encompassing the range of ancillary activities

that characterized the efforts of women: collecting not-always-voluntary donations of food and funds, feeding soldiers and militia volunteers, carrying meals and messages to guerrillas hiding on the mountainsides while avoiding (or tricking) Dutch patrols, caring for the wounded and burying the dead, taking part in rallies and training programmes. “Struggle” creates a conceptual space wherein a “faithful companion” or an “eager” (unruly) girl could lay claim to national belonging.

As Dwyer points out, a gendered analysis does not simply mean the addition of “women’s experiences” to an already existing discursive framework. Rather, it calls for an examination of the gendered underpinnings of the framework itself. In nationalist Karoland, these included such matters as the incitement to romantic desire expressed in patriotic love songs, the scheduling of indoctrination meetings and training programmes to fit the work-time of village women, the differential educational trajectories available to boys and girls under Dutch and Japanese rule, the customary expectations that limited the possibilities of education and mobility for Karo women, Karo (and Indonesian) assumptions about male and female nature, the division of labour in Karo society, patterns of kinship and inheritance, and the organization of space to accommodate all of these things.

One of the ways in which state power in Karoland retroactively intersected with gendered agency was through the veterans’ pension application system. In the 1990s, veterans of the independence struggle, including women, were allowed to apply for pensions on the basis of military service. They were required to prove their service, if not by formal documentation, then by oral testimony which emphasized confirmable facts: dates and places of service, military units served in, battles taken part in, names of fellow fighters, etc. Many men started our conversations with exactly this kind of sequenced record of verifiable service. But notice the gendering of such a record’s assumptions: it offers an evidentiary model that fits well enough with men’s experience of mobility and mobilization, but virtually not at all with the shared, repetitive nature of women’s activities. As Dwyer notes, this kind of implicit gendering of agency

is still pervasive in post-conflict truth and reconciliation efforts, which frequently provide only two conceptual slots for women to inhabit: either the “woman warrior” whose experience mirrors that of male combatants, or the suffering victim of male violence. There is little room in these frameworks for a female agency — or any other kind, for that matter — that differs from the unmarked but decidedly masculine standard.

Can a work like *Rifle Reports* offer a corrective or supplement to post-conflict efforts towards public “truth-telling” and reparation? In a direct sense, I believe not. This book is all about nuance and uncertainty, and that is not a style that fares well in judicial settings. As in the Karo pension interviews, what is most crucially at stake in these settings is the evidentiary status of testimony. Nevertheless, if I were given one wish for how *Rifle Reports* might contribute to this important work, it would be to urge greater attention to narrativity, context and dialogic engagement of narrator and audience — in other words, to learning to listen with care and openness to the stories that others *want* to tell, not just to the ones that we want them to tell us.

Rifle Reports is based on interviews conducted during the waning years — though we did not know it at the time — of the Soeharto regime. In 1998, the New Order came to an abrupt end, followed by an aspirational period of “*reformasi*”, decentralization and neoliberal adjustment. During the decade following Soeharto’s fall from power, the overt power of the military declined, government censorship relaxed (though other forms of media control did not), and the digital media footprint expanded dramatically. Regional and sectarian conflicts, religious disputes and separatist movements have fractured the polity. Indonesia has experienced a horrific series of natural disasters. Some of these, like the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, drew global attention and a great deal of humanitarian aid. Others, like the volcanic eruption of Mt Sinabung in the Karo heartland in 2014, did not. Nearly two years after Sinabung’s recent spate of violent eruptions began, many villages at the mountain’s foot,

including my adopted family's home, Berastepu, remain deserted, their inhabitants having once again been forced to evacuate but this time without much hope of a possible return.

In the twenty years since I began this project, many of the women and men with whom I spoke have passed away. In their lifetimes, a few — mostly well-educated people of relatively elite status — were able to parlay their wartime experiences into prominent social or professional positions. Most of the rest remained just about where they were before, imagining the “deliciousness” of independence for their children and grandchildren. This year there have been two seminars on Karo participation in the independence struggle, one sponsored by family members of high-ranking Karo officials and entrepreneurs in Jakarta, and the other, which focused specifically on “women heroes”, by a younger generation of activists in Karoland. Other issues are perhaps more pressing today — not only the plight of evacuees from the Sinabung eruptions, but also the ecological degradation of the highlands due to unconstrained logging and agribusiness as well as the continuing volcanic ashfall. Though this is probably not the most important question to ask at the present moment, one wonders how these events might affect Karo efforts to recall the time of “Independence”, when the nation was still a delicious, open possibility.

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