

*Banditry in West Java, 1869–1942*

By MARGREET VAN TILL. Trans. by DAVID MCKAY and BEVERLEY JACKSON  
 Singapore: NUS Press, 2011. Pp. 282. Plates, Maps, Bibliography,  
 Index.  
 doi:10.1017/S002246341200015X

This is a fascinating but also disappointing book. The theme, armed gang robbery in and around Batavia over a period of some 80 years, is rich and colourful; the sources are varied, and include not only the colonial archives, but also, and particularly, the local press (both Dutch and Malay). This underappreciated resource proves to be a mine of illuminating anecdotal information. Other aspects of popular culture, such as novels, are also used successfully, while the photographs are relevant and well chosen. Most of the action is set in the capital of the Dutch East Indies, Batavia, and the surrounding residency of the same name. In 1893 this was divided into the city of Batavia itself, the suburbs (Pendjaringan, Pasar Senen, Mangga Besar, Tanah Abang), and the districts of Meester Cornelis (Jatinegara), Tangerang and Buitenzorg (Bogor); the population then numbered 1,162,644, including 12,183 Europeans, 80,551 Chinese, 3,309 Arabs and 1,066,601 ‘natives’ of diverse origin (*Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 1st ed., 4 vols. [Leiden: Brill, 1899–1906]). Batavia was by far the largest city in the Dutch East Indies; its long history (since 1619), variety of functions (commercial, military, administrative), heterogeneous population, atypical hinterland (including many private estates) and idiosyncratic society (Betawi culture, creole Chinese and Europeans, relatively close ties to Europe) all combine to make it a rewarding research focus. (See also Ewald Ebing and Youetta de Jager, *Batavia–Jakarta 1600–2000: A bibliography*.)

Van Till chooses to organise her material into an introduction followed by nine chapters divided in four sections, followed by concluding remarks. The sections are: Setting (Batavia and environs); then Bandits (economics; organisation; firearms; *jagos*, *jimats* and *dukuns*); followed by City-dwellers (progress and degeneration; from bandit novels to detective stories; the bandit Si Pitung and popular history); and finally State (the fight against crime). Both the strengths and weakness of the work are apparent in the introduction: the detail is fascinating, but the line of argument remains unclear, while references to other work on banditry confuse rather than clarify. To begin with the last: there is a discussion of bandits in world-system theory, and in state formation, citing Gallant, Blok and Hobsbawm, with references to Greece, Egypt and the Italian mafia; van Till will thus look at banditry ‘through the lens of a single theory based on large historical forces’ but also consider ‘the specific circumstances’. These include the discourse on banditry, the opposition between city and threatening outlying areas, the press, and demands for modernisation of the police, and interesting typologies of criminal types. This seems promising, but proves to be too much of a good thing. The single theory is never clearly focused or applied, and references to other literature on the topic or region are unsystematic, restricted to comments on the extent to which van Till’s data supports or undermines their conclusions.

In the concluding remarks the author focuses on three themes related to 'specific circumstances'. First van Till emphasises the variegated world of Indonesian crime; she discusses how mythologised bandits became the basis for 'scientific' studies, which in turn supplied material for later anthropologists and historians: this is an important point. Van Till also rejects the idea of centralised mafia-like structures, or revolutionary proclivities. She then considers the relations between bandits and the authorities, concluding that the latter were not dependent on the robbers, but did sometimes profit from their activities; perhaps she fails to appreciate the more nuanced aspects of the political use of violence, but her correction is worth noting. Armed robbery, she concludes, peaked during the 'power vacuum' between the end of the forced cultivation system (1870) and the modernisation of policing in the 1920s. The data for the earlier period are hardly comparable with those from the twentieth century, so I would be wary of undocumented conclusions on this aspect, but the impact of modern crime-fighting is an important topic, the subject of recent work by Marieke Bloembergen (most notably, *De geschiedenis van de politie in Nederlands-Indië: Uit zord en angst*). Finally, van Till concludes that robbery was a lucrative business, but not connected to general food shortages, and that centre-periphery world theory does not apply. The three aspects evaluated in the conclusion have a clear focus connected to the data presented in the book. She wisely abandons the 'single theory' (with the exception of a brief rejection of Gallant), as excursions in this direction have consistently muddied the narrative.

This is a book that would have benefited greatly from rethinking and editing. There are wonderful stories, important themes and gripping detail, which could have been placed in a well-realised socio-political setting (compare Robert Cribb, *Gangsters and revolutionaries: The Jakarta People's Militia and the Indonesian Revolution 1945–1949*) and organised around simple themes, such as those summarised in the concluding remarks. Instead, the comparative and analytic framework is unconvincing, and does more harm than good, while the text is marred by carelessness. A couple of examples: on p. 72 it is observed '[T]hat the robbers maintained close ties with local administrative officials was an open secret', on p. 78 'Bandits maintained few if any relationships with colonial officialdom'; the term *pokrol* (as in *pokrol bambu* for a 'bush lawyer' or legal advisor) is consistently given as 'prokol' (an over-accurate back-reading from the Dutch *procureur*). The translation is also uneven, and sometimes misleading: *tuak*, which is almost always palm-toddy, is translated as sake, which is rice-based. There is no thematic index, only lists of personal and place names.

Academic conventions govern dissertation-writing; sometimes the need to demonstrate 'theoretical relevance and a mastery of the literature' can become an irritating and gratuitous distraction from a clean narrative or straightforward description. This seems to be the case here: *Banditry in West Java* might have been a much better book if it had simply aspired to being a collection of good stories clearly told.

HEATHER SUTHERLAND

*Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*