

Infrastructure of the Imagination

Patrica Spyer Examines Rumours, Graffiti, and Banners in the Ambonese Conflict

Interview >
Southeast Asia

Muslims and Christians on Ambon refer to the dividing line between them as the 'Gaza Strip', analogous to the disputed lands in the Middle East. Ordinary people under exceptional circumstances often place their own situation in a much wider context, says Patrica Spyer, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Contemporary Indonesia at Leiden University since February 2001.

By Jasper van de Kerkhof

Patrica Spyer challenges what she calls 'the taken-for-granted but hopelessly impoverished' anthropological notion of 'ethnographic context'. 'Anthropologists construct a close-up of a community; it's what they are good at. But because of that they often lose sight of the entire picture. I want to know how people experience situations, precisely by placing them in a broader framework. Context is the thread of my work.'

Last November Spyer held her inaugural lecture at Leiden University. In cooperation with the faculty of arts, she is cur-

rently working on the project 'Indonesian Mediations', which examines the role of the media in the final years of the Suharto regime and the subsequent period of Reformasi. 'The media form a well-researched topic', she says. 'But most scholars focus exclusively on the Internet, while it is particularly "small media" like illegal radio, banners, and graffiti which are important in conflict situations.'

Spyer explores these issues in the conflict-ridden Moluccan Islands in Indonesia, specifically in the province's capital. Communal violence broke out in Ambon city in January 1999 and lasted until a fragile peace agreement was signed in February 2002. Over time, the conflict consolidated two polarized religious groups – one Christian and one Muslim – which the outside world came to see as the war's main opponents. At least five thousand and possibly as many as ten thousand people were killed during the three years of hostilities, and an estimated 700,000 people fled from their homes.

'I was troubled by the sense that something was missing in the accepted explanations of the conflict'. Spyer does not dismiss the view that the Asian financial crisis, the step-down of Suharto, and the subsequent period of Reformasi, as well as the intrigues of Jakarta's political elite and the military, all played an important role. 'But some of these analyses are just too abstract, too far removed from the everyday lives of ordinary people.'

Too little attention is given to the work of the imagination and the construction of knowledge in all of this and, specifically, how imagination propels particular actions and shapes those who carry them out. In conflict situations, the boundaries blur between fact and fiction, fear and fantasy, knowledge and suspicion. Spyer: 'This, I believe, is what is meant by climate, which is no mere backdrop.'

Spyer cites the examples of *Voice of the Heart – Acang and Obet*, a public service announcement broadcast on national TV and several commercial channels some months after the break-out of violence. The spot was meant to foster peace among the

combatant religious groups in Ambon. It featured two young boys, the Muslim Acang and his Christian bosom friend Obet, who are discussing the tense situation in their city.

Trying to understand why Ambon fell apart like this, they come to the conclusion that they do not understand. 'It is a problem of adults, and we kids are the victims', Acang says. The camera zooms in on the two friends, who are posed with their arms around each other, while they voice the hope and mutual promise that 'even if Ambon is destroyed like this, our bond of brotherhood should not be broken'.

Spyer: 'All the Ambonese took from the spot was a name and a face for the enemy'. The many interviews she held with refugees are replete with phrases like 'Acang attacked' or 'Obet's territory' and so on. 'Inversely, the local population actively borrowed examples from other places held close to their own fraught world. For example, Ambon city's main dividing line between its Muslim and Christian parts has been known colloquially as the Gaza Strip.'

Comparisons with the Middle East have also been made by the people in conflict-ridden Venezuela, Spyer knows. 'But in the Indonesian case, where the conflict is often simplified as one between Christians and Muslims, people attach even more weight to the analogy. The people of Ambon and the Gaza Strip have never met, so Ambon's Gaza Strip is only possible when substantial groups of Ambonese were thinking of themselves as living lives parallel to those of substantial groups of people in the Middle East.'

Her interviews with Ambonese refugees showed her that the local population feels neglected by the political elites in Jakarta. She thinks that the borrowing of names and terms from other conflict grounds may thus serve a specific purpose. 'Twinning these war-torn places may be one way of lending local suffering in Ambon larger than local meaning.'

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Biography >

Prof. Patrica Spyer (b. 1957), daughter of a Dutch father and an American mother, was born and raised in New York. Early in the 1970s, she and her parents moved to Amsterdam, where she attended secondary education. She returned to the United States, where she double-majored in history and anthropology at Tufts University, near Boston, Massachusetts. In 1992, after a period of intensive field research, she obtained her PhD from the University of Chicago on trade networks in remote areas of Indonesia (*The memory of trade: circulation, autochthony, and the past in the Aru Islands*). After completion of her dissertation, she worked for several years at the University of Amsterdam. Currently, she is Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Contemporary Indonesia at Leiden University (the Netherlands).
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Publication Trends in International Indonesian Studies: The Asia-Pacific Region as New Gravitation Centre

Research >
Southeast Asia

It is the fate of almost every Indonesianist who carries out historical research that he or she must possess some modicum of skill in reading Dutch-language material. The reason is simple: until the 1940s/1950s, almost all publications concerning the former Dutch colony were published in the language of the colonizer. It may even be said that the Netherlands enjoyed a factual research monopoly in Indonesian Studies. Such power over the production of knowledge and 'knowing the world', as postcolonial studies has witnessed, enabled and, in many ways, determined the colonial endeavour. It is, therefore, not surprising that foreign research concerning Indonesia has always been a matter of strategic importance, not only for Indonesian scholars, but also for the political elite of the Republic of Indonesia. Over the last fifty years, how has the situation changed? Does the Netherlands (here read, intellectualism and academic institutions) still dominate in the field of research on Indonesia? Or has their position shifted from centre?

By Arndt Graf

This analysis surveys some basic quantitative trends in international Indonesian Studies in the 1990s. The source material is taken from *Excerpta Indonesica*, the bibliographical periodical published twice a year at the KITLV in Leiden (the Netherlands). *Excerpta Indonesica* provides a unique source in that it renders annotated citations of

'almost all'* research contributions (mostly articles) in journals and readers published on Indonesia. The disciplines covered are mainly from the humanities and social sciences, although certain other disciplines also appear (geography, medicine, etc.). The claimed scope is worldwide, although certain countries and journals are more favoured than are others. This is traditionally true for articles published in the Netherlands,

since they naturally find their way more easily into the holdings of the KITLV library, which constitutes the material basis for *Excerpta Indonesica*. The inclusion/exclusion policy of *Excerpta Indonesica* is often problematized in the field, since this bibliographical journal exerts an important gatekeeping function in the dissemination and, hence, the production of knowledge in Indonesian Studies. This makes it all the more interesting to look at the representation of international Indonesian Studies in this influential journal.

Excerpta Indonesica has rendered an additional service, important for the purpose of the present study, in every edition since the early 1990s: the

introduction typically includes general statistics indicating the numbers of contributions on Indonesia listed according to country of publication. Such a helpful indication suggests what the net balance of publications in journals, readers, and so on, would be. Since the production of these publications is usually linked to centres of Indonesian Studies, this also tells us something about the international drawing power and importance of the various national centres of Indonesian Studies. On the other hand, it also betrays a certain bias, disfavouring small countries with few researchers as well as less publicized publication opportunities for an international audience.

The analysis of the aggregate numbers of the 1990s shows in which regions and countries the most publications on Indonesia appeared. Some interesting results should be highlighted. The ranking of Indonesia in first place (representing about a third of world publications) demonstrates that the enormous investments in the education sector since independence (1945) have drastically shifted the balance in the production of knowledge concerning Indonesia to the former Dutch colo-

nia power itself. In other words, increasingly more Indonesians are writing their own story, on their own terms, thus forcing the international community of scholars to shift not only their assumptions concerning what is or is not a viable 'primary source', but also its requirements concerning language acquisition. It is no longer possible to carry out viable research concerning Indonesia without possessing the ability to read, write, and speak in Bahasa Indonesia.

In this context, it is interesting to see that the Netherlands, as the former colonial power, has lost most of its overwhelming global predominance in Indonesian Studies that lasted at least up until the 1950s. If we only count the statistics available for the 1990's via *Excerpta Indonesica*, less than 20 per cent of all published articles now appear in the Netherlands. Given the ongoing cuts in Indonesian Studies in the Netherlands, this percentage will probably further shrink. On the other hand, the Netherlands is still the most important place for Indonesianist publications in Europe (about 50 per cent). This regional prominence might continue for quite some time, even if other less well-represented European coun-

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* For a more detailed discussion cf. A. Graf, 'Der deutsche Beitrag zur internationalen Indonesistik in den 1990er Jahren: ein Blick auf die Repräsentation in Excerpta Indonesica', *Asien*, January 2003.