

BOOK REVIEWS

Niels Mulder, *Mysticism and Everyday Life in Contemporary Java: Cultural Persistence and Change*. Singapore University Press (Issued under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 1978. Pp. xix + 150 pp., Paper S\$12.00.

In his introduction to this penetrating study, Niels Mulder says he has discarded previous ways of explaining Indonesian politics, notably those focusing on the *aliran* as “streams” of religious-political orientation, organized and expressed by political parties. He has done so for two main reasons. First of all, the *aliran* pattern has been considerably weakened by the greatly diminished role of political parties over the last two decades. This is patently correct. But Mulder’s second reason, which even to a non-specialist on Indonesia seems debatable, is that the shared “Javaneness” of these orientations is so much more significant than the “interesting differences” between, for example, the syncretist *abangan* and the devout Muslim *santri*. (At least one recent study, Donald Emmerson’s *Indonesia’s Elite*, suggests that the effect of political and economic change since independence has been to exacerbate, and not diminish, these differences; and that polarization ensues, under conditions of stress, between the repressive political tendencies of *abangan* or secular military leaders on the one hand, and the pursuit of sectarian ends by Islamic leaders on the other).

To continue Mulder’s argument, it is *kebatinen* mysticism which most perfectly expresses the Javanese world view. Hence the title of this book, which contrasts with its companion piece on Thailand (Bangkok, 1979) in that the latter simply refers to “everyday life”. (This title, in both cases, is perhaps unfortunate. Mulder is concerned, above all, with *cultural* perspectives—the values and expectations that guide people’s “everyday” behaviour and give meaning to their experiences—rather than “everyday life” itself, as an object of empirical analysis, which the phrase connotes).

Three things strike me about Mulder’s extremely interesting and sympathetic presentation of the Javanese world view, and its implications for present-day society. The first is the comprehensiveness, though not (*pace* Mulder) the internal consistency, of the Javanese world view. Taken on its own terms, however, each concept fits harmoniously into the overall

“whole”, just as man relates to the cosmos. The second thing is the paradox that conformity with traditional values contributes to a situation—“modern times”—which in important respects *negates* those values (I will discuss this below.) Thirdly, because of the all-embracing nature of the Javanese world view, and its hierarchical presumption, even the “negative” aspects of modern conditions and behaviour can be *explained*—or explained away—and an appropriate response prescribed. Thus for those who suffer hardship, their lot in life is to endure the “crazy times” with resignation, for there is nothing they can do about it, until the cosmic revolution bringing justice and prosperity puts all things right again.

The paradox, referred to above, lies in this. The very comprehensiveness, refinement, and elaborate symbolism of the Javanese world view, those qualities which give it both its intellectual and emotional appeal, cannot but sustain not so much the ideal as the *existing* social order, structured as it is according to power, wealth, and status. This sanctioning function derives from the basic distinction between man’s inner (spiritual) essence and outer (material) body, the former linking man to the cosmic order, and the latter to the degrading world of passion and self-interest. It follows that man must detach himself from the fetters of the material world if he is to attain spiritual perfection; and that, according to their material-ness or spirituality, individuals can be ranked at various stages of their progress or descent. As Mulder puts it (p. 16):

The order of life and cosmos is seen as a spiritual hierarchy that runs from the lowliest animals and material *kasar* [coarse or rough] conditions, through the social hierarchy, into the realms of invisible forces and up to the highest realm of truth and cosmic essence (the *halus* [smooth or refined] conditions). The worldly powerful and the nobility are literally seen to be more *halus*, that is, closer to the truth and in a more favourable position to communicate with the forces of the cosmos than the lowly *kasar* man, who depends on his relationship with the earth for his living.

Thus the *halus* noble is, and cannot but be, more “spiritual” than the toiling *kasar* peasant. Yet if the noble gives himself over to degrading pursuits and base ambitions, as a result of passion and self-interest (*pamrih*), does he not thereby betray his *halus* status? Yet, in the conditions of modern times, this is precisely what happens. The present military-bureaucratic elite is well known for its attachment to wealth, corruption, and material interests. How then can the Javanese world view reconcile the glaring contradiction of *halus* turned *kasar*, the contra between what should be and what is?

Now Mulder is perfectly aware of this contrast. He notes, for example, the changes brought about by the nation-wide expansion of “hierarchy” (power and privilege) at the expense of *rukun* (the harmonious and peaceful unity of the group): “Communal strife, class formation and class struggle,

geographical and social mobility, political awareness, and religious cleavages have tended to break up the [erstwhile] solidarity . . .” (p. 69). Above all in the countryside, where the great majority of Javanese live, “*rukun* relationships are threatened by increasing poverty and maldistribution of economic resources. . . . The very unfavourable ratio of population to resources means that in many villages, people are simply becoming too poor to effectively help each other. . . . [Conversely] the village elites who are in command of resources profit disproportionately from the programmes of development and the increasingly capitalist mode of production.” Both result in polarization between haves and have-nots and “a breakdown of mutual assistance and patronage relationships” (pp. 76–78).

Faced with this situation, three responses are possible from the victims, according to traditional Javanese values. The first is one of fatalistic resignation or passive endurance, as mentioned above, tempered by hope (expectation?) of a cosmic reversal of fortune. The second, more positively oriented than the first, is to accept one’s allotted place in the social hierarchy, “not emphasizing personal initiative or responsibility, but the faithful acceptance of one’s task and duty . . . according to the law of *karma*, the law of ‘God’ and the law of men” (p. 37). The third response, if more positive than the second but (to Western eyes) less efficacious, is to manipulate the environment by magical means: “Their hopes may centre on a Ratu Adil, a just king to come. Their way of getting their wishes granted lies in the realm of supernatural where they seek protection. Their means are praying, fasting, offering, vows, the lottery, and right insight into the workings of the cosmos: they practise ritual and magic.” (p. 63)

All three responses can find a place or a justification within the all-embracing Javanese world view. But none provides an answer to the basic question: Given the crucial distinction between the “spiritual” and the “material”, what happens when the supposedly spiritual leaders of society are swallowed up in a materialist morass? One answer is suggested in the reformulation of the question: How can a thorough-going transformation of Javanese politics and society take place, which will restore the congruity between values and environment? Alternatively: Is it better to produce a change of mentality first, since it is traditional ideas that are bolstering an inequitable system?

A scholar who shares the same concern as Mulder, Benedict Anderson, refers in his “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture” to reformist Islam and the modernizers in Suharto’s “New Order” as two potential sources of change; but he believes that neither of them understands the nature of the “adversary” (Javanese cultural values) or has a persuasive, coherent alternative to offer, apart from abusing the “old mentality”. One could argue from a different perspective, Anderson goes on, that it is better to adapt

transformation to tradition in the Sukarno style; that is, using traditional ideas to mobilize people. But Sukarno failed. His Guided Democracy was Power-full (in the symbolic sense), but was not a powerful state in terms of an organization capable of planning and effectively carrying out change.

Niels Mulder, in his concluding pages, suggests a way out. He explains that “while these elite conceptions fit the old framework of thinking, they overlook an essential area that remains out of most discussions, namely, the relationship of society to its material environment”. When culture is no longer concerned with the fate of the common man and his struggle for survival, then new ways of thinking are needed. These, Mulder proposes, may spring either from Western historical materialism or from the sinicized cultures of East Asia, which emphasize material development irrespective of political system, and (unlike Indianized cultures) are characterized by a high degree of social discipline.

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