

BOOK REVIEW

***Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia.* By Benedict R. O’G. Anderson.** Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1990. 305 pp.

This volume consists of eight of Benedict R. O’G. Anderson’s most influential essays written over a period of two decades. Most of the essays have been published previously, some as early as 1966. In this absorbing book, Anderson explores the cultural and political incongruity that has arisen as a consequence of two critical facts in Indonesian history. While the Indonesian nation is still in its embryonic phase, the Indonesian state is ancient, originating in the early seventeenth-century Dutch conquests; and contemporary politics is conducted in a new language, Bahasa Indonesia, by a population (especially the Javanese) whose cultures are rooted in medieval times.

Most of the essays address aspects of Javanese political culture from the early nineteenth century (when the Javanese did not have words for politics, colonialism, society, or class) through the early nationalism of the 1900s, to the era of independence after World War II (when deep internal tensions exploded into large-scale unrest).

Almost every page of this book deals with wayang. Using wayang, Anderson “describe[s] the picture of social and political life seen through traditional Javanese lenses” (p. 18), and analyses the relationship between cultural background and socio-political behaviour. His scholarship is enhanced considerably by the use of arguments to disprove the view that Indonesian political and historical ideas are adopted from the West.

Anderson presumably also assumes that traditional Javanese culture

possesses historical and political notions. Unfortunately, due to lack of strong primary sources pertaining to this field of study, the author only refers to Ranggawarsita's *parandéné* for pre-modern political ideas and to Dr Soetomo's *mulia* for more contemporary approaches. In short, then, Anderson wants to demonstrate that Javanese expressions such as *mirong kampuh jingga*; *ambeguguk ngutha wanton*; *ambondhan tanpa ratu* (the three phrases, each expressing opposition or revolt, are generally combined into one sentence in *wayang*, *ketoprak* or *ludruk* performances) were not only in force on the *ketoprak* stage or the *wayang* screen but were also manifested in Javanese political society.

Anderson argues that the early *ngoko-krama* antithesis — *ngoko* being the popular language of the Javanese, whereas *krama* was the language used to address people of higher rank — was created by the Javanese ruling class, which was “feudalized” and “fossilized” by Dutch colonialism. The process of “*kramanization*” was merely caused by “the sunans and sultans (having) become *levende wayangpoppen* (living *wayang* puppets), and therefore “ever greater pomp was displayed by the ruling class to conceal the reality of increasing impotence” (p. 201). This trend even led to the birth of “*krama inggil*” (high *krama*), the use of which was more refined and practised in court circles.

Similarly, Anderson calls the growing social distance between the people and the new social and political élites a “*kramanization*” of the official Indonesian language (p. 145). Anderson's new *krama* has again been “renovated” by the new, military-dominated ruling class to become the new order of “*krama inggil*”, which Anderson says is cultivated and spread by the official institutions in Jakarta, furnishing official Indonesian (Anderson's new *krama*) with archaic expressions and new creations, especially in the form of abbreviations such as *ipoleksosbudhankam*, a term used frequently by the armed forces to symbolize the multidimensional nature of national security. (The term is derived from *ideologi* [ideology], *politik* [politics], *ekonomi* [economy], *sosial* [social], *budaya* [culture] and *hankam* [*pertahanan dan keamanan* or defence and security]). It also revived some old Javanese and Sanskrit fossils, such as *bina graha* (the term is used to signify “presidential office” in the New Order period), a most confused compound word, both in its elements and its structure. It is possible to conclude that this *krama inggil* may be intended to give additional *wahyu* (the divine radiance that passed from the disintegrating power of one kingdom to the founder of its successor) to power (compare with Anderson's analysis in pages 22–23).

On the question of the Javanese concept of power, the book's first section deals with interesting problems on the borderline between history, sociology and political science. Particularly in the first chapter, Anderson

tries to show that many aspects of Indonesian political life since 1949, the year in which the Indonesian Republic was recognized as a sovereign state, can be understood in terms of a concept of power derived from Javanese tradition. The author contrasts the Javanese idea of power with the contemporary Western concept of power (p. 21 ff). One of his points is that "traditional literature deals with the problems of concentrating and preserving Power, rather than with its proper uses". The author, however, makes the questionable assertion that the basic elements of the Javanese power tradition were discernible during the Soekarno regime. There are also doubts about Anderson's assumption that the Javanese concept of power "does not raise the question of legitimacy". Supernatural forces provide a person with *kasekten* — but they may equally withdraw legitimacy. In the case of Soekarno, the volcanic eruption of Gunung Agung in 1963 was viewed by quite a few Indonesians as a sign that he, as a result of the deficient management of government affairs, had lost what the Chinese call "The Mandate of Heaven".

The author rightly argues that Soekarno, in the course of his tenure as President, gradually expanded his personal power. However, it must be stressed that Soekarno was not interested in accumulating power for its own sake. In the third chapter, entitled "Old State, New Society", the author explains that Soekarno was forced to assume the presidential powers granted to him by the Constitution of 1945 because the Constituent Assembly had failed by 1959 to fulfil its task, and because of armed insurrections in the Outer Islands which were supported by the West. One of Soekarno's first steps after the inauguration of the policy of "Guided Democracy" was the promulgation in 1959/60 of laws on share-cropping and on land reform which, though "rather mild" (pp. 108–9), showed his concern for the *petani* (farmers). Under his regime, it was possible for peasant unions, trade unions and women's organizations to operate fairly freely. Moreover, his Balinese mother had exposed him to more than a purely Javanese tradition. On a lecture tour through eastern Indonesia in 1956 to promote *Pancasila* instead of an Islamic State as a basis for the debates in the Constituent Assembly, an accompanying journalist observed how Soekarno quoted the Qur'an in Makassar, the Bible in Ambon and the *Bhagavad Gita* in Denpasar! On the other hand, the manner in which President Soeharto set about accumulating power was much closer to the traditional Javanese concept of power, indifferent as it is to "questions of good and evil".

As Indonesia begins to wrestle with questions pertaining to succession, what hope is there for a Western-style democracy emerging in Indonesia when the Soeharto era concludes? A study of Javanese power may prove illuminating in this context. The Javanese have always regarded power

strictly as a quality possessed by sacred kings, feudal lords and princes, repressive foreign administrators and authoritarian high-ranking officials. Power was translated into arbitrary orders or instructions, which flowed downwards from the top. The Javanese learned to accept the belief that the source of power possessed by such extraordinary, foreign or high-ranking individuals was hereditary, a divine appointment, or some other incomprehensible, mysterious historical condition or event, which they had come to accept as fate.

In the words of an eminent scholar of Javanese culture, Koentjaraningrat, "legitimation of power by means of democratic election is . . . irrelevant for traditionally oriented Javanese". According to them, power is an ascribed quality which is obtained through inheritance or divine favour. Consequently, the quest for power does not necessitate efforts to gain public support and approval, while the pursuit of popularity through public appearances and so on comes to constitute a hindrance rather than a useful means towards the acquisition of power. According to Koentjaraningrat, "in traditional Javanese societies the power of a leader is enhanced by keeping aloof from the people, by remaining distant and hidden from view, or through the mere fact of being a foreigner. However, the image of a just and righteous, immensely wise, and exceptionally generous king, leader or high-ranking administrator requires a constant effort of preservation and intensification by means of the appropriate ceremonial acts and rites, wherein material objects, incantations, and acts symbolizing the qualities of power and authority play a key role". Do these physical attributes of power and authority give us some idea of the type of individual who will ascend the office of the President? Perhaps closer to 1998 we might be able to speculate better. However, one thing is for sure: it will be a brave analyst who attempts to discount the importance of Javanese culture and its ability to help us elucidate the complexities of Indonesian politics when 1998 arrives.

Anderson's *Language and Power* is, hence, indispensable for anyone concerned with the interplay among language, culture, and politics. By analysing a spectrum of examples from classical poetry to public monuments and cartoons, Anderson deepens our understanding of the interaction between modern and traditional notions of power, the mediation of power by language, and the development of national consciousness.

LEONARD C. SEBASTIAN
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies