Indonesian Life Stories: Towards an Autonomous History

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Abstract
Interest in personal narratives and life histories has been growing in recent years, but attention to this form of research material in anthropology has always been patchy. As an anthropologist with long experience of fieldwork in Indonesia (specifically with the Sa’dan Toraja people of South Sulawesi), I realized that some of my older acquaintances who were born near the beginning of the twentieth century had lived extraordinary lives. They had experienced all the dramatic social transformations accompanying successive political developments as Indonesia moved from colonialism, through wartime occupation by the Japanese and the struggle for Independence, to the emergence of a new nation-state. The possibility of identifying as “Indonesian” developed along the way as well. I became interested in the potentials of life narratives – not just of the famous, but of ordinary people - to provide insights into the interface between personal experience and great historical events, and to contribute to a more “autonomous” history, rich in indigenous perspectives, as John Smail, a dedicated historian of Indonesia, proposed was urgently needed in his oft-cited essay of 1961. My edited volume, Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience (Singapore University Press/Ohio University Press, 2007), draws together several such life narratives, as recounted and reflected upon by anthropologists working in different regions of Southeast Asia, with a view to exploring more fully the potentials of this kind of research for social scientists. In this article, I focus on the several remarkable Indonesian life narratives presented there, as well as a range of other recently published works in this genre, and discuss their contributions to a history and anthropology that seek to do justice to indigenous personal experience.

Keywords: Indonesia, life narratives, autobiography, autonomous history, memory.

“Measurable or not, subjectivity is itself a fact, an essential ingredient of our humanity” (Portelli 1997, p. 82).

1. Why Study Lives?

When I first became interested in the potentials of life history research within anthropology, I came to realize that there were some outstanding examples in this genre going back to the very beginnings of the discipline. One of the earliest examples was Paul Radin’s Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of an American Indian (1926), an account he elicited from a Winnebago man, which was written for him in the Winnebago syllabary and directly translated

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by him into English. Radin proposed (1926, p. xvi) that such direct personal accounts in original languages provided the only possible way in to another culture and its world view. Radin’s insistence on the importance of “subjective values” and individual experiences in the effort to grasp another culture may well appear, from our present perspective, to have been ahead of his time. Why, I wondered, had attention to the possibilities of life stories subsequently remained so intermittent? This interest of mine grew out of some of my own fieldwork experiences, and resulted in the book, *Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience* (Waterson, 2007), in which I commissioned other anthropologists to join with me in presenting life stories (several of them from Indonesia) and pondering over the possibilities they presented for analysis.

Life histories might seem to present certain particular problems of analysis: they seem to offer both too much information (a wealth of unique and specific details) and too little (any account of a life can at best be partial and incomplete, and autobiography is a notoriously self-serving genre). How then does one go about analyzing such materials, and how can one draw wider theoretical conclusions from them? In spite of the difficulties, there are a number of reasons why anthropologists may, in the course of our often lengthy and repeated fieldwork, have unique opportunities to gather such materials. We have time to establish close friendships with those we meet, and thus we may come to know individuals who have extraordinary stories to tell. Chance plays a large role in the process, since one must arrive at the right time; much depends on whether the person in question is at a point in their lives when they feel moved to talk about their experiences, and equally, on whether the researcher has the imagination to ask them, and is ready to listen. In spite of the potential difficulties, a number of anthropologists have made important theoretical contributions to the study of lives (Agar, 1980; Langness and Frank, 1981; Watson, Lawrence and Watson-Franke, 1985; Behar, 1992; Caplan, 1997; Skinner, Pach and Holland, 1998) and some fascinating accounts of lives have been published. At the present time there is a growing interest in doing this kind of research, a fact for which I think there are several reasons.

For a good part of the twentieth century, the theoretical focus in anthropology (as in sociology) was on social structures, whether through functionalist or Marxian approaches. As undergraduates in the early 1970s, my fellow-students and I were excited by the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which explored the structures of the mind on which, it was postulated, cultures were based. From the late 1970s and through the 1980s, a keener awareness grew of the importance of history to anthropology. Suddenly it seemed obvious that this had been a neglected relationship; in fact, all our data were historical, and the apparently self-contained “societies” presented in anthropological monographs had been changing all along. Thus the colonial experience, instead of being excluded from ethnographic studies as something that had disturbed the authenticity of putatively “traditional” cultures, was now recognized to be an intrinsic part of what had to be studied. As each theoretical shift occurs, we become more aware of what was missing in our previous approaches. By the 1990s, there was taking place what one might call the turn toward experience in anthropology. For one can describe the structures, and trace specific histories, but this still leaves us with the question: what does it really feel like to live in such structures, or to live through such histories? Could we not develop accounts of social life

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that did not simply lose sight of individuals, but did justice to their experiences, to how they struggle to make something of their own lives, within the constraints of structure and the upheavals of history? Undoubtedly, the second wave of feminism of the 1970s had already made a vital contribution to this shift of perspective. Women social scientists did not find their own experiences, or those of any other women, being adequately explained in the texts so far produced; they began to insist on the idea that the personal is political, and hence a suitable starting-point for the development of theory. The claim to an omnipotent and detached, empathetically “neutral” gaze as the basis for “scientific objectivity” now stood revealed as a masculine conceit; on the contrary, feminists insisted that true objectivity required an acknowledgment of one’s own subjectivity, necessitating a more self-conscious reflexivity about the unavoidably specific positions from which we speak. This new wave caused major transformations in theoretical perspectives within the social sciences, opening the way for the serious consideration of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988); by the 1990s, it had become correspondingly easier to acknowledge individual experience as a necessary and legitimate object of study.

Another fruitful line of approach concerns the fundamental importance to humans of story-telling, including the story we each tell ourselves about our own lives and identities. The term “personal narrative” is useful in referring to a wide spectrum of accounts, from published autobiography, through orally recounted life histories, to fragments of life story related in conversation or recorded in letters and diaries. “Life histories” (in the form of long and coherent narratives, recorded in dialogue with an anthropologist or oral historian) are a rather distinctive type of personal narrative, in which the relationship with the researcher may itself influence the shape of the story and become a matter of some theoretical interest (Waterson, 2007a; Hoskins, 2007).

It is the aim of anthropology to make the diversity of human experiences intelligible across cultural boundaries. Whatever the risks of translation, that is a worthwhile effort in a world where misunderstandings, ignorance and prejudice can so easily lead to hatred and violence. Anything that contributes to mutual understandings must be of value, when these too often seem to be still so tenous. As Watson (1989; , p. 4) has pointed out, personal narratives offer rich seams of ‘shareable experience’, and therefore present special opportunities for the ethnographer. Moreover, personal stories expand our understandings of history, whether of our own community or of others. The more voices that reach us from the past, the better we can understand our own identities as members of a certain culture or society, or simply as human beings.

In Indonesia today there are elderly individuals still living whose memories stretch back to the Dutch colonial era, and whose life experiences have encompassed all the dramatic social and political transformations of modern Indonesian history from that time. Among those born closer to the beginning of the twentieth century, some people travelled in their own lives a complex journey from a village childhood in an ethnically distinct region of the archipelago, as yet little touched by a Dutch colonial presence, to an awareness of themselves as ‘Indonesians’ (an idea which itself takes shape only during the 1920s) within an independent nation. Their educational journeys took them to more distant towns and finally to Java and beyond, and they experienced all the dramatic social transformations accompanying successive political developments as Indonesia moved from colonialism, through wartime occupation by the Japanese and the struggle for Independence, to the emergence of a new nation-state. The two Sumatrans (P. Pospos and Muhamad Radjab) whose published autobiographies are discussed in Susan Rogers’ Telling Lives, Telling History (1995) provide fascinating examples of such trajectories from childhood to
adulthood in a transformed world. But published autobiographies are usually the work of people who have achieved distinguished careers (the Indonesian examples I have come across are commonly either politicians or writers), and not everybody has the resources to do this. Through my own fieldwork experience in Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, I became fascinated with the potentials of life narratives – not just of the famous, but of ordinary people - to grant us new insights into the interface between historical events and the personal experience of living through them. Even apparently “ordinary” and non-famous people have undeniably contributed in their own ways to the events and outcomes of history, and the more that their voices enter into the historical record, the more it is enriched.

2. Historical Consciousness and the Construction of the Self

All life stories present us with the intersection between a self and the social context in which that individual makes something of life with the resources available to them (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992; Skinner, Pach and Holland, 1998). In these analyses, the manner of telling the story is as significant as the content of the narrative itself. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p.8) talk of life stories as “an organisation of experience”, and sometimes a process by which individuals “becom[e] aware of their social predicament” and perhaps even find a means to transcend it - a possibility which points to the potentially transformative power of narrative. Skinner et al. (1998, p. 3) point to the links between identities, experience, and history, and call for “a new ethnography of personhood”, one that will recognise the existence of “persons in history and history in persons.” In their presentations of life stories from Nepal, they search for the interface between personal trajectories and the larger structures within which they “struggle to constitute themselves as particular kinds of actors and persons vis-à-vis others within and against powerful sociopolitical and cultural worlds.” Women may typically experience different life trajectories from men, “improvising” multiple careers for themselves (Bateson, 1989), or may choose a different style of telling about themselves, one that does not omit important relationships with others, or a sense of community solidarity, one that speaks of the “we” and not only the “I”.

It is ironic that a particular sense of historical consciousness should appear to be so intricately linked with modernity, yet the connection has been pointed out by a variety of authors. Marshall Berman (1982, p. 17) has written that in Europe and America, “the nineteenth-century modern public can remember what it is like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that are not modern at all. From this inner dichotomy, this sense of living in two worlds simultaneously, the ideas of modernization and modernism emerge and unfold.” For many colonised people, the sense of living through a rupture comes somewhat later, in the twentieth century. Their experience has been one of living between two cultures, attempting to endure the clash between them and to make some sense of the contradictions involved. The life histories of some remarkable individuals provide great insight into that experience (Spradley, 1969; Cruikshank, 1990). Indeed, often it is precisely such exceptional individuals who have the sharpest insights to offer about their own society, its virtues and constraints, or its processes of change. Given the tumultuous events that many people have lived through in the twentieth century, whether in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, the question of historical consciousness is a crucial one in the construction of the self. So we can look at life histories both from the point of view of the light they shed on the experience of historical events themselves, and also in search of those critical moments in life when the protagonist tells us (explicitly or implicitly) how he or she first became
aware of wider political issues and struggles that may have shaped the course of their life subsequently.

3. The Problem of Representativeness

What is it that makes a life story representative? I argue that it is precisely this distinctive positioning of the subject that gives the narrative its authenticity, not the question of whether that individual is “average” or typical. However apparently unique, the individual’s story will always be representative of the experience of living at that particular historical conjuncture, faced with those particular contradictions, opportunities or constraints. Nobody has written more penetratingly about the problems of representativeness than Portelli (1997). The authority of a personal narrative, he stresses, is closely tied to point of view. In telling of a historical event, an individual will generally tell it from their own, necessarily circumscribed, point of view, “a device,” as Portelli points out, “that is widely shared both by oral sources and modern novels” (1997, p. 84). For instance, a worker from Terni, interviewed about the events of World War Two, recalls his own memory of a day in 1942 when the factory hands were brought to the main square in order to hear Mussolini’s radio broadcast announcing Italy’s entry into the war. From his place in the crowd, he cannot see the whole scene; to do that, says Portelli, he would have had to be somewhere else:

In order to take a stance as omniscient narrator in that situation, one would have had to be located on top of the prefecture building – indeed, in the turret from which machine guns were aimed at the crowd in case of civil disturbances.

Once we accept the impossibility of a “neutral” position, the “problem” of a life’s idiosyncracies no longer appears so disabling. Indeed, the particularity of an individual’s story, according to Portelli (1997, p. 86), far from disqualifying it as a useful source, is always important insofar as it adds to our understanding of the range of possible human experience. As he puts it, “The representative quality of oral sources and life histories is related to the extent to which they open and define the field of expressive possibilities” (my italics). And he adds:

Texts do not become representative because of their statistically average quality. We do not dismiss Dante Alighieri’s ‘Divine Comedy’ from our reconstruction of the Middle Ages in Italy on the ground that he was not representative because the average Florentine citizen of that time would be unlikely to produce such a text. Rather, we include it precisely because of its exceptionality: on the one hand, only a Florentine citizen of that time could produce such a text; on the other, its uniqueness comprehends and defines the range of possibilities of its time and society.

Thus even the most unique and unusual life story will always be valuable in that it adds to our wider comprehension of human possibilities, as well as knowledge of a particular historical conjuncture.

4. “Autonomous History”
The move toward a more socially relevant history, one that tells of the experiences of ordinary people and not only the deeds of “great men”, is part of a democratising urge to listen to the voices of the non-famous. The great British radical historian E. P. Thompson spoke of “the enormous condescension of posterity” toward the defeated, and saw his own kind of historical enterprise as “a gigantic act of reparation” to them (cited in Samuel 1994, p. viii). The extension of history into the area of social memory has only increased its pace in the past two decades.

Not very long after Indonesia’s hard-won Independence, historian John Smail (1993 [1961]) pointed out in similar vein the need for what he called an “autonomous domestic history” of Indonesia, one that would break from the Eurocentric perspective which had left great gaps in the understanding of the Indonesian past, and which would not be written only by the victors. At that time he saw that Indonesian history, as written by the Dutch, had tended to foreground Dutch concerns, leaving Indonesian experiences “grey and undifferentiated”; it was unduly focused upon the colonial period, as though nothing of note had happened prior to Dutch intervention; it was tainted by colonial value-judgements, an unquestioning use of European categories and concepts, and an over-reliance on Dutch sources. Such a critique prefigures the concerns of another more recent movement founded by the historians of the Subaltern Studies group in India. Ranajit Guha (1982, p. 7) calls for a “rejection of the spurious and un-historical monism” characteristic of elite historiography, and instead, makes a passionate call for us to listen to the “small voice” of history (Guha 1996). He points out how even India’s own nationalist historians, rebelling against the earlier dominance of British historians, have still too often replaced their perspectives with a focus on famous and powerful males of their own. They have thus continued to fail to tell the stories of the great mass of Indian people - peasants, workers, and most particularly women. As for Smail, his argument was revived in the 1990s and applied by a younger generation of scholars to a wide range of Southeast Asian contexts in the book, Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honour of John Smail (Sears, 1993).

There are a number of interesting recent works that would appear to contribute to this goal of multiplying indigenous Indonesian perspectives on the past. These are just a few examples published in English that I have been able to encounter, but I am quite sure there is much more work in Indonesian that I have not yet been able to find, and I should be grateful to hear from Indonesian colleagues of further examples.

Walter Williams et al. (1991), in the volume, Javanese Lives: Women and Men in Modern Indonesian Society, presents an array of life narratives which Williams collected in collaboration with ten researchers from Universitas Gadjah Mada. Their interviewees come from all walks of life, ranging from a farmer, a market woman trader, a seamstress and a cake seller, to teachers, businessmen and —women, a princess of the sultan’s palace of Yogykarta, and specialists in the arts and spiritual fields, such as a dance teacher from the Yogya palace, a dalang or shadow puppeteer, a dukun or healer, a singer, and the caretaker of a Buddhist temple, and members of various different religions. Impressed by the great diversity of individual and cultural experience in contemporary Indonesia, Williams wished to avoid any implication that those interviewed are “typical” Javanese, but desired rather “to interview persons who represented various aspects of that diversity” (1991, p. xv). Since he teaches in a gender studies programme at the University of Southern California, he was also particularly concerned to include women’s narratives and experiences. Those interviewed ranged in age from their 50s to their 80s. Thus they were old enough to have lived through four distinct eras: from the Dutch colonial regime and the Japanese Occupation through the years of revolutionary struggle for Indonesian Independence, to the
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display the same idealization and cosiness as did Dutch memories, or might they tell a different
story? As part of a larger project on “Popular Memory in Indonesia” put together by researchers at
the University of Michigan, they set out to elicit subaltern counter-narratives from people who had
once been servants to Dutch colonial families. Their Indonesian collaborators were researchers
Nita Kariani Purwanti (an anthropologist), Didi Kwartanada (a historian), and Dias Pradadimara (a
Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan). This research was also focused on Yogyakarta
and its environs, where they interviewed over 30 former servants, both women and men, and often
their children and grandchildren too. One thing they discovered was that, while they themselves
might have entered into the contents of Dutch family photo albums, scarcely a single one of their
interviewees had ever received copies of such photographs themselves. In this study, which
reads memory against the grain of the archive, the perspectives of servants against those of their
erstwhile masters, a number of sharp contrasts are revealed. Servants’ accounts displayed a
marked lack of emotion and sensory delight, by contrast with the markedly sentimental and
sensuous qualities of Dutch memories; boredom and forgetting, in place of the undying loyalty
assumed by employers; and the matter-of-fact recall of oppressive relationships in place of the
picturesque and nostalgic. Tastes, smells, textures, sounds and bodily secretions are quite
differently recalled by Dutch and Javanese. The authors note (2000, p. 13) that many interviewees
were wary and uncomfortable at first with the subject matter, their “submerged anxiety” as much
an outcome of New Order politics as of any habit of deference left over from the colonial era. It
was more recent politics, perhaps, which had made people unsure as to what was “safe” to express
an opinion about, and also about the uses to which the stories might eventually be put:

There seemed to be no comfortably correct stance to take in relation to the Dutch colonial
past. But what was unsafe? Recounting work for a Dutch person because one’s previous
service rendered one’s patriotism suspect? Disparaging a colonial European (often,
though not always) to a white interviewer? Or merely having an opinion at all?

Yet their accounts are deeply revealing of the distortions embedded in dominant narratives. As
they conclude (2000, p. 38-9):

Attention to memory-work marks out a space for the unrehearsed recollections of those
convinced that their telling are not what makes up real history at all. In New Order
Indonesia, history has been tightly controlled, male, heroic and national. And even a more
generous rendering of what defines history, as ‘not what has happened but what can be
narrated’ , would leave little room for the unpicturesque things former servants chose to
tell…they demarcate the uneventfulness of inequities that could be both viscerally sensed
and coldly rationalized, felt deeply and, by some, assiduously forgotten.

Finally, Rudolf Mrazek’s *A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta Through the Memories of its
Intellectuals* (2010) presents vivid images of his encounters during the 1990s with now elderly
intellectuals, people who were part of a special generation in Indonesia, one that had experienced
all the cultural collisions and transitions of growing up under Dutch colonial rule and who in many

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3 Paul Ricoeur (1984, pp. 169-170) *Time and Narrative (Volume 1)*. Chicago: University of
Chicago Press.
cases had been radical activists for independence, and contributed in different ways to the development of an Indonesian modernity. Over tea and cake, in their often faded and slightly gloomy old houses, now marooned amid the new highways and flyovers whose traffic roared in the background of their conversations, they relived with him their childhood experiences. At the same moment, he was witnessing the end of an era: on his visits in 1997 and 1998, Jakarta was gripped by the riots that would bring about Suharto’s downfall.

The details of these intensely sensory recollections of childhood convey how children experienced the spaces of the houses and neighbourhoods in which they grew up. Indigenous patterns of eating, sleeping, playing or interacting with neighbours were radically altered by the adoption of Dutch tastes in educated families, as were the appearances of living rooms and their contents, though only for the better off. Ninety-year-old Mrs Sosro, a former political activist, describes herself as coming from a “200 percent poor” family (“the rich natives were 100 per cent poor”), and who, when Mrázek inquires as to whether they had a gramophone when she was growing up, replies: “His Master’s Voice? No, just a dog” (2010, p. 7). Going to school entailed new rules of habitus and deportment. Putting on shoes was the gesture that initiated the educational journey, though shoes were so indicative of status differences that one might avoid wearing them in the neighbourhood streets where “people would give a certain look”, and only slip them on at the school gates. Interviewees recall the arrival of the modern in the shape of electricity, cars, and cinema. Mrázek traces how elements of school organisation (uniforms, flags, debate clubs) were borrowed and put to new uses in the independence movements. Bizarre continuities are revealed, too, in the life that some later led as political prisoners in Dutch internment camps such as the notorious Boven Digoel in West Papua, where they made a surreal attempt to maintain civilisation among the local savages by holding classes, forming musical bands, playing sports, dancing to the gramophone, and organising picnics. Within the layers of Mrazek’s book, we find deep reflections on the powers of memory and the interpenetrations of past and present.

5. Indonesian Life Stories: Fritz Basiang, Made Lebah and Joseph Malo

The life narratives of the three individuals briefly discussed in this section all feature in my book, Southeast Asian Lives, and interested readers can find the full versions there (Waterson, 2007b; Warren, 2007; Hoskins, 2007). Each of them, for different reasons, exemplifies the potentials of individual lives to enrich a nation’s wider history and sense of identity. This is nowhere more true than in Indonesia, with its unusual diversity of cultures. They came from different parts of the archipelago – from Toraja (Sulawesi), Bali and Sumba, respectively - and thus experienced growing up in quite different cultural locales. The life journey of Fritz Basiang, whose outward progression carried him first from a tiny mountain village to local and more distant towns, then to Java and Europe and finally home again, exemplifies Anderson’s (1983, p. 111) idea of the educational “pilgrimages” undertaken by those select few native Indonesians who managed to pass beyond primary school level in the extremely restrictive educational system constructed under Dutch colonial rule. The newly “imagined reality” which grew out of these journeys, and the encounters with others along the way, contributed directly to the formation of nationalist identities and aspirations. The Dutch East Indies’ educational system was deliberately designed to limit the number of colonial subjects who might run the risk of developing into a disaffected indigenous intelligentsia. Such an intelligentsia, however small, did indeed form by
the early decades of the twentieth century, supplying the discourse that would drive nationalist movements by the 1920s. Fritz’s own life in a number of ways encapsulates the radical changes undergone in the whole region of the Sa’dan Toraja highlands during the twentieth century.

Fritz recounted his remarkable life to me in several long interviews in 1983, when he was 78 years old. I was struck by the way he had eagerly reached for the new experiences ushered in with the colonial transformation of Toraja society. From the time he was a young boy, he had seized advantage of every opportunity to pursue novel goals, and in the process, he created a new sort of life and identity for himself. Born in 1905, the same year that the Dutch entered the Toraja highlands, he was one of the first Toraja to attend school, and was also an early convert to Christianity. Though he never had the chance to complete a high school education, he seized the opportunity to train as a nurse under a German doctor, Dr. Simon, who had been employed by the Dutch Reformed Church Mission to start a rudimentary health service in the Toraja highlands. He subsequently followed his mentor to Germany, where he stayed during the years 1930-32. He was thus, so far as I am aware, the first Toraja person to visit Europe. Observing the escalating political tensions in those years, culminating in Hitler’s accession to power in 1932, he then decided to return home to Toraja, where he went to work in the mission-founded Elim Hospital at Rantepao. He married Marta Gora, Toraja’s first trained midwife, with whom he also travelled again to Java in the pre-war years for more advanced nurses’ training. A doctor at the Rantepao hospital, seeing that it would be many years before there would be enough doctors to minister to the Toraja population, took the decision to train him in surgery and obstetrics. Barred by his incomplete secondary education from ever qualifying as a doctor, he thus ended up effectively working as one, while continuing to be paid at the discriminatorily low rates set for indigenous nurses. Not only that, he was left to administer the hospital during the Japanese Occupation, since all Dutch personnel were then interned. After the Japanese surrender came the difficult years of struggle for Indonesian Independence, and the troubled decade of the 1950s, when a prolonged guerrilla war was waged by the secessionist Darul Islam movement, whose forces roamed the Toraja highlands terrorising the unconverted and co-opting villagers to fight with them. These troubles were ended only in 1965 with the death of the movement’s leader, Kahar Muzakkar. In both these conflicts, Fritz was obliged to treat the wounded from both sides. Just as Anderson proposes, though, his ever-widening experiences on his travels had ensured his exposure to nationalist ideas, and during the years 1945-49, he also did his best to aid the Independence struggle by smuggling medicines to the Pemuda, the forces of the revolutionary youth, whenever he could. He passed away in 1993, having lived almost the entirety of the twentieth century and been a much-loved figure in the community he served for so many decades.

The life of Fritz Basiang caused me to reflect how a single individual could in one lifetime experience so many social and political transformations, from the world he knew as a child in a remote highland village, to the emergence of Indonesia as an independent and modernising nation. Fritz was an unconventional person in his enthusiasm for new experience, and in the way he devised for himself a new kind of identity - modern, Indonesian, and Christian - while still to the end of his life retaining a strong respect for certain aspects of his own Toraja culture. Although his story appears so remarkable, it is by no means entirely unique; if set within the framework of other published autobiographies of a similar period in Indonesia, we can at once see the emergence of some parallel themes. Indonesia’s own, relatively short, tradition of published autobiographical and biographical writing has, as elsewhere, almost exclusively produced works by well-known public figures, whether politicians or literary figures. They provide many
fascinating insights into the authors’ encounters with modernity. A marked theme in many of them, particularly those published in the 1950s, is the simultaneous development both of the writer’s own personality, and his (the writers are predominantly male) identification as “Indonesian” – the very idea of “Indonesia” itself being still emergent in the 1920s. In the process, a childhood world steeped in a more local ethnic identity is gradually left behind, assuming the qualities of a lost world, both romantically recalled and sharply criticised by the writer from his perspective as an adult and a nationalist.

In Fritz’s case, I am also able to situate his narrative within a distinctive subset of narratives – a handful of contemporary autobiographies published by individuals who, like him, received medical training under the Dutch (Anderson, 1990; Soemarno, 1981; Djelantik, 1997). All of the above individuals came from more privileged backgrounds than Fritz Basiang, and have had more distinguished and high-profile careers. Their access to a more complete education in the Dutch language made it possible for them to qualify as doctors, an opportunity which was denied to Fritz. But in spite of these differences, their accounts provide many interesting parallels in experience. Like Fritz, they all lived through the Dutch colonial system and the passage toward a modern Indonesian identity. The training as a doctor in itself must have ensured a radical change in world view, providing a thorough indocrination into scientific rationalism as well as a humanist philosophy. All chose to practise their medical skills where they were desperately needed, in areas where at that time the health service was in its infancy and conditions were often primitive. And for all of them this progression was also a political one, in which each came to share the vision of an independent Indonesia, and used their skills to contribute in the most practical way possible to improving life for ordinary people. Although Fritz Basiang’s reputation never spread beyond his own locality, his narrative has just as much to tell us about the experience of becoming Indonesian as those of more famous individuals. In reflecting on his life, however, I began to think how differently other Southeast Asians may have experienced the cultural collisions of the twentieth century, and responded to the threats or opportunities presented by the impacts of modernity.

Carol Warren presents the equally fascinating life of a person who, like Fritz, lived almost the whole of the twentieth century. Madé Lebah (1905? – 1996) was born to a Balinese commoner family who were hereditary retainers to the Rajas of Peliatan. He describes his childhood in a world in which the Dutch presence was as yet barely felt, and his experience of the changes of the later colonial period, the Japanese Occupation and the emergence of an independent Indonesia. As Warren points out, the social transformations experienced in Bali during the Suharto era were in some ways still more radical than those of the first half of the century. A gifted musician in his own culture, his talents led Madé Lebah to have many encounters with Europeans. He formed a gamelan association which, besides playing for the court at Peliatan, was invited to perform at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931; later he was employed by the musicologist Colin McPhee, performing a dual role as chauffeur and gamelan teacher. His account is full of detail and insightful commentary on many aspects of his changing social world: on Balinese ideas of illness, on magic, music, village co-operation, the declivities of the Rajas, and the changing costs of living. As an individual, Warren points out, his life is of interest for the way he represents Bali’s “exceptional collective legacies”, as much as for the details of his cross-cultural encounters; as a commoner, his down-to-earth view of life provides a valuable contrast to the upper-caste perspectives which, Warren suggests, have tended to dominate in many researchers’ accounts of Balinese society. For all that he was clearly an exceptional individual, his account sheds light on
a variety of broader social and historical issues.

Janet Hoskins’ account of the life of Yoseph Malo of Sumba (1880? – 1960) presents us with another highly unusual narrative of an extraordinary individual, who lived through the colonial encounter and its cultural collisions, yet whose life never the less exemplifies certain cultural ideals of Sumbanese society. Malo was born into an aristocratic family, witnessed his father’s beheading by enemy raiders at the age of nine, was sold into slavery, and ended up working for the first Catholic mission on Sumba in the early years of the twentieth century. He went on to take two heads himself. He deliberately married into the family of his father’s murderers in order to reclaim his father’s head and recover the family honour by affording it an elaborate secondary burial, complete with the erection of a megalithic monument in accordance with Sumbanese tradition. He subsequently became the Dutch-appointed Raja of the domain of Rara, and the husband of eight local wives.

Yoseph Malo was not himself literate enough to write his own autobiography, but he did tell his story to many people. During his lifetime he often performed it in an indigenous genre of storytelling that includes elements of ritual poetry, oratory and song. It is remarkable to note the parallel way in which the staging of ritual acts, with their accompanying orations, prayers, or laments, both act as critical turning-points in Malo’s career as lived, as much as they provide high points in the dramatic narrative of his life as told. His own performances must have served to dramatize his persona and the reversals of fortune over which he had triumphed, in a form which clearly fits within an already familiar and socially salient narrative framework in Sumba. Before he died, he also ‘bequeathed’ the duty of telling his story to others, including an indigenous storyteller, Maru Daku, who has been a key consultant to Hoskins in her research on Sumba. Hoskins has worked in collaboration for fifteen years with Yoseph Malo’s son, Cornelius Djakababa, who has also been writing his own version of his father’s story. Yoseph’s grandson, who bears his name, is currently studying for a PhD in history at the University of Wisconsin, and may in turn produce his own account in future. What was my own pleasure and surprise to meet, at the Yogyakarta conference of 2011 which provided the occasion for presentation of an earlier version of this paper, his granddaughter, Nelden Djakababa, whose name I immediately recognized, because Hoskins has also mentioned that she too has written about her grandfather in the course of her studies at an American University.

The author’s collaboration with Yoseph Malo’s son has grown out of an initial difference of opinion over the appropriate way to present his story. In the written correspondence and repeated meetings that have followed, their accounts have borrowed from each other to the point where they have in Hoskins’ words “served to construct one another”. The circumstances therefore raise a number of demanding and thought-provoking questions: about the ownership of life histories, the possible ways of recording them, and not least the various prospective audiences who may read them. Hoskins’ bibliography contains, as well as six papers of her own that refer in different ways to Malo’s life, five versions locally produced by Sumbanese consultants. Two of these are tape recorded, two exist in manuscript form, while one is in press with a Jakarta publisher, and is due to appear in both Indonesian and English. One manuscript version has been lost, an ironic reminder – borne out by similar experiences in my own fieldwork - of the potential vulnerability of written materials, versus the tenacity of oral memory). Hoskins has also videotaped Mr Djakababa telling his father’s story, thus producing still another kind of oral version, which differs in some of its narrative dimensions from the written accounts. Nelden informs me that the reason why Mr Djakababa chose to produce a version of the story in English
was in order that his nephew, who has grown up in New Jersey, should be able to read it. Thus in this era of globalization, the family’s own networks have become wider and wider. A particularly interesting dimension of Hoskins’ analysis concerns the manner in which these various versions of Malo’s life have already influenced each other and become interwoven. At the same time, the number of possible audiences, and the different frameworks of ideas and interests which each of these audiences is likely to bring to bear on their interpretations of Malo’s story, continues to multiply. With each new account, our perspectives on Malo’s life and its possible significances multiply, yet none can be claimed as final. Even as the tale is enriched, we are obliged to accept the inescapable sense of incompleteness that is a feature of every life story.

**6. Postcolonial Developments**

When an authoritarian regime collapses, history is characteristically one of the first things to come under re-examination; the watershed of 1998 in Indonesia brought the abrupt closure of the Suharto era, and the new mod of Reformasi suddenly opened up this possibility. The new outburst of historical activity, publicly encouraged by Abdurrahman Wahid during his brief Presidency, has enabled Indonesian historians and the general public to re-examine for themselves many episodes of the recent past, as well as their often dubious presentation under the New Order. In this new atmosphere, previously taboo subjects are revisited, and it becomes possible for some people – former political prisoners, for example - to tell their stories for the first time. Testimonies need listeners, and a younger generation of researchers and activists in Indonesia have been making vital contributions to the “straightening out of history” (meluruskan sejarah) and to opening up a space for potential reconciliation by helping to create appropriate conditions for these stories to be told and received with respect. One such scholar is Budiawan, who wrote his PhD at the National University of Singapore, and has taught “The Politics of Memory” at Sanata Dharma University before moving more recently to UGM. His thesis, ‘Mematahkan Pewarisan Ingatan; Wacana Anti-Komunis dan Politik Rekonsiliasi Pasca-Suharto’ (Breaking the Immortalised Past: Anti-Communist Discourse and the Politics of Reconciliation in Post-Suharto Indonesia (2004) deals directly with these issues (see also Budiawan, 2009, 2011). Another is Priambudi Sulistiyanto (2007), who has been actively involved with organizations working for reconciliation and has studied and written about them. Wahyudi (2007), another young Javanese scholar, has gathered narratives from survivors and relatives of victims of the Tanjung Priok tragedy of 1984 and has written about their struggle for a full investigation of the event, a struggle that remains unfulfilled until now. I have no doubt there are many others – I mention here only a few whom I have been privileged to encounter and whose work I have been able to learn from.

Watson (2006) also brings together a range of published autobiographies by individuals who suffered as political prisoners, or who committed themselves to working against what they perceived as injustice under the New Order regime, and who have been moved since then to publish their stories. Some of these memoirs have been published privately or by small presses in Indonesia, and their circulation in many cases has been limited. By attempting an analysis of this group of autobiographies, Watson has certainly made them more accessible to a wider English-speaking audience since such works are difficult to find even if one lives in Indonesia. Thus we see that scholars both from within Indonesia and beyond have been contributing to the fresh examination of Indonesian history since 1998 and to putting on record the situated narratives.
of ordinary people and their experiences. Each of these narratives can help to build a fuller, richer and truer account of the past, a genuinely autonomous history which should be of vital importance to both present and future generations.

References


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