

*Minorities, Modernity, and the Emerging Nation: Christians in Indonesia. A Biographical Approach.* By Gerry van Klinken. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003.

This astute and innovative historical account of some of the cultural content of “the modern world” in the late colonial Indies’ public imagination takes as its sources life history information about five urban, elite Christian men. These are the Javanese Catholic Ignatius Joseph Kasimo (1900–86), a court noble, and a leader of a Catholic political party; the Batak Protestant Soetan Goenoeng Moelia (1896–1966), another activist in confessional political party work; G.S.S.J. Ratu Langie (1890–1949), a Volksraad member from a prominent Minahasan family; the Batak Protestant convert (from Islam) Amir Sjarifoeddin (1907–48), a conflicted and even tragic man executed for his role in the Madiun revolt; and the aristocratic Javanese Albertus Soegijapranata, S.J. (1896–1963), a Jesuit priest, a close ally of Soekarno, and the Indies’ first bishop. Each of these unusually identity-conscious men lived along several cultural fault lines in the 1920s to the 1940s, the time period at the heart of the book. That is, all five claimed Indonesian national identity yet were invested as well to varying degrees in “ethnic heritage”; each was a member of a tiny Christian minority in an overwhelmingly Muslim population; and each was an Indies Christian strongly influenced by Dutch-style education. Furthermore, all five professed Christianity with its gospel values of human equality — yet benefited from various types of privileged social rank. Each moved fluently in the Dutch-language world of the late colonial Indies intelligentsia, advocating Indonesian self-determination and one version or another of an Indonesian republic.

Van Klinken rightly reads their biographies as texts on how these men negotiated such ideological options, and how they imagined modernity within these specific Christian, nationalist cognitive precincts. One of the strengths of this book is Van Klinken’s decision to put questions of imagined modernities at the centre, and to put the more standard, even clichéd interpretive frameworks about grand trajectories from colonial subjugation “toward” nationalist futures

somewhat off to the side. Additionally, in charting out Indies/Indonesian modernities, Van Klinken lets the often counter-intuitive small biographical detail take front stage.

Refreshingly, Van Klinken employs some classic Weberian terms of analysis for his five case studies, arranged into such chapters as “Kasimo and Moelia Welcome the Modern State”, “Ratu Langie and the Christian East”, and “Christian Charisma in War and Revolution”. That is, he looks at frameworks of leadership that are charismatic, traditionalist, or legal-rational, and asserts that a primary transition that these men were involved in was the one from island Southeast Asian kingship modes of political community to the quite contrastive and new nation-state way of conceptualizing the political world. In this context, New Testament Christianity’s theological promise of “a new world” becomes especially interesting. Indeed, Van Klinken’s injection of theological content into his topics for study in writing twentieth-century Indonesian history is apt and productive.

Each of the five main characters in the volume took the Gospels and (in the case of the Catholics) the sacraments seriously as game plans for world renewal. They had also soaked up some of the popular Christian stereotypes for evaluating Christian existence in the late colonial Indies: notions that, for instance, Christians were more hard-working, cleaner, and more school-minded than their Muslim brethren. They also assumed that Christian church membership lent special moral virtue to family life, especially in terms of the treatment of women. Such flattering imageries of Christian life often worked in these quite elite men’s lives to give them a language for talking about modernity itself. Such imageries also reinforced a degree of social privilege: all considered themselves to be further down the road to modernity than their fellow Indies residents. At the same time, Christian tropes of redemption led these men to critique colonial social hierarchies in Batavia and in the plantation economy in general.

As Van Klinken writes in an insightful chapter on the history of Christianity in the Indies, Indonesian Christians experienced the political world in two contrastive ways (p. 7). On the one hand, they experienced church in terms of state authoritarianism, docile

conformity, and the tamed congregations beholden to government licensure. On the other hand, “the elite few experienced a conversion to another kind of religion, namely the bourgeois Christianity of Europe just at its most vigorous moment. They were empowered by it” (p. 7).

Each of the book’s focal characters is introduced, at base, in terms of how they grasped the modernization project at work in the Indies of his time. Kasimo and Goenoeng Moelia, for instance (two fairly establishmentarian figures), are discussed in relation to their ways of imagining the modern state. Goenoeng Moelia’s “privatized Protestant piety” (p. 51) made some of the effusive community ethos of the early nationalists seem excessive to him. Furthermore, the economic ups and downs of the late 1920s and 1930s (turbulence that shook his trust in the verities of the state’s Ethical Policy) left him in some “moral bewilderment” (p. 68). He withdrew, almost to private contemplation. This left him open to accusations from more communitarian nationalists that he was forever stuck working within the colonial system. Van Klinken makes the useful point here that Goenoeng Moelia was deeply influenced by the theological stiffness of the Calvinist Reformed Church while he was in the Netherlands as a youth (he was sent to the metropole at age 12 for teacher training). Goenoeng Moelia came from the South Tapanuli town of Sipirok, which had a hearty if beleaguered Christian minority of around 10 per cent (their ancestors had been converted by the Rhenish Mission, starting at a time before Toba was introduced to Christianity). His Sipirok grandfather (from the Harahap clan, although Goenoeng Moelia dropped the *marga* name in public) was a high official working in the Dutch-run bureaucracy. His father was a teacher working in a Dutch-style school. Given this background of compromise with Dutch officialdom, added to his theological leanings, Goenoeng Moelia’s encounter with the modern state was cautious, accommodationist, and morally conflicted.

Kasimo’s Javanese Catholicism and his career in the Volksraad is interpreted in a similar mode, this time in terms of Kasimo’s enmeshment in some Jesuit-led, anti-capitalist social activism in the Netherlands and in Java. Kasimo’s identity journeys are also read here

in terms of the immensely complicated Catholic political party scene of the Indies. A more nuanced than usual view of the Volksraad emerges thereby, by keeping this particular kind of biography front and centre.

Ratu Langie came from a conservative high aristocracy in Minahasa and gravitated to ideas of “tradition” in religion and ethnic heritage in rather strategic ways, to cater to a political constituency. He fashioned notions of Minahasan traditional community as one of his main means of “doing modernity” in the Indies. By reifying Minahasan-ness in this way, interestingly enough, he anticipated by decades similar strategies of cultural politics at work in the Soeharto regime. Ratu Lengie’s engagement with Christianity is examined in this context of his political manoeuvrings, and vice versa.

Amir Sjarifoeddin was much more charismatic, and more psychically marginalized, than these first three. Van Klinken writes, “Amir’s conversion to Christianity, like those of Moelia and Kasimo, was part of his modernity” (p. 115). However, he wanted anything but working within the Volksraad system: an ardent nationalist, he was also an explicit anti-traditionalist — and another southern Batak who had dropped his clan name (again, the Harahap *marga*; he and Goenoeng Moelia were first cousins). Amir’s father had been raised a Protestant Christian but had converted to Islam when he married a Muslim Batak woman. Amir was sent to the Netherlands as a youth, for high school. Excelling there, he later enrolled in Batavia’s new law school. This chapter takes the unusual and effective tack of examining Amir’s possible interior states, as he becomes further and further involved in nationalist activism. Readers learn about the political party history of the 1920s to the 1930s from this vantage point. Amir used a rhetoric from the colonial middle class for his abundant published opinion pieces, and his political legitimacy with more radical nationalists suffered in consequence. His Protestantism became a source of censure too.

The Javanese Jesuit Soegijapranata’s biography is examined in a similar vein, in terms of his particular faith life as that was shaped by his social position within multiple elite cultures — and in terms of how his Catholicism and his life as a privileged Javanese close to Soekarno structured his hopes for the Republic.

Overall, the book is a success, bringing such micro-histories of personal entanglements with the modern into line with Indonesian historiography, and into line with Christian historiography. The book models a comparative approach for writing Indonesian biography.

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