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Mapping the Acehese Past

R. MICHAEL FEENER, PATRICK DALY, and ANTHONY REID, eds.
Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011, xvi+292p.

One of the underlying themes in this edited volume on Aceh is that “a fresh look at the . . . archives suggests that new histories can be created” (J. G. Taylor, p. 234), so each of the articles presents a new history, a new production of knowledge, a new way of representing and looking at Aceh using old archival, historical sources that have previously already been written about from other angles. These include ancient history archaeological findings and investigations of ceramics and Muslim tombstones; the Ottoman Empire's archives on the friendship and collaboration between Acehese sultans and the Ottoman Empire; close readings from a fresh perspective of traditional Malay-Acehese hikayat and indigenous oral traditions on *prang sabil*; the art of royal letter writing by three Acehese sultans from different periods; a very brief look at Portuguese archives; the close reading and analyses of Dutch letters, VOC correspondence, notes, and gift exchanges with the Acehese sultans and the *orang kaya*, and KITLV photographs. This book highlights the cosmopolitanism and richness of Aceh's connections to the outside world and is, according to the editors, a book about Aceh as seen from the “outsider's perspectives.” But there is an inconsistency: if it

is a book by outsiders about outsider's perspectives on Aceh, then where does one place the two articles by the only two Acehnese in the book, Teuku Iskandar and Amirul Hadi? Are they Acehnese outsiders?

The most informative (with a fresh perspective), elegantly written, and profoundly critical papers in this book are those by Teuku Iskandar ("Aceh as a crucible of Muslim-Malay literature"), Ismail Hakki Goksoy ("Ottoman-Aceh relations as documented in Turkish sources"), Annabel Teh Gallop ("Gold, silver and lapis lazuli: Royal letters from Aceh in the seventeenth century"), Ismail Hakki Kadi, A. C. S. Peacock and Annabel Teh Gallop (on "Writing history: The Acehnese embassy to Istanbul, 1849–1852"), and Jean Gelman Taylor ("Aceh histories in the KITLV images archive"). Here is one example of something hilarious:

The grand vizier's minutes suggest the limitations of the Ottoman bureaucracy's intelligence about the political and administrative structure of Southeast Asia. He wrote that "the place called Java is a sort of province of the great island of Sumatra," implying that the Ottomans did really consider Java as a province of Sumatra, as the Acehnese mission claimed. (Kadi, Peacock and Gallop, p. 176)

Annabel Teh Gallop examines an example of how artistically sophisticated and intellectually subtle the Acehnese were in the art of rhetoric:

As with so many royal Malay epistles, this is a carefully crafted and extremely diplomatic letter, deploying both bombast and subtlety as judged appropriate to convey what is essentially a negative message. (Gallop, p. 116, describing the content of Sultan Iskandar Thani's [r. 1636–1641] letter to Frederik Hendrik, Prince of Orange [1584–1647])

Jean Taylor provides a fascinating unpacking of the problem of power and inequality in the field of history and historiography, in particular in the use of photographs as tools of history:

Consideration of what actually was photographed obliges us to recognize that photography is not an objective record of peoples, times and places. Photographs are subjected to manipulation through selection, like any other set of documents. They are staged records and products of fleeting relationships between the photographed and the photographer . . . Specialists in colonial photography draw attention to the social distance between the viewer and the viewed, and to the process of "othering." (J.G. Taylor, p. 201)

These articles are riveting and fascinating to read, and a treasure trove of new insights and new knowledge into old sources that have already been interpreted by dozens of other interpreters. I strongly recommend these articles and this book, especially to Acehnese readers. Granted it is so much easier to "handle" old texts and archival photographs from a great distance (both temporally and geographically), compared to doing ethnographic fieldwork and living with Acehnese in rural areas—and this is where one can see the editing hand of Anthony Reid, whose name is on

the cover as one of the editors, but who has no paper in the volume. This is the historian's selective *bias* of "how to map the Acehnese past" in a particular way. And one can see why there were protests outside the conference (from which the papers in this book were collected), because this mapping relies primarily on royal letters that survived, hikayat texts commissioned by sultans, foreign power-elites' correspondence with the Acehnese elite, and the material culture, gifts, photographs, tombstones of important people who "mattered" and were able to write themselves into history. What about the majority of Acehnese who were not in the "paper trail"? James Scott's argument in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) that "the job of peasants . . . is to stay out of the archives" would be very instructive here in unpacking the inequalities in the production of knowledge about Aceh, and why Acehnese public intellectuals (who have minimal access to archives, surviving texts kept outside of Aceh, but rely mostly on oral traditions and local knowledges) continue to feel "inferior" when confronted by their foreign counterparts who focus on print literature, no matter how empathetic and well-meaning.

I must admit that I was initially reluctant to say anything enthusiastic about the book, since the conference from which it was produced (the first International Conference on Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies, ICAIOS) in Banda Aceh, funded by the Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi (BRR) and organized in conjunction with the Asia Research Institute (ARI) was rather controversial, with Acehnese civil society groups and students protesting in front of the hotel where the conference was held back in February 24–27, 2007. I was one of the invited speakers to this first International Conference on Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS) and remember being instructed that we must stay in the hotel and be careful about going outside as there were Acehnese protesters outside who were not thrilled about the "types" of scholars and scholarship being presented in this conference. It is revealing that there is an absence of discussion of the contentious socio-political-economic-ecological context of present inequalities of knowledge production in Aceh in this neatly sanitized book.

Writing history, as some of the papers in this volume have argued eloquently (especially those by Teuku Iskandar, Annabel Teh Gallop, Ismail Hakki Kadi, A.C.S. Peacock, and Jean Gelman Taylor), is never an objective, neutral exercise: it is a process of selectively choosing which photographs, symbols, words, rhetoric, manipulated maps to use to represent one's self, or an entire nation. It is the same with the selection of articles for this mapping Acehnese history book, which is telling in terms of its emphases and absences. So while I found this book highly informative and fun to read, enlightening on so many aspects of Aceh's past which I haven't come across (especially the use of sources from the Ottoman archives), my hope is that it will be translated into Acehnese and Bahasa Indonesia to bridge the gap with wider Acehnese and Indonesian audiences who may just easily dismiss it as yet another history book by foreigners who know little about Acehnese' current conditions of continuing to feel "inferior" and "fossilized" (the words of a prominent Acehnese

public intellectual in BRR and IAIN) in what they see are ongoing processes of domination.

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The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity

KAH SENG LOH, EDGAR LIAO, CHENG TJU LIM, and GUO-QUAN SENG

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 347p., with bibliography and index.

This book examines the history of the University Socialist Club (USC) at the University of Malaya (later renamed as University of Singapore) from 1953 to 1971 within the broad context of British decolonization, the global Cold War, and the making of the modern nation-states of Singapore and Malaya(sia). It is a timely product because the only substantive works on this important subject are a 1973 unpublished BA graduating thesis (Koh 1973) and the recent firsthand accounts in *The Fajar Generation* as edited by three former USC members (Poh *et al.* 2010). Moreover, it arrives at an opportune moment when the authoritarian politics of Singapore appear to be changing, with “untold stories” and “alternative narratives” being offered through a multitude of platforms to challenge the dominant state narrative of the Singapore Story as framed primarily by the elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew.

It is to the credit of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS, Singapore) to have provided the four young scholars with initial financial support and moral impetus to explore new ground in Singapore history (p. 12). It would have been even better if ISEAS had seen the project to its fruition and publication through its own internal publishing unit. Similarly, the authors have registered their share of difficulty in getting access to local primary source materials, especially government records, and their fresh archival findings were mostly excavated from foreign archives instead of the National Archives of Singapore (pp. 38–39). How they overcame these obstacles is testimony to the tenacity and skill of the history writing of the authors as they have indeed succeeded in putting together a volume rich in details and analysis.

The main body of discussion begins with the reluctant British approval for forming a political club within the nascent university as well as the *Fajar* arrests and sedition trial which elevated the