

## Review Article

# Theories of Stagnation and Dynamics of History

## A Review of Three Publications on the History of Indonesia

Tilman Schiel

The Second World War and the post-war period has been a time of fast and fundamental change in Southeast Asia. As a secondary result these upheavals shook also the foundation of the historiography of this region. Especially the decolonization of Indonesia led to a revision of the view on the history of this new state and its real or imagined predecessors: Before the war this view was of course dominated by colonial history, a history formed and recorded by others. This included even the precolonial times which had been interpreted as an epoch of Hindoo colonisation. The historians of the new state of Indonesia pursued eagerly a strategy to change this image, and to write a different "national history". But also scholars from Europe and the USA had recognized the necessity to change from a euro-centric towards a more regio-centric view on historical developments.

This change was reinforced by another tendency amongst these scholars, namely to interpret historical data with the help of theories about social development. Two schools had a longer-lasting influence – or should we rather say: two versions, a bourgeois and a marxist one, of the same topic, of "orientalism"? The first one started already in the late-colonial period with the writings of Schrieke and van Leur, who

---

\* Fritjof Tichelman: *The Social Evolution of Indonesia. The Asiatic Mode of Production and its Legacy.* (International Institute of Social History Amsterdam, Studies in Social History No. 5). The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980. XV, 301 pages.

Jan Breman: *The Village on Java and the Early-Colonial State.* (Comparative Asian Studies Programme at Erasmus University, Publicatio No. 1). Rotterdam: Faculty of Social Sciences 1980. 54 pages.

Jan Wisseman Christie: *Theatre States and Oriental Despotisms: Early Southeast Asia in the Eyes of the West.* (Centre for South-East Asian Studies of the University of Hull, Occasional Papers No. 10). Hull: Centre of South-East Asian Studies 1985. 49 pages, £. 2.00

were only recognised internationally after the war. This "school" was based on the sociology of Max Weber, and Harry J. Benda was amongst its most outspoken representatives.

Although it emerged as a radical antagonist the other "school" had remarkable similarities, namely the basic thesis of "Asiatic" stagnation preventing or at least retarding a development towards capitalism: This marxist variety of historiography based on a theory of long-term social development had its roots in Marx's (rather marginal) idea of an Asiatic Mode of Production. The first book under review was the hitherto most ambitious and systematic attempt to pursue this way to explain the idiosyncracies of historical developments and recent trends in Indonesia.

The author, Tichelman, approaches this goal in several steps: The first part of the book is dedicated to an outline of the general setting, i.e. the basic historical trends in Asia and the most important attempts to present explanations why developments were so different from the European ones there. Based on the named idea of an Asiatic Mode of Production the author outlines the varieties one can find of this mode of production in Asia. Tichelman is well aware that there did not exist a "pure model" but only modifications of quite different intensity with two extremes: On the one hand the rather ideal-typical rice-growing kingdoms with an inward focus, marked by a great degree of central power exerted by a rigorous bureaucratic apparatus. On the other extreme he sees the mercantile harbour principalities with their outward focus and with parallels to European merchant-capitalist developments. Although Tichelman is well aware about combinations of both extremes he interprets them as antagonistic and he sees the former one as more or less dominant in Asia.

The second part of his book contains an interpretation of the history of Indonesia with the concepts developed in the first one. The aim is to explain the present state of Indonesian society with its assumed idiosyncracies of being haunted by stagnative traditions. Tichelman sees the mentioned antagonism represented in the history of Indonesia by the tradition of the rice-based inland realms of Java proper (*kejawen*) with marked "Asiatic" features on the one, and the commercially oriented states and harbour principalities of the outer islands and the north coast of Java (*pasisir*) on the other hand. The continuity of dominance of the "Asiatic" feature with its bias of parasitic bureaucratic control by the state was not broken by Dutch colonialism. It was only modified or even reinforced: Although changes took place – like the emergence of visible class antagonisms and of a western-educated, partly also western-oriented intelligentsia – they proved to be too weak and ineffective not to become overwhelmed by the tradition of parasitic bureaucratic dominance.

Therefore also the present society is still marked by the classical triad (well known to Indonesianists from the writings of Clifford Geertz): The (neo-)priyayi-abangan dyad of the Javanic tradition and the *santri* of the islamic pasisir tradition.

The (neo-) *priyayi* is the representative of the "asiatic-bureaucratic" parasitically exploiting elite, the *abangan* represents the (rather diffuse) mass of the exploited rural population (with limited trends only to proletarianization), the *santri* represents the weak indigenous merchant capitalist and landowner (perhaps this section of Indonesian society could be called the dynamic "non-parasitic" exploiter). Tichelman sees two main causes for recent underdevelopment and the catastrophic demise of radical mass movements in Indonesia. One is the inability of both the modernist intelligentsia and the labour movement to get rid of the bondage of this tradition, and the other the limitations of nationalism who could not absorb modernizing ideologies which again strengthened the bureaucratic etatist tradition and blurred class consciousness.

The same year in which Tichelman's book was published saw also the publication of the small booklet of Breman. This was a remarkable coincidence because Breman presents a fundamentally different view of Javanese "traditionalism". Indeed Breman has written a fierce attack on one of the pillars on which the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production is based: the concept of the self-content, closed, isolated, socially homogeneous, corporate village community as represented also in the concept of Village Java followed by and large by Tichelman. Breman argues that the precolonial rural society was quite different from this ideal picture of Village Java: Rural society was far from homogeneous, it was markedly stratified into haves and havenots, into land owners and tenants (*sikep* resp. *numpang*).

Similar to the oikes-type households found in Europe in ancient and medieval times the Javanese rural households (*cacah*) were often large diverse units consisting of a *sikep* with his family and a varying number of dependent *numpangs*. And, moreover, according to Breman this *cacah* was the basic unit of administration, not the village which was, again according to Breman, a rather loose agglomerate of hamlets formed by several *cacahs*. There was also no clear-cut dichotomy between the refined *priyayi* and the rural world of the *abangan* (or his predecessor): There were *priyayis* also living in the rural sphere, and instead of the well-known picture of a twofold society with the refined *priyayi* world of the *kraton* on the one, and the "vulgar" peasant world of the *desa* on the other hand mediated by the village headman as an interface between these worlds, Breman outlines a chain of intermediaries between top and bottom organized rather individually according to the patron-client model from the *kraton* down to the single household.

This sheds also light on the utterly unbureaucratic organization of the polity. But one question was not yet answered: Was there really never a type of village existing in Java with features as outlined in the concepts of the "typical Asiatic" village? Breman's answer deserves our special interest: Yes, there was – but not at all originally! This village was rather a product of colonial policies fitting so conveniently to

the need of colonial government for efficient control of the rural producers. One might add: it fitted also nicely the age-old European prejudices about "Oriental Despotism" which can claim antique ancestry – already the Greeks used this concept to denounce the barbarians, especially the Persian archenemy. According to Breman the empirical evidence for the Asiatic Mode of Production was created by colonialism as "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger), whereas the same Dutch sources which are presented as evidence for the existence of the AMP reveal, if scrutinized, a quite deviant picture for the situation in late Mataram.

But what about still earlier times? Is it justified to argue – as texts dealing with the history of Java, especially those written in colonial times, often do – that late Mataram was already an adulteration of the "Asiatic" model? That the latter therefore had to be "reconstructed" only by an enlightened benevolent colonial policy to give back to the rural Javanese their appropriate social environment? The recently published paper of Wisseman Christie is defeating such an attempted sortie to save the model of Oriental Despotism of AMP. Based on her first-hand knowledge of primary historical sources, she disproves all the assumptions about Indic rural society on ancient Java found in the texts of the authors favouring an Asiatic approach (with the exception of the corporate character of early villages).

Based on an intimate knowledge of the old Javanese documents she draws a picture totally incompatible with that of the AMP or Oriental Despotism approach. It may be consoling to this school that other schools like the sociological one, and authors as famous as Anderson, Geertz, and Wolters, are judged also quite unfavourable. The following paragraphs try to give a rough outline of the already very concise picture of the Javanese society and political order during the Indic epoch as presented by Wisseman Christie.

On the low agrarian level we find villages (or groups of villages) which are quite undisturbed in their affairs by the state or the supra-village level of administration. But this was not at all the idyl of the egalitarian small republic of peasant community, village society in contrary was marked by internal stratification: We find people with full property rights to land, including the right of alienation by sale. Sales of land indeed were not uncommon amongst villagers. This village elite of landowners formed also the council managing the affairs of the village (*karaman* i.e. *ke-ramanan*, the body of the *rama*'s or "fathers" of a village). This council was not dominated by representatives of higher interests, who were excluded from this council even when living in the respective village. From this body the village officials managing the village affairs, including irrigation, were recruited without interference of the greater political entities.

Below this village elite (which could be quite large, numbering up to several hundred persons in large villages) there was the group of the *anak wanua* (the "child-

ren of the village") with unclear status, representing or at least including people of non-agricultural wealth like traders and artisans. Still below we find the *raray* group consisting of subordinate members of the village without any *karaman* rights, presumably landless tenants, servants and minors. Even slavery was found at the village level: There were times when regular slave markets were found in some regions of Java. This latter remark – like the earlier ones on the property rights and on the composition of the *anak wanua* group – throws also some light on the question of the existence of the presumably tradeless oriental villages. Rather than being isolated, closed communities they were participating in regional commercial networks.

Not only the picture of village society as presented by Wisseman Christie is incompatible with the "Asiatic" view. Likewise her picture of the organization of the early Javanese polities is deviating from "Asiatic" assumptions of bureaucratic despotism. Although the political centre was much more stable and real than the sociological school (see e.g. the theatre state model of Geertz 1980 or the *mandala* model of Wolters 1982)<sup>1</sup> saw it, it was not absolutist. The administrative apparatus was not simply one formed by bureaucrats dependent on the king, but consisted to a great extent of people of local standing, chosen and remunerated by the village. The fiscal system of central government was monetized at least in assessment. It was not seldom based on taxfarming in exchange for deliveries to provision the royal household or for services of dancers and musicians. The tax rights of the kings were based neither upon an ultimate property right to the land nor upon a command over or at least commitment to irrigation works.

Between the central state, the *bhumi*, and the village there existed intermediary forms of regional government. The *watek* was a group of villages under the jurisdiction of a *rakai*. In other words: such a *watek*, which was not identical with those mentioned village groupings formed by the economic integration into a commercial network, owed tax payments to a *rakai*. These taxes were different from those owed to the king, and the *rakai* was not the tax collector for the king. The tax rights of a *rakai* were neither granted nor revocable by a king, and they were inheritable. The *rakai* was therefore quite independent from the king and not at all simply a creature dependent on the mercy of his overlord. Rather the latter originated from a small number of *rakai*'s with extraordinary wealthy *watek*'s, and he remained *rakai* of his *watek* also after ascendancy to the position of a king. Also the *rakai*'s tax rights were neither based on property rights to land nor upon activities connected with irrigation systems. Both forms of taxes were not subject to arbitrary assessment, neither by

- 
- 1 Clifford Geertz: *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980  
 O. W. Wolters: *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Singapur: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982

*rakai* nor by *raja*. A village which believed to be burdened by "confiscatory taxation" (to allude to a European analogy) had the possibility to renegotiate them.

Besides the inheritable aristocracy of the *rakai*'s based on tax rights in their *watek*'s there existed another intermediary form with its own tax income: the *sima*, which was originally a religious foundation for the maintenance of a sanctuary. This foundation was given the means for its existence by a grant, freeing the *sima* from all tax payments. To enhance further the tax incomes of a *sima* a *raja* could encourage or persuade the *rakai* of the respective *watek* to grant his tax rights as well. These *sima* grants were made in perpetuity and could not be revoked by a succeeding king.

In later times these *sima* grants showed an interesting mundane variation: the investment *sima*. Families which had become wealthy without having hereditary *watek* holdings began to buy land and to build a family temple. They then applied for a *sima* for the maintenance of this temple and offered to pay a lump sum to get the tax revoked. In such cases the ruler tended to divide his tax rights in such a way that he retained a part of it whereas the rest was divided to benefit directly the temple itself, but besides also the family. In this way a family not belonging to the *rakai* group could obtain special tax rights mimicking the *wateks*. This process of the transformation of wealthy families into a new aristocracy was furthered by an inflation of grants of immaterial privileges instead of tax reliefs: Visible status markers and symbols could be bought by the nouveau riche leading to a complex ranking system between village and state. One can see an analogy to the sale of newly created noble titles (like the baronet) by the Stuart kings, creating a new aristocracy not necessarily connected with real material rights and privileges.

Also the supra-village sphere was therefore by no means one ruled by a despot by means of a dependent bureaucracy hired and fired arbitrarily. Rather there were intermediate aristocratic groups with inheritable own resources not dependent from the mercy of a king. This group was differentiated from the beginning, because the *wateks* were not uniform. Moreover new groups were ascending which had acquired their own resources. The picture given by Wisseman Christie – and outlined here in a concise manner – therefore makes necessary a revision of the views of a stagnant development of Indonesia due to idiosyncracies typical for its wet rice economy. It rather shows a markedly dynamic development. The features recorded by Europeans (who were of course influenced by theories of "Oriental Despotism" as a caricature of European absolutism) especially since late 18/early 19th century cannot be interpreted as survivals of ageless Asiatic idiosyncracies.

A new change in paradigms obviously becomes a necessity. The sociological and anthropological paradigms had led to a necessary revision of the biases of colonial history as well as of the indianization picture drawn by a former generation of

historians. But it had also substituted new prejudices for old ones. Now a new generation of historians is winning back ground from these sociological schools. As a sociologist and anthropologist confessing to have committed sins quite similar to those criticized by Wisseman Christie I cannot but agree with her that it is time "to temper anthropology with a bit of history" (Wisseman Christie 1985:39).