

# National politics, local contexts

Jacqueline Vel's book provides a comprehensive account of socio-political developments in one of the most understudied regions of Eastern Indonesia. Based on extensive fieldwork over the last 20 years, Vel describes how changes in national politics have affected the conduct of local politics in West Sumba, a small district in East Nusa Tenggara province. With its broad temporal scope and its great attention to ethnographic detail, it will be an important reference for scholars working on Eastern Indonesia. However, it should be noted that a significant amount of the material presented in this book is actually not new (some data is based on fieldwork in the 1980s) and several chapters or parts thereof have already been published elsewhere.

Dirk Tomsa



ABOVE: School children in Waikabubak.

Vel, Jacqueline A.C. 2008.

*Uma Politics: An Ethnography of Democratization in West Sumba, Indonesia, 1986-2006.* Leiden: KITLV Press. 277 pages. ISBN: 978 90 6718 324 6

The book consists of ten chapters and three additional vignettes about social life in Sumba. The first two chapters provide some basic geographic and ethnographic information about Sumba and highlight the importance of the state for all aspects of life in this part of Indonesia. Furthermore, these chapters, as well as the next two chapters, also introduce the reader to some key concepts used throughout the book, for example Bourdieu's three forms of capital, notions of political class or local concepts of *adat*.

Taken together, the first four chapters make up nearly half of the book. Only in Chapter 5 does the narrative turn to events in the post-Suharto era, which is a bit disappointing given that the title indicates a focus on democratisation. Following a concise overview of the events of 1998 and how they were perceived in Sumba, this second half of the book deals with issues such as localised violence (Ch. 6), socio-economic development and civil society (Ch. 7), the desire to create a new district (Ch. 8) and local elections (Ch. 9). Last but not least, Chapter 10 provides some concluding remarks which stress, among other things, the importance of analysing democratisation processes in their local contexts.

Vel argues that despite the transformation of Indonesia's political system, the predominant style of local politics in Sumba has remained largely unchanged (p. 238ff.). Yet, as local leaders gradually adapt to the new conditions, the broader socio-political landscape of Sumba is inevitably being transformed. According to Vel, the incremental changes that have occurred in Sumba as a result of democratisation have been positive (p. 246), but she also alerts the reader to growing social inequalities which may pose new problems for Sumba in the future (p. 247).

## A palpable familiarity

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on local politics in Indonesia. Arguably, its major strengths lie in its comprehensiveness and its attention to detail. Having lived in Sumba for extended periods of time, Vel is intimately familiar with the political and social dynamics in this part of Indonesia, and this familiarity is palpable throughout the book. The general reader may at times be puzzled about the various local names and places, but generally the author succeeds in communicating her detailed knowledge in an engaging and readable way.

Perhaps the best sections of the book are those where Vel enriches her dense descriptions of certain events and persons with a broader comparative perspective in order to put the situation in Sumba into a wider context. In Chapter 6 on local violence, for example, the insightful analysis of the events of 'Bloody Thursday', a day of brutal violence in the town of Waikabubak, is complemented by the notion that the fighting in Sumba cannot simply be explained as yet another case of communal conflict in Eastern Indonesia. As Vel points out, there were certainly similarities with the mass violence in places like Maluku or Poso (e.g. historical continuities or the instrumentalisation of violence by local elites), but religion played no role whatsoever in Sumba.

Thus, in Chapter 6 the book lives up to its ambition, articulated in Chapter 1, to use Sumba as a case study to either confirm or challenge conclusions about 'Indonesia in general' (p. 7).

among whom I dwell. It always takes considerable effort to then 'bracket' myself and to open up to ways of life and thinking that I may or not at all may appreciate. In brief, my profession is about cross-cultural encounters, about boundary crossing, about being open to new things, and about being rooted at the same time. In that sense, I am a cosmopolitan engaging distant belonging and close encounters.

## 'Cosmo-patriots'

Most of the subjects described in the present volume – Hong Kong and Singapore queers, Indonesian gay and lesbian, skinheads of Korea, Indonesian pop-music imagings (*sic*), those exposed to media, South Korean youths – are not literally border-crossing, but stay in their places of origin. There, they are exposed to the messages of world-wide media that they distort without any attempt of opening themselves up to their original meaning; they merely invest the messages and examples they receive with the characteristics of their particular *milieu*. This demonstrates that they are rooted in a place – and like it that way – at the same time that they are exposed to cosmopolitan or global media. Contrary to the expectations of some researchers, the exposure to the wide-world world does not deracinate. On the contrary, it strengthens roots and identity, resulting in the 'passionate sense of belonging to a certain locale' (p.12) that the editors have dubbed 'patriotism'. Hence, the subjects described are of two worlds and can so be called 'cosmo-patriots'.

Most other chapters, however, lack this broader perspective or it is at least not articulated as clearly as in the chapter on conflict and violence. With their fairly exclusive focus on Sumba, they will therefore appeal primarily to specialists with a distinctive interest in Eastern Indonesia. They are generally well-written, but still leave a number of questions unanswered.

In Chapter 8, for example, Vel explains in great detail the motivations of various groups of people who campaigned for the creation of a new district, Central Sumba. According to the author, it was a combination of what she calls 'overseas Sumbanese', local activists and well-educated but unemployed youth who pursued the creation of this district (p. 185). The reader learns a lot about the main actors and their strategies to achieve their goals, yet there is little information about the various social forces that did not want a new district in Sumba. This is even more surprising in view of Vel's admission that only a small minority of Sumbanese actually supported the movement for a new district. But apart from some scattered references to 'outspoken opponents' and the 'rather indifferent' majority of the population (p. 185), the reader learns nothing about these critics.

Similarly, the analysis of electoral dynamics in Chapter 9 raises a number of questions. Perhaps most significantly, the relation between national and local elections is not explored satisfactorily. Vel dismisses the importance of national politics, claiming that people 'were not very involved' (p. 211). But the voter turnout of 80 percent in the presidential election seems to suggest otherwise. Moreover, there are important patronage networks between Jakarta and Sumba, as alluded to repeatedly throughout the book. Arguably these networks would be very heavily involved during the national elections, but Vel does not shed much light on this dimension of electoral politics.

## Disputable assertions

More specifically, some of the assertions in this chapter seem to be quite disputable. Among these are for example Vel's elevation of Vedi Hadiz' 'predatory interests' argument to a general consensus in academic literature (p. 212), her discussion of the relation between political parties and presidential candidates (p. 211-212) or her sweeping statement that 'political parties generally create campaign teams to assist the *pilkada* candidates in their election campaigns' (p. 214). In fact, as various analyses of local elections have shown, parties actually often play only marginal roles in *pilkada* campaigns, leaving candidates to assemble their own teams without substantial support from the parties that nominated them.

Finally, a word on the overall presentation of the book. Unfortunately, it must be said, the editors of this book have worked rather sloppily. The first three chapters in particular are riddled with typos, missing words and grammatical mistakes, and several names are misspelled, for instance Nusa Tenggara Timur (p. 7; should be Timur), Donald Emerson (p. 8; should be Emmerson) or Ann Booth (p. 28; should be Anne Booth). More diligent editing could have prevented this kind of problem and thereby facilitated readability.

In sum, this book is probably a bit too narrowly focused to reach a wide audience, but it does provide some valuable data for scholars of Eastern Indonesia and those who are generally interested in Indonesian local politics.

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## Modernisation theory?

It brings to mind the modernisation thesis of the 1950s and 60s. Exposure to the modern world would westernise, secularise and rationalise. Tradition, religion, and disorganisation were on the way out. Then, lo and behold, 'religion' was coming back with a vengeance, identity celebrated (and often powerfully pushed by the nation-state), and westernisation merely expressed in symbols, from skyscrapers to the fashion dictates of Paris, even as it was not impressed on the mind. From the late 1960s on, it was, therefore, concluded that exposure to world-wide modernity reinforces the local; that it prompts the religious impulse; that identity is rooted in the life-world; that life-styling is a mere fashionable fad animated by the deep-seated drive for distinction. In brief, inputs coming from the outside are localised, are adapted to the own way of life. Now, by substituting globalisation for modernisation, the whole sequence is largely restated.

Of course, this is not what editors and contributors have in mind. They aim 'to unpack the dialectics between the local, the national, the regional and the global' (p.11), which doubtlessly is a legitimate endeavour. The principal vehicle of the extra-local messages is the media, and who, these days, has the privilege of not being assailed by its coverage? So, why concentrate on marginal, often fleeting groups and artistic expression, classified under Sex, Space, Body, Race, when discussing a virtually universal phenomenon? Any peasant come to town crosses more borders than those who have their lifestyles inspired by pop

# 'Inventing' the horse

This book is full of interest. The geographical and historical core of it may be found in the sub-title. Its chief authors, Greg Bankoff and Sandra Swart, are respectively authorities on the Philippines and Southern Africa: the former discusses the introduction of horses in the Philippines, their role in its colonial history, their impact on and adaptation to the environment; the latter the role of horses in settler South Africa and the emergence of the 'Besotho pony' in Lesotho.

Nicholas Tarling

Bankoff, G. and Sandra Swart, with Peter Boomgaard, William Clarence-Smith, Bernice de Jong Boers and Dhiravat na Pombejra. 2007. *Breeds of Empire. The 'Invention' of the Horse in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa 1500-1950.* Copenhagen: NIAS Press. viii + 263 pages. Maps, tables, illus. ISBN 978 87 7694 014 0

COLLABORATORS in the book include William Clarence-Smith, whose concise and informative essay on the maritime horse trade of the Indian Ocean shows the connection between the two areas; Peter Boomgaard, who writes on horse-breeding and trading in the history of Indonesia; Bernice de Jong Boers, who writes illuminatingly on the horses of the Indonesian island of Sumbawa; and Dhiravat na Pombejra, who, drawing on Dutch sources for the history of Ayutthaya, reminds us that horses were not the draught animals of Southeast Asia, but were used in non-colonial states for military and ceremonial purposes. Neither Southeast Asia nor Southern Africa was, by contrast, say, to Australia, ideal for the horse. But while horses affected the environment, they also adapted to it. Typically the 'breeds' that emerged were small but their stamina was great.

## Horses and humans

The principal authors comment on the story from many points of view and offer many insights on the relationships of horse and human and also some on the relationships among humans. The role of the horse in human society is, of course, not a new topic, but it has rarely been placed in the context of colonialism. Historiography has been more familiar with those who rode into Europe – to borrow the title of the English translation of Miklos Jankovich's book (1971) – or with the feudal system that sustained the mounted knight in Europe. The age of the horse indeed did not at once terminate with the building of railways or the advent of motorised vehicles. Horses were employed and destroyed on a grand scale in the First World War.

'[T]he only thing that wrings my heart and soul', cried the composer Edward Elgar at its outset, 'is the thought of the horses – oh! my beloved animals – the men – and women can go to hell – but my horses – I walk round and round this room cursing God for allowing dumb animals to be tortured.' (quoted in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar A Creative Life*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 670). But it was true of the Second World War, too. Hitler invaded Russia with 600,000 vehicles, but, as Richard Overy points out, also with 700,000 horses. (Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, London: Pimlico, 2006, p. 264)

Perhaps our authors under-emphasise the extent to which horses have appeared in past historiography – Napoleon's Marengo is not the first war-horse whose name is remembered: Bucephalus supported Alexander the Great and Babieca El Cid (and no Antipodean author can forget the legendary race-horse Phar Lap) – and in literature – Black Beauty is preceded by Rosinante. It is not clear, in other words, that the horse has been quite so 'othered' as is suggested. Whether there is, or should be, horse-story as there may be her-story as well as history is open to question. The principal authors raise it, but do not goad us to answer. But their initiative is welcome. Could it apply to other creatures that have had the good fortune and the misfortune to be closely associated with the activities and imaginings of humankind? – the cat, the dog, or the elephant, the chicken or the hawk, the whale.

## Breeds and breeding

Our authors put some emphasis on the 'invention' of the horse and on the emergence of 'breeds' and the concept of 'thoroughbreds'. That invites the adoption of yet other perspectives. Notwithstanding the usefulness and the endurance of the horses that adapted to the conditions of Southern Africa or Southeast Asia, human beings sought to improve their 'breeding'. In the late 19th century, as Professor Bankoff points out, Spaniards in the Philippines became convinced that life in the tropics debilitated both man and beast and that 'science' had the answer. 'And just as nature needed the intervening hand of man, white man, to reverse the process of retardation, so the local population required the guidance and control of Spanish colonialism to escape from 'savagery'.' (p.121)

'It is widely accepted', Dr Swart adds, 'that human 'races' are far from natural and are in fact socially produced and shifting, but animal breeds are often a safe realm for those narratives on to which conceptions of human difference such as hierarchy, gender, class, and national character are mapped.' (p. 147) Historians of the colonial world, and indeed of the Western world, cannot ignore the looseness of thinking and talking about the 'races' of men. If, as they should, they read this excellent book, they will also be reminded how easy it has been, not only to imagine animals as humans, but to regard humans as animals, to be, in the case of 'lesser breeds' or 'impure blood' or 'bad stock', to be improved, used or disposed of, trampled down by panzers and horses' hooves.

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INSET TOP:  
Chinese dressage horse  
INSET MIDDLE:  
Besotho pony. Image by Jazz Kuschke.  
INSET BELOW:  
Napoleon crossing the Alps on his horse Marengo.



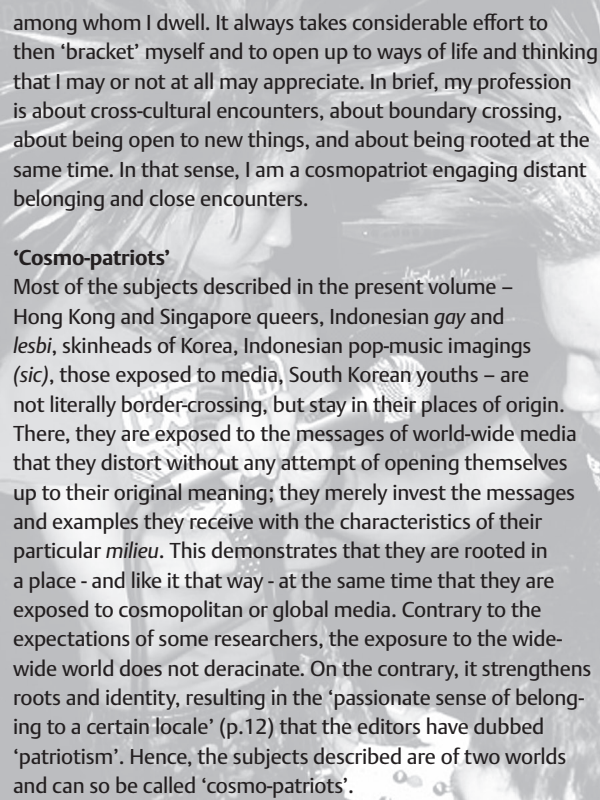
# Reinventing the wheel

Hoodwinked by the enigmatic title, I expected to review a book on my preoccupation with anthropological field work.<sup>1</sup>

Niels Mulder

Jurriëns, Edwin and Jeroen de Kloet (eds.). 2007. *Cosmopatriots: On Distant Belongings and Close Encounters.* Amsterdam, New York: Editions Rodopi B.V. 302 pages. ISBN 978 90 420 2360 4.

YES, EVEN AFTER SPENDING most of my professional life among strangers, I cannot escape from my Holland-Dutch roots and bourgeois birth. To an important extent, these decide what I first note and think, and how I'll distort the image of the people



BELOW: 同奕, the first anthology of Singaporean gay Chinese fiction. Written by Ken Ang.



## Ambiguity

The window is dressed by an ominous quote from Jacques Derrida on which the book opens, and in places the reader will be in for a rough ride, since many contributors eagerly theorise their descriptions of the obvious and expectable. However this may be, the best working hypothesis that emerges is that the localisation or adaptation of extraneous inputs hybridises, pollutes, betrays, bastardises, and demonstrates the dangers of essentialism or the quest for pristine purity. This implies that identities, however deeply rooted, are ambiguous and negotiable, too.

Even so, certain authors want to emphasise essences and stress the often expressed nativism of the adapters. Did

the *ligne sac* and hula-hoop crazes I witnessed in 1958 make the Japanese any less self-secure?<sup>2</sup> Most probably not. Did the soccer hooliganism of the fans of *FC Surabaya* – regularly drawing a trail of destruction through Java in the 1990s – make these fans any less Madurese, Javanese, Indonesian? It probably did, yet it may have strengthened their urban proletarian belonging. There is an element of the all-possible in the outcome of cultural contact, and so I remain reticent to efforts of over-theorisation of intercultural translation or the over-interpretation of cultural essentials of which the volume offers many instances.

## Overwhelming diversity

Concretely, the collection offers readings on being gay in Chinese and Indonesian localities; on maintaining an evolving local identity in the face of extraneous modernisation and state-sponsored essentialism that tells the citizens what it is to be Chinese, Korean, Indonesian; on Indonesian and Korean pop and youth culture; on de-territorialising aesthetics in international Indonesian and diasporic Chinese art.

The rationale for this overwhelming diversity is that we may gain theoretically relevant insight through focusing on the marginal. In exploratory studies, this often is the case indeed, also because absurd outcomes have the merit of showing what things are not. This approach through serendipity would have tremendously gained in credibility if any or some of the tentative conclusions on translation, root-searching, or cultural pollution would have

been applied to mainstream situations that are, wherever in the world, subject to the same processes. Thus far, however, these marginal cases, diversity, eclectic theorising, etc., make me fear that the editors bit off more than they could chew. Granted, the question of how scholars should engage the contradictions in everyday practices and the concomitant uncertainties of identity remains as valid as ever, yet the present miscellany of divergent interpretations leaves the reader – me, at least – bewildered. Maybe I am growing old.

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## Notes

1. E.g., Niels Mulder. 2008. *Doing Thailand; the anthropologist as a young dog in Bangkok in the 1960s and 2009. Professional Stranger; doing Thailand during its most violent decade. A field diary.* Bangkok: White Lotus.
2. E.g., Nguyen Van Thang. 2007. *Ambiguity of Identity. The Mieu in North Vietnam.* Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
3. In, Niels Mulder. 2008. *Rondje Wereld in het jaar van de hoelahoep.* Rijswijk: Elmar.