

Indonesia

Technology and ethical idealism: A history of development in the Netherlands East Indies

By SUZANNE MOON

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Suzanne Moon has pioneered a new approach to studying development in Indonesia, by carefully reconstructing the debates about development and economic change in early twentieth-century Netherlands East Indies. Moon's explicit goal is to write the political significance of technology into Indonesian history. This original approach to the old question of colonial reform is particularly effective in explaining why native agriculture became an obsession of Dutch reformers, under the sway of what she calls Ethical idealism, and how technology was perceived to be the most efficient vector for spurring economic development. She defines the problem of development by linking it to the Ethical period of the early twentieth century, and argues that technological intervention became a touchstone for Ethical policies, down through the 1930s. The strongest chapters of the book examine the Department of Agriculture from 1910 to 1918, under the directorship of Herman J. Lovink, when the Department created the core methods and institutions meant to improve and develop the native economy. Moon's conclusion, that Dutch colonial officials built development initiatives with the goal of reaching and impacting the small farmer, is persuasive and useful to the Indonesian historian. Schools, demonstration fields and seed gardens were staffed by native elites, who created a forum for close contact between agricultural experts and native farmers. The small farmer ideal came under fire in later years, but remained the foundation for future debates. This material about the early Department of Agriculture is persuasive because here Moon follows more than just the debates about development, and extensively examines the workings of the development initiatives as they were deployed by European and native officials.

The later chapters follow the development question as it was debated in the 1920s and 1930s. Her analysis demonstrates, for example, how the dual-economy thesis of J.H. Boeke influenced the Department of Agriculture to concentrate development initiatives on wealthier farmers, who straddled the native and European economies. Moon's focus on the debates amongst Dutch officials and experts, with interjections from Indonesian nationalists in the *Volksraad*, loses touch with the context of native agriculture, and does not convince me that technology remained central to development initiatives after 1918. The successful Department of Agriculture programmes she cites from the 1920s, for example the initiative encouraging farmers to replenish their fields' nutrients by growing the *croton* plant after harvest, seems to be more about agricultural science and less about technology. And because Moon's political contextualisation of the development debates after World War I is less sure, the analysis of the back-and-forth about development, including her discussion about the importance of technological 'fit', is not analytically precise.

A possible weakness is that she hesitates to conclude what the politics of development meant to Indonesian social history. She consciously avoids the usual approach

of analysing and judging the Indonesian development projects by evaluating their social and economic impact. Nonetheless, she uses the results of political economy scholarship, which with great care has reconstructed the social and economic worlds of the peasants and workers targeted for development, when it helps her argument. Moon seems to share in the scholarly consensus that while the entry of colonial capital, the expansion of the world market for agricultural commodities, and the growth of the colonial state all disrupted native agriculture, some colonial development policies did mitigate the serious disadvantages native farmers faced, even if it did not really create progress. Nonetheless, she avoids taking a position on whether development debates, practices, technologies and institutions she describes extended colonial power.

Historians of colonial Indonesia will find much of value in Moon's book. She shows that the development question intersected with the rise of nationalist politics, the expansion of the colonial state, the spread of colonial infrastructure to the Outer Islands, the growth of export crop plantations and the changing political economy of Javanese peasants. On the whole, I found the book to be more about the history of technological ideas and ideals, and hence part of a history of colonial expertise and officialdom. Still, she makes a strong case that Indonesian historians will benefit from paying closer attention to technology and technological discourses.

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Muslims and matriarchs: Cultural resilience in Indonesia through jihad and colonialism

By JEFFREY HADLER

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The Minangkabau region of Sumatra is well known for a number of reasons, particularly its role in early Indonesian nationalist leadership and its matrilineal culture. The Minangkabau people, who formed just 3.36 per cent of the Netherlands East Indies' population in the 1930s, produced many dynamic and ideologically diverse first-generation Indonesian political leaders, such as H. Agus Salim, Muhammad Hatta, Muhammad Yamin, Muhammad Natsir, Hamka, Sutan Sjahrir and Tan Malaka. Nowadays Minangkabau is noted as the world's largest matrilineal Muslim society, which, while continually interacting with many global patriarchal-based ideologies, has managed to maintain many of its traditions. The most distinctive cultural characteristic of all Minangkabau customs – adhering to a matrilineal system with a partilineal Islamic legal framework – has attracted the attention of scholars for over a hundred years. Ever since George Wilken drew attention to Minangkabau custom in the 1880s, this 'culture of paradox' – to borrow a phrase from the author of *Muslims and matriarchs*, Jeffrey Hadler (p. 1) – has become an exemplary case-study for ideas of kinship and has continued to inspire other scholars to study it.