

A Sea of Histories, a History of the Seas: Interview with Adrian B. Lapan

When Prince Claus of the Netherlands visited Indonesia in 1994, he asked Adri Lapan whether it wasn't difficult to describe Indonesia's past—where to start? The answer: 'Just as difficult as Germany's history, should one start with Bavaria, Saxony, Alamannia? Surely not Prussia?' In December 2003, Hendrik Niemeijer interviewed Adri Lapan in a place where they had often met before, the Warung Sate Tegal close to his house at Jalan Haji Sa'abun no. 9 in Pasar Minggu, South Jakarta. Professor Lapan was born in Tegal on 1 September 1929. A year later the Lapan family moved to Manado, in the Minahasa, the northernmost province of Sulawesi, where his father was elected to the 'Minahasa Council'. Until then his father, Bernard W. Lapan, had worked for the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) and he wrote articles for Indonesian newspapers in Batavia and Manado. He even published a short-lived paper of his own, Fadjar Kemadjoean. In 1938 the Minahasa Council elected B.W. Lapan to the Volksraad. As the Volksraad convened only twice a year, the Lapan family continued to live in the Minahasa where Adri attended school in the village (now the town) of Tomohon.

The Minahasa is known for its high standards of education at that time. What was your early youth like there?

In Tomohon there was a good school, the Louwerierschool, established by a Dutch Christian Protestant foundation. The children had to speak Dutch. There were seven classes and this basic school gave access to the MCILO—the highest institute of learning in the Minahasa before World War II. In January 1942, however, when I was in the seventh grade, we were occupied by the Japanese. That meant that I had to go to a Japanese school. We were certainly influenced by the Japanese occupation.

Where we were Dutch-oriented before, the Japanese presence gave us another view of the world outside. But in my case something important happened during my childhood in Tomohon on 31 January 1938, when Princess Beatrix was born. I was playing with the children of our Dutch neighbour, one of the Dutch teachers at the MOLO who rented one of

my grandfather's houses. We used to sing in anticipation of the event, 'Er is een prinsje geboren, Oranje blijft bestaan.' The message reached us by radio while we were playing. It was still night in the Netherlands, and I ran to my grandfather with the news. 'So what?,' he said. 'But she will become our queen,' I replied. I became confused when he remarked: 'Your queen?'

After the war we had to go back to the Dutch education system, from the third grade of the Japanese Chu-gakko to the third grade of the Dutch MULO. It was a difficult time because my father was held prisoner in Java by the Dutch (as a result of the February 1946 revolt when North Sulawesi declared it would join the Republic of Indonesia). I was the eldest in the family, and had attended the AMS from 1947, a year after it was opened. But in December 1949, after the Round Table Conference, my father came back home, just a few months before I finished school. He urged me to go on studying as I was actually planning to look for a job. I chose the Fakultas Teknik Clniversitas Indonesia in Bandung to study to become a civil engineer.

At the time, there were not as many options as there are today. For tertiary/higher study, there were medical, law, agricultural and technical colleges. A faculty of arts and philosophy had been opened in Batavia in 1941, mostly for Dutch children, as they could not go to the Netherlands, and then occupied by the Germans. But at high school I had opted for mathematics and the natural sciences, so the obvious choice was to become either a medical doctor or an engineer. Therefore, I went to Bandung. But this was not a good choice. The theoretical side of it was interesting, but I felt I could never become a good engineer, and I disliked the long periods of standing behind the drawing board. In 1952, I fell ill with severe pneumonia, and in 1953 I decided to leave my studies in Bandung. In the same year my father (1892–1977) was transferred to Jakarta to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and retired shortly afterwards. After his release from prison he had been appointed acting governor of the province of Sulawesi, which at the time comprised the whole island. His transfer made it possible to re-unite the family in Jakarta where I started looking for a job.

First, I worked in the library of the Biro Perancang Negara, the forerunner of Bappenas, the National Planning Agency, on a day-to-day basis for a salary of 14 rupiah per day. A year later this was raised to 15 rupiah and it was clear to me that it offered no prospects at all. So I decided to leave and applied for a number of jobs, until I became a journalist for the *Indonesian Observer* in 1954. That was a completely different kind of

life. In 1955, the Asian-African Conference was held in Bandung, and as a young reporter I could meet great political leaders such as Nasser, Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, the Burmese premier CI Nu, and the like. Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus attended as an observer. There was also Zhou Enlai of China, but I couldn't get near him. He was always surrounded by a host of big senior reporters.

You were 26 at the time. What was your own ideological position?

The *Indonesian Observer* had as its motto 'independent and objective.' It expressed no preferential sympathies for the World Powers and I agreed with that. Initially assigned to proof-reading, I was then placed at the 'foreign desk' of the newspaper, receiving foreign telegrams from Reuters, Associated Press, United Press, AFP from France, but not from Aneta in the Netherlands. I had to select those news messages that I thought were interesting, for instance, on the Kashmir conflict. Often, when the *Observer* published news about the conflict, the press attachés of either India or Pakistan would come to my office to protest when the news was not in their favour. That stimulated me to read more about the history of the region. Although I had liked the history lessons at school, it had never crossed my mind before to become a professional historian. As for many of my contemporaries at that time, the Faculty of Arts (opened in 1941 mainly for Dutch youngsters) was a luxury for those who did not need to find a practical job. But journalism changed all that.

How did you come into contact with Sartono Kartodirdjo?

A rather interesting story. He influenced me even before he became a well-known historian and before I had met him. As I said, my journalistic work forced me to read more about the historical background of current events, so I was toying with the idea of studying history at the Universitas Indonesia. But I was informed that the history department was at the point of closing down. The Dutch professors had left because of the New Guinea conflict, many times lectures had to be cancelled as those who replaced them were working part-time, so the students left and chose other subjects like archaeology, law, sinology, philology and linguistics. Then, while perusing reports from Antara, the Indonesian news agency, I came across the name of Sartono Kartodirdjo among those who graduated from the Fakultas Sastra. At that time new university graduates were newsworthy people, and he was from the history department. So, history was being taught after all.

Who were the first history teachers at the history department at that time?

Soon afterwards, in 1956, I was registered as a student, very easily without any selection as is the rule nowadays. I attended courses given by the first generation of Indonesian scholars such as Professor Husein Djajadiningrat who taught the history of Islam and the Middle East and Tjan Tjoe Som, a sinologist from Leiden who not only taught the long story of China's past, but also problems of Chinese historiography. There was also an Italian, Giulio Costantini who had fled from Shanghai after the communists took over the city, and was teaching aspiring diplomats at the ADLN (Akademi Dinas Luar Negeri, the academy of the office of foreign affairs). As one of our part-time professors he gave a course on diplomatic history, but also enlightened us on Italian political history and philosophy, introducing names like Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce, and also Machiavelli and Mazzini. The unification of Italy was a relevant topic for Indonesia at the time. Later I learned that Sukarno had also read Mazzini!

How long were you registered as a student?

Five years, I graduated in 1961. The time when I had to sit my examinations during the early years often coincided with a busy period at the newspaper. So the editor of the *Observer* wanted me to make a clear choice: history or journalism. I chose the first, although when I enrolled as a student history was only meant to help me in my work. But I had come to know the city of Jakarta, and it was possible to make a living from translation work.

In 1958, I met Pak Sartono for the first time. I had seen him from a distance the previous year at the first National Seminar on History in Yogyakarta, but he was very busy at the time and I wanted to explore the city and its surroundings. He was then working for MIPI (Majelis Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, the Indonesian Council for Sciences, later LJPI) and was assigned to be co-ordinator of the first National Science Congress (now known as KIPNAS, Kongres Ilmu Pengetahuan Nasional) held in Malang. A friend, Eddy (now Prof.) Masinambow, told me that he was looking for an assistant co-ordinator, so I applied for the job. Afterwards I was offered a part-time job in the MIPI library and later in the public relations section. This involves programmes like the popularisation of science, and I had to lay the groundwork for setting up science clubs, modelled on the Science Clubs of the USA. The director, Dr Watson Davis, came over as a consultant. I also had to assist Dr. Richard Russell, a distinguished American geologist, who came as a consultant on scientific organisations. We had to organise many conferences, national as well as regional. It was the first time that Southeast Asian scholars had worked

together. Before independence, each of them was oriented towards their respective colonial metropolises.

When in 1962 Sartono received a scholarship to Yale University, I became the co-ordinator of the second Science Congress held in Yogyakarta. It was also the time when Taufik Abdullah joined MIPI. It was difficult to organise such an event in the early 1960s. There were not many hotels, and there were many practical problems. For instance, the University of Gadjah Mada did have cars, but all the tyres were completely worn out. As the co-ordinator, I went to the tyre factory in Bogor, only to find that I needed permission from the Department of Industry. We procured a truck full of tyres, but the road from Bogor to Yogya was very unsafe because of robbers. We therefore had to ask for a police escort. Of course I did not have to climb on that truck myself!

As coordinator of the Second Science Congress in Yogyakarta, I had various kinds of responsibilities. President Sukarno had to open it officially. There had been quite a few assaults on his life, and he already suffered from a kidney problem. A special toilet was reserved for him, and we had made sure that nobody had placed a time bomb in there, and so on, and I had to keep the key, which I felt to be an enormous responsibility. Later I helped to organise another conference, the fourth IAHA meeting, held for the first time in Indonesia in 1974, also in Yogyakarta. Sartono was, then, president of IAHA, and I was the secretary-general. Former Vice President Hatta was the keynote speaker. Curiously enough, he also had to go to the toilet and I had to be on guard. I guess I'm the only historian who has guarded the two proclaimers of Indonesian Independence in such a way!

I guess that is so! How did the first contacts with Dutch historians develop meanwhile?

That brings me to another anecdote about another conference. The First International Seminar on Southeast Asian History held in Singapore in 1961. There I met Padre Antonio da Silva Rego who was an expert on Portuguese sources about Indonesia. He later helped me find my way in the Portuguese archives. The Indonesian delegation consisted of Sartono, Soetjipto Wirjosuparto and Soekmono. There was also Prof. Slametmulyana who lived in Singapore. And Soedjatmoko—already a well-known figure—had been specially invited. It was a privilege for me to join the group, just a few months before I graduated. The only historian from Holland was Dr H.J. de Graaf who, of course, was very curious about the situation in Indonesia. We had many discussions during coffee breaks. We were the only Dutch-speaking participants. After a full day of

sessions, we had to attend a reception at the palace of the Yang Dipertuan Negara, the head of state. As De Graaf was alone, we shared a taxi, and as we entered the reception hall together, the major-domo announced: 'The delegates of the Republic of Indonesia and the Kingdom of the Netherlands!' And that happened during the height of the Irian Barat conflict! Later I met De Graaf very often in the KITLV library in Leiden.

At that time you also developed an interest in maritime history.

That began in 1963. I thought I had had enough of organising conferences and looked for a job more in line with my historical interests. Machfudi Mangkudilaga was head of the Historical Section of ALRI, the Indonesian Navy. He invited me to join his staff. He was also the contact person between KITLV and its Indonesian members with the title of *commissaris*. Despite the disruption of political relations with the Netherlands because of New Guinea, we continued to receive the *Bijdragen* via Basel, Switzerland. In 1963, the conflict was resolved and Machfudi received the very first scholarship from the Netherlands. I became head of the historical section, but was at first reluctant also to take over his work as the contact man for KITLV. But Prof. Resink persuaded me to accept: 'After Machfudi returns you will be given a scholarship, too.'

As staff member and later the head of the historical section of the Navy, I had the opportunity to join several sea expeditions to various places in the archipelago. Even Maluku. This is how I learnt to observe Indonesia from the sea. Moreover, these expeditions often did not follow regular routes. We also had to deliver provisions to faraway places, for instance, lighthouses on remote islands. Once we went to Thailand as the Navy had to procure rice during the hard times of the mid-1960s. That gave me the opportunity to meet Thai historians. I also met the doyen, Phya Anuman Rajadhon at the Siam Society.

When were you finally invited to the Netherlands?

In 1967. I was then back at MIPI where research institutes had been established, including the LRKN (Lembaga Research Kebudayaan Nasional), the National Institute for Cultural Studies. I was asked to join this new institute, but got permission to go on study leave, as in 1966 I had already applied for a scholarship in Leiden to study maritime history. When I applied I only had one name, Prof. De Milo, specialist in the history of the sea. But he had passed away, and his forthcoming successor, Jaap Bruijn, was still working on his Ph.D. dissertation with Prof. Kernkamp. I attended Jaap Bruijn's courses, together with younger

fellow students like Femme Gaastra and the late Frank Broeze. Prof. Bruijn retired this year (2003), after having supervised scores of Ph.D. dissertations.

What were your initial experiences in the Netherlands?

I realised that it was not possible to work on a dissertation. There was no supervisor, and the grant was for only one year, later extended for another year. True, Mrs. Meilink-Roelofs who helped me enormously in the Dutch archives, was appointed temporary professor, but that was in 1969 when I had already packed my things. Therefore, besides attending courses, I worked in archives and (mostly) in the KITLV library which was then close to the station. At the time, the archives of the nineteenth century were still kept in a bunker in Schaarsbergen, only to be reached by bus from Arnhem. It was a very cold location in the winter. The keeper saw me shivering, so the next time he lent me his personal electric radiator from his flat. I only consulted the indexes; the documents I needed were sent to Amsterdam, to the municipal archives on the Amsteldijk. I lived in the Lassusstraat, close to De Lairesestraat. I had first lived in the cheapest pension in Leiden, then for six months in Katwijk-aan-zee. I stayed for a year in Amsterdam, and the last six months in Leiden again for library research. It was interesting to work together with Bruijn, reading the ship logs of the VOC.

Which historian do you admire the most?

Braudel, of course. As soon as his *La Méditerranée* came out in 1966 (the first edition was published in 1949), I ordered it for the MIPI library, as I could not afford to buy the two volumes myself. Now this French edition is still kept in the library of the Documentation Centre of LIPI, but I am afraid not many students are using it. A revised edition appeared in 1979, and there is now an English translation. The way Braudel dealt with the Mediterranean world was very appealing. I also liked Chinese history, but as I don't know Chinese, I have only learnt about it from French books like those of Rene Grousset, Marcel Granet and later Elyseeff.

As a consequence, I began to divide the Indonesian seas in the Braudellian way: the Java Sea, the Banda Sea, the Sulawesi Sea, etc. This was a liberation from 'traditional' history writing which was completely Java-centric, or as before viewed from a Dutch perspective. History books used to follow the Dutch trail, beginning with the arrival of the first Dutch ships in Banten in 1596, to Maluku, then back to Java, as if the history of Maluku stopped when the Dutch became more interested in

the exploitation of Java and later shifted to the big plantations of Sumatra. As a matter of fact, the Dutch legacy is still being felt today. The study of history begins with the availability of European sources. Indigenous sources should be studied by philologists only, while the ancient monuments belong to the field of archaeology.

Other historians were also inspired by Braudel, for instance Anthony Reid. Yes, there is a Fernand Braudel Center in New York, and in 1985 (shortly before he died) many historians and economists gathered at Chateauvallon for the 'Journées Fernand Braudel,' three days of discussion on his three most important works: the Mediterranean, capitalism; and the identity of France. However, Southeast Asia is not like the Mediterranean which is a well-researched and a well-documented area with an abundance of sources. Certainly, I have immense admiration for Anthony Reid's works and always enjoy reading his books and articles. He did much pioneering work, and I like *The Age of Commerce*. It is a much better name than Chinese expansion or Indianisation, the colonial era, or the age of European expansion, or, much less, 'the Vasco da Gama era.' Yet, sometimes I wonder whether there were no other, earlier ages of commerce, during the Sung, Tang or earlier times. Of course, for these periods West European sources are of no use and most indigenous texts do not give chronological data. But trade with East and West Asia has had a long history. And there are still many sites waiting to be excavated. Besides, I don't think that history is linear.

Until very recently most Indonesian archaeologists only looked for ancient monuments. Now they realise that there are more things hidden below the surface. Perhaps they might dig another Sambisari (a temple which was completely buried), but harbour cities like Kota Cina in North Sumatra have also provided interesting material. The work in Bali by I Wayan Ardika, for instance, gives new insights into trade relations in remote periods, and the results of the French team working with our archaeologists in Sumatra and Bangka are improving our knowledge about ancient trade. Excavations in the Mekong delta are still going on, also in other places in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines. Here we should not expect pre-Spanish monumental remains, so excavations are focused on old trading centres. And marine archaeology is here more advanced than in Indonesia.

By the way, I think our Philippine friends are not only well advanced in the study of shipwrecks. They are also much better at finding and exploring new approaches to the study of their past. As you know, I was

teaching Southeast Asian history at the University of Indonesia from 1961 (also at Gadjah Mada University from 1962 to 1966), on and off, not continuously, only as far as my work at the Navy and at LIPI allowed, and I also travelled, including in those days. When I decided to stop teaching as I joined the group of the 70-Ups in 2000, I chose as topic for my last semester 'New approaches in Philippine historiography.' For the last sessions, with the help of the SEASREP Council I invited one Filipina and two Filipino historians to give lectures in my course. SEASREP stands for Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program, set up with generous support from the Toyota Foundation. The chief officers are Shaharil (Malaysia), Charnvit (Thailand), Maris Diokno (the Philippines) and Taufik Abdullah (Indonesia).

Well, for my course I invited (1) Dr Teresita Maceda. She analysed protest songs, an alternative mode of truth-telling under martial law. It was an attempt at rewriting history from the point of view of the rank and file members of social movements; (2) Dr Francis Gealogo, a young demographic historian. The use of parish documents has provided interesting insights into the social history of the country during the Spanish colonial period, while labour statistics reveal historical patterns of labour emigration—most relevant to the Indonesian situation as the number of workers who are finding jobs abroad is growing; (3) Prof. Rey Ileto, a very prominent historian and well known for his Pasyon studies that, he believes, are already quite old. But he also discussed more recent topics such as writing non-linear or non-developmental history and avoiding Orientalist pitfalls.

It has often been said that during Soeharto's New Order a great deal of historical objectivity was lost in Indonesia. The focus was almost completely on contemporary, national history. How did you deal with that problem in your situation?

The focus on contemporary history has nothing to do with New Order policy. It is simply a matter of access to Dutch sources. Studying pre-national history requires a good knowledge of the Dutch language. Although Dutch language courses continued to be given to history students (even during the New Guinea conflict when the use of Dutch was discouraged or prohibited—although Soekarno and cabinet ministers spoke Dutch among themselves) results are very poor. A lack of motivation, perseverance or just sheer incompetence? Perhaps because of wrong methods of teaching? I don't know. It is of course very different from my generation who—as the expression goes—imbibed Dutch with

the *paplepel*, the porridge spoon, when we were fed as babies. But I often told my class how Japanese history students manage to obtain a fair and sometimes a very good command of Dutch, although the structure of their language is also very different.

As for objectivity, I must say that any official history is per definition subjective. History from below is a new phenomenon, and there is a distinction between great and little traditions. But indeed, in those days there was much self-censorship in the case of newspapers, books, including history writing. One had to know what to say and what not to say. Certain topics were taboo, like ethnic and race relations and also religious subjects that might cause conflicts. One should not deviate from the government's interpretation of the PancaSila. There was also concern about the style of writing, the choice of words, how to recount things. But, well, lately I have been thinking about those years and have come to the conclusion that we have been conditioned to that kind of situation. Just suppose as a boy of only eight years plus I had run to my Dutch neighbours and told them that, according to grandfather, their queen was not my queen? That would have caused grave consequences for my grandfather. But by instinct I didn't do that. Perhaps I already knew that certain matters should be kept within the family. At the time, I learned to sing Indonesia Raya, taught by an older cousin. In the original version, that is, Indonesia *mulia* (noble) instead of *merdeka* (free). But my parents told me that this must only be sung indoors.

During the so-called New Order, we did say certain things which some people in the government did not like. I don't remember everything, but a few weeks ago at a party I met an old journalist friend whom I had not seen for many years. He reminded me about a statement I had made against the looting of wrecks apparently condoned, if not supported, by top officials. A great deal of important historical information had been lost since the divers were hunting only for treasure and not systematically recording the location and the way the wreck and its contents were found. However, I must say that the Soeharto era was not entirely negative with regard to historical studies. Besides seminars on national history, many workshops on local history were also held. And we—the late Abdurrachman Surjomihardjo, Taufik Abdullah and I—were frequent consultants for projects of the Department of Education and Culture, notably the IDSJ (Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Sejarah Nasional) and IDKD (Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Kebudayaan Daerah), the inventory and documentation of national history and local culture.

Speaking about local history, during that period there began a trend to search for the origins of towns, districts, etc. Some research projects for this purpose were carried out quite scientifically; others less so. But we should see it as a desire to look for one's own roots and identity. And what is interesting is the fact that each wanted a date much older than the others and—more importantly—preferably much older than Jakarta's. We may see it as a counter move, perhaps unconsciously, against the centralising process of the Jakarta government. But, if well researched, the dates could provide options of where to start when writing Indonesian history. As I once wrote, from being in Provence or Okinawa the history of France and Japan is seen from a different perspective.

Can you tell us more about your Ph.D. thesis? You developed it at a later stage in your career. Was that an advantage?

In my case it was certainly an advantage. I had read more books, articles, records, and so forth and I didn't have to rush—no worries about career—and my supervisor, Prof. Sartono, I had known for decades. I was then in my late fifties. During the TANAP workshop in Xiamen last October Prof. Zhang Zhiliang from Beijing told me that, according to Confucius, if you are 50 you already know the way to heaven. And when you are 60, you only want to hear pleasant things. At 70 you may do what you like. So, I think there is a good reason to write a thesis at an advanced age! Today, a Ph.D. degree is the first step in a long career, but I belong to a vanishing generation. Many old professors in Japan wrote their theses at a later stage, too. My dissertation deals with the phenomenon of piracy. In the 1960s during one of our sea expeditions, we landed on a tiny island of a group called Taka Bonerate in the Flores Sea, on Dutch maps called the Tiger Islands. We wanted to buy fresh food, chicken or fish. But it was a very sad forlorn sight. Only two days before pirates had raided the small village. They took away everything, including their stock of chickens. We had to give them some rice and canned food instead. It was the first time I witnessed such a terrible scene. Piracy, I thought, was something you only read about in newspapers, history books or novels. You know, of course, the lines of Gilbert and Sullivan, '... and it is, it is a glorious thing to be a pirate king.' And if I remember well, wasn't it Thucydides who wrote that in the old days people were not offended or ashamed if they were called pirates?

The title of my thesis is *Orang laut, bajak laut, raja laut* (Sea-people, Sea-robbers, Sea-lords). The idea is that each can call the other a pirate, depending from whose angle one is looking. But piracy is a concept in

the minds of people with an established government where the state has the monopoly of violence to exert its authority. Until late in the nineteenth century, there were many states in the archipelago with no clear boundaries either on land or at sea. At sea, they were *raja laut* in their own right, but pirates according to the colonial documents. There were also maritime communities with no fixed places of abode, the *orang laut par excellence*, the sea nomads who lived on boats. They were also featured as pirates in reports compiled by colonial authorities. But surely the VOC ships were initially seen by the local people as pirate vessels, too. At least, that can be surmised when reading the old texts. Only at a later stage, notably in the eighteenth century, was the VOC accepted as a 'local' power. As I said on another occasion, the VOC was then going native. But the arrival of Daendels changed everything. And with the arrival of steamships the balance of power shifted in their favour. By 'they' I mean the Western powers, the superpowers at the time, the *adiraja laut*. Like the superpowers in our time who had the monopoly of nuclear energy, the *adiraja laut* had the monopoly of steam power. Some indigenous raja tried to own steamboats, but the colonial powers only allowed them to order small ships. Well, I can go on and on...

What I wanted to say is that it is certainly worthwhile, if not necessary, to study Indonesian history from a maritime perspective. Van Leur complained that Dutch historiography about Indonesia was written from the decks of VOC ships, but I think that we must go sailing to have a fresh comprehensive look at our past. After all, we call our country *tanah air*—land and water. Therefore, for a balanced picture the study of Indonesian history should be oriented towards both.