

*Dissociated Identities: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in an Indonesian Society.* By Rita Smith Kipp. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. Pp. ix, 304. Maps, photographs, glossary and abbreviations, references, index.

This twelve-chapter book by Rita Smith Kipp is a well-written account of a Batak sub-ethnic group, the Karo, whose heartland is the area between Lake Toba and the city of Medan in the North Sumatran province of Indonesia. The author spent two years of intensive field-work, with two intervals of several years, in the heartland during which she befriended Karo individuals from various social strata and groups. However, her field-work is not limited to this site alone. She has also visited other Indonesian cities where many Karo live, namely, Medan, Jakarta, Bandung, and conducted in-depth interviews as well as participant observations. By combining anthropological field-work with several months of archival research in the Netherlands, the author has managed to write an ethnographical account portraying the dynamism of identity formation among the Karo today.

To depict the changing Karo identity, Kipp starts from the view that identity formation is an ongoing process stretching from a past into a future which, in the context of modern states today, is greatly influenced and shaped by state policies. Among the Karo, the process of identity formation is largely determined, as Kipp attempts to show, by Indonesia's policies on ethnicity, religion, and class, as well as by the shifting power relations within Karo society. To give the readers a sense of context within which the process had taken and is taking place, Kipp provides us with an historical overview of the changing power relations involving the Karo from the colonial period up to the present. She succeeds admirably.

Kipp argues that through time some important aspects of Karo identities have separated from each other, resulting in the compartmentalization of these identities. To support this argument, she provides an emic view of how the Karo define themselves. Kinship, Kipp maintains, is a fundamental element in the definition of Karo identity. The Karo see their society as based upon "an imagined kinship order", which is

still hegemonic in Karo highland villages today. Here, membership of the five great patrilineal Karo clans (Merga Si Lima) and the asymmetrical marital exchanges between them form the ideological framework through which Karo view their relations with each other as “metaphoric kin relations”, rather than as strictly genealogical and biological relationships. It is from this very familial order that Karo ethnic solidarity gets much of its emotional power. It also provides a clear boundary between an outsider and an insider, a Karo and a non-Karo.

In the pre-colonial period, Kipp believes that Karo identity was less dissociated than the present. Ethnic and religious identity then was viewed as identical, and conversion to another religion, Islam for instance, would have implied a change in ethnic identity. When a person became a Muslim, he “stopped being a Karo and became a Malay”, and those who became Muslims often dropped their *marga* name. It was thus not surprising that many Karo resisted Islam at that time.

As Karo society became incorporated into the colonial state, Christianity entered the scene. The Dutch missionaries worked hard to win the Karo and convert them to a new world religion. But for most Karo it was not an easy step to take, since embracing this new religion was perceived as a political statement, that is, “a statement of loyalty to the Dutch”. Religious conversion thus still meant a crossing of the ethnic boundary during colonial times, but the isomorphism of ethnic and religious identity was beginning to crumble; a phenomenon that was becoming more persistent in the post-colonial period.

When Indonesia gained its independence, the Karo were absorbed into the new republic, and new settings were imposed for them, within which their ancestor’s religion, the Perbegu, which was an integral part of a traditional, total way of life, lost its meaning. It no longer matched their experience of a centralized state power, of a new social stratification, and the spirit of nationalism. The discrepancy between the Perbegu and its present-day settings has become greater as Karo move to the cities, where kinship orders too face challenges.

As more and more Karo move out of their original country and live in an urban, ethnically mixed environment, the actualization of their kinship order becomes increasingly problematic. The urban Karo youths

not only lose the intricacies of kinship terminologies, but they also do not have strong bonds or attachment towards their kin. The value of asymmetrical relations between the wife-giver and the wife-taker in organizing labour is seen to decline, and *rebu* (avoidance relations between particular persons) observance also decreases. Thus, Karo kinship practices start to change. Instead of strictly following patrilineal rules, bilateral practices are becoming more common among many Karo urban families. Nevertheless, it is the Karo imagined kinship order (whatever that means to the Karo) that still hold Karo individuals together as a “society” and forms the basis of their ethnic identity.

How are government policies related to the religious and ethnic identity formation among the Karo? Unlike any other Muslim countries, the Indonesian Government has created a unique bureaucratic structure to manage religion. In addition to that, the state ideology, Pancasila, while giving legitimacy to a variety of world religions, denigrates all traditional religions, including the Batak’s Perbegu. In this case, the policies actually coincide with “what some Karo want and feel”. They correspond to “a widespread and deeply felt religiosity among many Karo Christian and Muslim”. Under such a situation the political meanings of conversion to Christianity or Islam, as well as the attachment to the ancestor’s religion, shifted. For many Karo today, embracing a religion has become a private matter and is left to the free choice of the individuals. Although most Karo are Christian, and the largest church (GBKP) is an ethnic church, the number of Karo converting to Islam shows a steady increase.

With regard to ethnicity, the government’s views are ambiguous. On the one hand, traditional ethnic cultures are seen as symbols that can be used to forge a national identity and build “a sense of community”, for ethnic pride is not only legitimate, but is regarded as a kind of patriotism as well. On the other, ethnic politics is seen as a threat to national unity, so that discourses on ethnicity should be conducted in accordance with certain unstated rules. However, the government gives general support to traditional arts and performances, which fits the Karo’s strong ethnic pride as well as the need of many urban Karo to have “some ethnic roots” in their new ethnically mixed milieu.

These pro-religious and ethnic policies can only be understood

within the Indonesian historical context and the bitter experiences the nation had with communism in the 1960s. Although a distinctive, influential class has not yet emerged in the Indonesian political scene today, the government sees its probable rise owing to the widening gap between the rich and poor. The adopted policies on religion and ethnic cultures, according to Kipp, have to some extent deflected class identities that might appear in all socio-economic strata.

After reading this book, one no longer views the Karo as a homogeneous society or a monolithic entity (if it ever were), consisting of individuals having the same self-identification. Thus we find among the Karo today varying social categories such as Christian Karo, Muslim Karo, and traditional Karo, cross-cut by wealth differences, different lifestyles, different occupations, and different geographical regions. Kipp's book provides ethnographic details on these Karo social segments as well as variations in their religion, outlook, and ethnic identification. If the Christians and the Catholics are socially more stratified, such a division based on wealth differences is less clear among the Muslims, who appear to be segmented into patron-client blocks. The religious minority among the Karo today are the followers of the traditional religion, the Perbegu, whose numbers are continually declining. Their stance, Kipp observes, is the stance of "the poor and the uneducated". In the contest over the meaning of Karo identity in the modern Indonesian context, the traditionalists are the disadvantaged party.

Kipp's sensitivity to small and yet important details of Karo activities is reflected in her field notes, which support and give vivid illustrations to her arguments. What is interesting about these notes is that the dates when the notes were taken are consciously put in. This enables us to get a sense of history about these notes. These will be useful not only for historians but for historically oriented social scientists as well. Unfortunately, the book suffers from some shortcomings, which will be elaborated below.

Of the three subjects mentioned in the subtitle of the book, that is, religion, ethnicity, and class, it is the discussion on class in a Marxian sense that is largely absent in the book. "Class" is here taken to mean no more than differences in wealth, life-style, and occupation. The dif-

ficuity faced by Kipp in elucidating the phenomenon of class in the Indonesian context has already been anticipated by Tanter and Young's *The Politics of Middle Class Indonesia* (1990), which rightly points out that a Western-derived political outlook is difficult to apply to a social formation that adopts diversity as its principal motto, such as Indonesia. The problem becomes greater as Kipp tries to use it to analyse Karo society, in which class consciousness is largely absent and kinship ideology is the hegemonic order.

The absence of Karo interpretations about state policies on religion and ethnicity makes Kipp's argument on the influences of these policies on the dissociation process of Karo identities look unconvincing. This is due partly to the nature of these policies themselves, which are mostly implicit or unstated rather than explicit. This weakness would have been overcome by Kipp, had she provided us with the Indonesian (stated as well as unstated) policies on religion, ethnicity, and class in a more systematic manner.

Kipp also says that the main factors shaping Karo consciousness and definition about themselves are "migration out of Karoland, greater communication between Karoland and areas outside it, and the Karo's incorporation into an ethnically diverse nation". Unfortunately, if one tries to determine how these forces work and shape Karo's view of their identity, as well as how they change in the course of time, one will be disappointed, for Kipp's interest is not on these factors, despite their decisive role in forming Karo ideas about themselves. However, apart from these weaknesses, the book is well worth reading and should not be missed by those who are interested in the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian societies.

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