

Indonesian Historiography: From Nationalist Disentangling to Global Reconnection

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Abstract

This article originated in a keynote lecture to the 10th Indonesian National History Conference (KSNI) in 2016, the theme of which was Maritime History. The founders of those national conferences in the 1950s and '60s were seeking to disentangle Indonesia's history and destiny from a Dutch-centric perspective, and create an Indonesia-centric history with its own vantage point and values. This article argues that they succeeded so well that Indonesian history is now dangerously detached from world history at a time when the new generation lives in a globalized world. Indonesia's pride in its own history can provide plenty of entry points into global history, whether economic, religious, intellectual or social. History training must beware creating different histories for each nation-state lest it become the problem for international understanding, rather than the solution.

Keywords: Indonesia, Maritime History, Global History, Nationalism, History of Science

Introduction

President Joko Widodo no doubt helped to nudge national aspirations in a global direction by announcing that Indonesia will be a Global Maritime Fulcrum – *Poros Maritim Dunia*. One might ask why it took so long for Indonesia to reclaim its obvious character as the world's largest and most strategic archipelago. The pioneers of nationalist history naturally felt obliged to reject the Dutch history they had learned in schools, characterized by van Leur (1955: 261) as though 'written from the deck of the ship; the ramparts of the fortress'. As the leading maritime power of the 17th century, the Dutch were drawn to this Archipelago and grew stronger by using their naval power to exploit it. Dutch nationalist pride in their maritime achievements from the VOC (United East

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India Company) to the KPM (Royal Packet Navigation Company) seemed to leave little room for Indonesian pride. Their story became one of establishing a viable modern state by gradually defeating, co-opting or controlling (with the help of course of local rajas) the Indonesian maritime story, which was increasingly portrayed as 'piracy'.

I am all for recovering and reclaiming Maritime History. Both sides of the millennial maritime struggle between land-based state forces and their "pirate" opponents need to be studied with respect and honored. This is an important theme globally (and notably in Chinese historiography) but absolutely central in the Archipelago's history, though one that eludes any simplistic quest for good guys against bad guys. It is a way to show connections and networks, and to go beyond the parochialisms of place, at either a local or national level. James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), devoted to the genius of upland Southeast Asians in building stateless societies, demands a comparable honoring of the genius of small-island Southeast Asians. They for centuries evaded state control in their boats; they moved their trading bases to whichever island state control had not yet got to. I love A.R. Wallace's description of 19th century Dobo in the Aru Archipelago. Traders from everywhere, he wrote, "live here without the shadow of a government, with no police, no courts and no lawyers....Trade is the magic that keeps all at peace" (Wallace 1869: 259-60). When I read that I always think of my lucky 1986 visit to the tiny trade-oriented island of Bonerati midway between South Sulawesi and Flores. Hundreds of small trading vessels made it home for no better reason than escaping the red tape and taxes of government. We are the guests at this conference of the Indonesian government for which I have the greatest admiration and gratitude, but nevertheless as historians we are entitled to celebrate small-island maritime Indonesians as among the world champions of 'the art of not being governed'.

Maritime History is a big subject, and I trust this (2016) conference will give it the attention it deserves. I want to make it even bigger. Maritime History is one of a number of means to escape the domination of state-centered Political History while retaining and attracting the interest of students who want to be able to see the link between their own local lives and very much broader trends. Economic History, Environmental History, the History of Gender and Sexuality, Intellectual and Cultural History are among the other trending avenues to a broader approach. The welcome trend should not be limited to explicit labels such as Global, World or International History, or more trendy 'Entangled' History or *Histoire croisée*. I want to make the case that globalizing history in every form is the real challenge for historians of this problematically global age. To retain and deserve the attention of students, we need to link the very local with the very global; empirical and local research with the vaster global literature that is now electronically available to us.

The danger of parochialism to our discipline

In one sense history is simply the past, and therefore it is common-sense that we should study and understand it. That is the danger to us professionals. Like religion, or literature, history is inherently important enough to attract everybody's interest without the theoretical apparatus of most other academic disciplines. In fact, the theoretical obsession that did overtake it in the post-modern phase drove students away in droves. But although it is common sense that we must understand our place in history, in practice we must drastically select what we teach and study. As a university discipline history is rather new, entering the university syllabus in the 19th century as

a foundation for the rise of nationalism. In the British-influenced sphere I know best, it sought to explain to diverse Welsh and Scottish and Yorkshire students, and even Indian and New Zealand students, why they were 'British' and how Britishness had developed as a particularly benign set of liberal institutions. Similarly with 19th century French, German and Dutch universities, it became the place where national identity was debated, understood and to various extents celebrated.

The twentieth century was Asia's time for nationalist self-definition, and the model of what history was about was very clear. How India, Viet Nam, Burma and Indonesia would define themselves historically was of course initially much contested, but it was undoubtedly exciting and important. Even recently in Scotland, as Scottish nationalism was aroused leading up to the 2014 referendum on independence, the debate was largely fought through history (Devine 2015; Broun 2007; Crawford 2014). In post-revolutionary countries—initially France, the US and Latin America, and in the 20th century Russia, China, Vietnam, Indonesia—the nation's historical identity was regarded as too important to be left for academic historians to debate. The revolutionary victors defined it as unitary, heroic and virtuous, and since blood had been shed for this version others could not be tolerated. We can see how dangerous this made life for independent-minded or local historians where the revolutionary victors were communist parties. Indonesia's experience is more like that of post-revolutionary France, the US and Latin America where denying the revolution itself could be treachery but no party was strong enough to impose a unitary version of it. The New Order in Indonesia, which I have likened to the Thermidor reaction in the French Revolution (Reid 2011: 192; see also Reid 1974), rejected the idea of revolution in favor of a military-defined 'war of independence'. I will return to this question.

Here I want to say that the problems of historians in Indonesia are not unique. The nationalist temptation is always there, and becomes irresistible at crucial times of nation-building. History as a discipline rose with the nation-state and its nationalist ideology. The great danger is that as the nation-state becomes less important than all kinds of global influences in people's lives, and nationalism declines as an explanatory principle, we must ensure that history does not decline with it. I became a historian in 1950s New Zealand because I perceived it as a way to understand the world. There, and in 1960s Malaysia where I first learned to teach, historians had absorbed enough of the colonial perspective to know their British and European history but were busy using that to find their way in an exciting post-colonial age. Local history was part of how one understood the world, to some extent in creative tension with popular national or imperial preconceptions. I thought that was normal and healthy, and was rather shocked to see how in Europe history was so much the history of "Us" – British History and even Imperial History, 'Histoire de la Patrie', 'Vaterlandsch Geschichte'. In fact, I now see that I was part of the post-colonial moment of transition, and that history everywhere is in danger of explaining much about the nation, especially its discontents, but very little about the world. It thereby risks becoming marginal and fusty to students in this global age.

The Nationalist revolution in Indonesian history

Foreign occupation and liberation from it produce the most abrupt reversals in understanding history. One nationalism replaces another as the dominant motif. In many cases the defeat of the occupier produced the immediate demonization of its type of history. Nazi support for Ukrainian

or Croatian nationalism against domination by Russia and Serbia respectively, or Japanese restoration of imperial and multi-ethnic ideas in the parts of China that it occupied, were both totally discredited as 'fascist' after 1945. This made it easier for the communists to take command of history. In Southeast Asia the situation was much more interesting, since the Japanese occupiers did not appear too bad after 1945 in comparison with the long-term European occupiers they replaced. In each Southeast Asian country there was post-war contestation between ideas more favored by western or by Japanese occupiers. Indonesia was at one extreme of the spectrum of possibilities, where in general those cooperating with the Japanese remained in charge of nationalist rhetoric thereafter, after only the briefest of retreats at the end of 1945.

The vital date in Indonesian historiography is therefore 1942. Nationalist writers suddenly occupied center stage when the Japanese occupation banned the Dutch language and all Dutch textbooks. Muhammad Yamin (1903–1962), a Sumatran convert to a Java-centric view of national history², was the most interesting and influential creator and patron of the new nationalist history which glorified the shadowy pre-Muslim kingdoms and thereafter anti-Dutch fighters as the two key precursors of modern Indonesia. His Java-centric nationalist perception was certainly contested until 1965 by rival Marxist and Islamic constructions, both much more internationalist in their understanding of where Indonesian identity belonged in world history. Marxist internationalism, in particular, had a marked influence on most nationalist writers up to 1965, starting with Semaun, Tan Malaka and Iwa Kusuma Sumantri in the 1920s. Iwa's English pamphlet, *The Peasants Movement in Indonesia* (Dingley 1927) written in Europe under the pseudonym S. Dingley, certainly deserves a new edition and an Indonesian translation. The Marxists were prominent in identifying the 17th century as a time when Indonesia's bourgeois revolution was curbed by VOC monopolies, prolonging feudalism artificially (Rutgers & Huber 1937; Tan Malaka 1925). The generation of Sukarno and Hatta all knew their European history well because it was crucial to reading Marx and left-wing literature more generally, with its confidence that imperialism was simply "the last stage of capitalism", on its way out. Seeing their own 1945-9 revolution as a successor to European revolutions, some played the game of identifying the equivalents in Indonesia of Mirabeau, Robespierre and Napoleon from the French revolution, of Lenin and Trotsky from the Russian. As long as Sukarno held the microphone, constantly quoting Renan, Marx, Kautsky, Liebknecht, and Sun Yat-sen, Indonesians were left in no doubt that their history was part of a great global movement of revolution.

The New Order of Suharto, on the other hand, banned Marxist constructions completely, and marginalized Islamic ones, in its imposition of a single centralized definition of Indonesian identity through history. Best represented by military historian Nugroho Notosusanto (1930-85), head of the TNI's Pusat Sejarah Militair from 1964 and Minister of Education from 1983, this enforced a military version of the past in which anti-colonial fighters declared as *pahlawan nasional* became the essential unifying factor in Indonesian history (McGregor 2007). Revolution was definitely off the agenda, though another legacy of Marxist analysis survived at least in popular

² Especially *Gadjah Mada* (1945) and *Sedjarah Perdjoengan Dipanegara* (1945), both frequently reprinted. Yamin was Minister of Education, Culture and/or Information in most of the governments from 1953 to 1965 (Noer 1979: 250-9; Reid 1979: 297-8).

usage. This was the idea that the pre-1942 structure of Indonesian society was 'feudal' (*feodal*), in a false analogy with European history. It became another means of discrediting the past.

What I want to stress here is the extent to which this nationalist rewriting of history before 1998 was unusually successful in both imposing a single interpretation of historical identity on a diverse Archipelago, and in minimizing Indonesia's entanglement with the rest of the world. Not only everything to do with the Dutch was marginalized or demonized, but also other foreign entanglements which colonial scholars had perhaps exaggerated. The great and fascinating ways in which the Archipelago interacted with, adapted and modified Indian, Chinese, Islamic, European and Japanese ideas and influences was no longer explored in Indonesian classrooms, though still intriguing to the foreign scholars who wrote about the revolution (Anderson 1972, Reid 1974, Frederik 1988, Lucas 1991, Bouchier 2014). I have argued elsewhere that this highly centralized syllabus was immensely successful in creating a modern nation in which most people thought of themselves firstly as Indonesians. Among the costs was a poor foundation of confidence in dealing with the rest of the world in this now global era (Reid 2010: 212-5).

Since researching in the 1970s the Indonesian Revolution and its counterfactual Malaysia case (Reid 1979A; 1974) I have been convinced that its revolutionary path to modernity is crucial in explaining why Indonesia differs from other Asian countries in this respect. By contrast with not only Malaysia, but federal Pakistan, India or Burma, the Indonesian sense of a single national self appears more securely established than in those societies that achieved independence and modernity through negotiation and compromise, not revolution. Of course, the cost of revolution was also great, not only economically but in terms of being obliged to forget the separate histories of Balinese, Bataks, Bugis or Betawi – indeed to be unusually isolated from realistic connection with these separate pasts. Language adds its weight to this isolation from the past. The fact that the Japanese banned Dutch so abruptly (as they did not ban French or English elsewhere as modes of communicating with the new rulers), that it was very weakly reimposed after 1945, and that Indonesian was enforced as the sole medium of instruction and mass media under Suharto, has largely removed young Indonesians from access to the older sources about their past. The remaining monuments of Jakarta's golden age, centered around what is now Taman Fatihillah in Kota, were tidied up under Governor Ali Sadikin as an attraction for foreign tourists, but they appear to hold few points of contact or interest for Indonesians. There is no other country in Southeast Asia with so little identification with its past.

Rediscovering Indonesia as Global

We do live in a global age, and students have grown understandably impatient with the constraints of a narrow nationalist syllabus that does little to explain the world. The way so many idealistic or discontented educated youth turn from an idealization of the Indonesian nation to an idealization of a global Islamic political order may be a demonstration of this.

This shrinking of horizon was legitimated by nationalism, but I think the causes were deeper. These had to do with the understandable reduction of the definition of Indonesia-ness to something that was partly racial, partly linguistic, partly simply very recent – the definition that expressed itself in Romanized Indonesian. I want to quote here the most celebrated of contemporary Algerian writers, Kamel Daoud, who of course writes in Arabic but accepts Algeria's

many literary pasts. That specifically includes Albert Camus, one of the greatest writers of French literature, who lived in Algeria and wrote his most famous novel about it.

[Camus] was an Algerian writer. My own 'Algerianness' is not exclusive and does not exclude others: I assume everything that enriches me, including the monstrous wound of colonization. Camus is Algerian because Algeria is larger and older than French Algeria, Ottoman Algeria, Spanish or Arab Algeria (Kamel Daud, cited Messud 2015: 56).

If we were to transpose that quote to an Indonesian setting, would it read something like this?

Eduard Douwes Dekker (Multatuli) was an Indonesian writer [or Christiaan Eikman was an Indonesian scientist and first Nobel Prize-Winner]. My own 'Indonesian-ness' is not exclusive and does not exclude others: I assume everything that enriches me, including the monstrous wound of colonization. Douwes Dekker is Indonesian because Indonesia is larger and older than Dutch Indonesia, Majapahit's Indonesia, Hindu-Buddha Indonesia, Islamic Indonesia or Republican Indonesia.

Indonesian History as a Door to Global History

Let me suggest some obvious ways in which Indonesia has played a central role in world history, starting with the more recent. Each of these, I propose, can be a portal through which Indonesian historians should play a bigger international role, and Indonesian students be better prepared to understand the modern world.

The Cold War, firstly, had perhaps its crucial battleground in Indonesia. It was not as 'hot' a war zone as Indochina, and did not draw foreign actors to it. Indonesia's experience has therefore not had as much international attention; yet it is a better test case to explain how the West, despite losing in Indochina, nevertheless won the long-term contest for Southeast Asia. Indonesia was wooed by the US, by the USSR and eventually by China, as a crucial arena in the Third World propaganda war. Vietnam and Korea were occupied and divided in the hot end of the Cold War, but Sukarno and his colleagues played the three sides expertly enough that nothing like this happened in Indonesia, despite having the world's third biggest communist party. That party certainly deserves more study in the context of world communism, the Cold War, and the radical experimentation with building a new national culture.

Secondly, Comparative Revolution. For my generation of history students and many before it, analyzing why revolutions and wars happen, and what consequences they bring, was essential to understanding how the world worked. As long as people hoped for revolution, or feared major wars, historical analysis appeared essential. Francis Fukuyama (1992) was half right when suggesting that the end of Marxism might imply 'the end of history'. But in fact ideological contestation has continued, and revolution remains a crucial historical phenomenon. The Indonesian case, more than the communist party-driven events in China and Viet Nam, exhibits a classic French Revolution pattern of progression to the left until a military or Napoleonic reaction takes over. It was one of the great events of the 20th century and deserves a much bigger place in comparative analysis.

Thirdly, Indonesia's role in intellectual history and the growth of science needs to be understood globally. Let's begin with Indonesia's first Nobel prize in Medicine, awarded to

Christiaan Eijkman (1858-1930) in 1929 for discovering that the cause of beri-beri was the polishing away of the vitamin-rich outer skin of the rice grain, and thereby laying the foundation for the whole understanding of vitamins. Nobel prizes have become such a big deal that everybody tries to claim them. Australia claimed the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2011, and certainly didn't care that the winner, Brian Schmidt, was born and educated in the US before taking up a job at my university in Australia. More commonly we claim people who did their pioneering work in Australia but because of it got a chair in Harvard or Oxford where they could better publicize themselves and gain academic credibility – and only then got the Nobel Prize. That is more the case with Eijkman. His crucial work was unquestionably done in Jakarta, when he was the first director of the visionary Medical Laboratory there for its first decade, 1888-98 (and incidentally of the Doktor Djawa School). Probably he would not have got the prize if he had not then been given a prestigious chair at Utrecht and become a member of the respectable scientific academies. But that should not stop Indonesia claiming all the credit for the scientific breakthrough, which as always depended on a whole large team in the Medical Laboratory Batavia, most of whom lived and died in this country. It is really very unusual that a country would not seek to claim a Nobel Prize on the basis of work done in that country; but then Indonesia is rather exceptional in the very low degree to which today it either accepts foreign talent or exports its own talent. That began to change with Habibie, who re-established the Eijkman Institute in 1992, but it needs to change much more.

Alfred Russell Wallace (1823-1913) is another illustration of the way breakthroughs have been made in what are regarded as academic peripheries, such as Indonesia, but the credit was taken by those higher up or more central to the global academic hierarchy. The hierarchy of the academic system required, then perhaps even more than now, that research breakthroughs be authenticated in some cold northern university or scholarly academy.

We all know how Charles Darwin discovered evolution and natural selection, one of the most fundamental scientific breakthroughs of all time. His practical experience was as naturalist on the *Beagle*, which went around the world, but avoided Asia, in 1831-6. But his famous *Origin of Species* was not worked out until much later in Cambridge, and was an academic sensation because of his already high status in the academic community. Wallace had no such status, no position, and was always desperate for money, but he worked out the basic theory of natural selection on his own during 10 years in the Indonesian Archipelago, accompanied and informed by a range of local people. From Ternate, Maluku Utara, Wallace sent his paper outlining natural selection to the much more established Darwin in Cambridge in 1858. It was Darwin's realization that Wallace was ahead of him in working it out that forced him to present his theory as well as Wallace's parallel one to the Royal Society. Only recently has Wallace become accepted as not only discoverer of his famous Wallace Line dividing Asian from Australian-type fauna, but co-author of the fundamental theory for modern biology, natural selection. His Southeast Asian collaborators only now begin to be acknowledged—notably his Sarawak Malay constant companion Ali (c.1840-1907), responsible for capturing and processing thousands of bird specimens and bringing to scientific attention the Bird of Paradise.

A little earlier Indonesia was in the forefront of the establishment of the scientific study of linguistics. Understanding the basis of language families, remarkably illustrated by the wide dispersion of Malayo-Polynesian (what we now call Austronesian), was based on the work in

Indonesia of Raffles, Crawfurd, Leyden and Marsden (and of course their usually unmentioned local partners and informants). They were mediators to the great German systematisers, starting with **Wilhelm von Humboldt** whose immense work on the Kawi language made Javanese culture appear to be the civilizational bedrock of the vast language family and its entanglement with Sanskrit.

Going further back in time, the archipelago was the most important venue for the European discovery of tropical diversity; it was also the place where China, India, the Middle East and Europe met and interacted on what initially were something like equal terms. The great wealth the VOC was extracting from Indonesian spices allowed it to employ some educated men who developed their curiosity about Indonesian flora in a scholarly direction.

Dutch-born, Leiden-educated physician **Bontius (Jacob de Bondt, 1591–1631)** and German-born **Rumphius (Georg Eberhard Rumpf, 1627–1702)** were both taken to the Indies by the VOC and spent the rest of their lives there – 17 years for Bontius and nearly 50 for Rumphius. Their publications on the great variety of Indonesian plants and their medicinal properties helped mould the emergence of systematic botany as a discipline.

What is insufficiently known is the role Indonesian women played in the discoveries they recorded—the east-west sexual encounter at its best. Bontius reported that every Indonesian woman is both an able physician and obstetrician and “I should prefer her skill above that of a learned doctor or arrogant surgeon”. Moreover “their botanic knowledge . . . is far more advanced than our own”, and thus indispensable in herbal cures (Bontius 1769, cited Sargent 2013, 148-9).

This knowledge was most explicitly formalized by Rumphius, the pioneer botanist who spent most of his long life in Ambon. He systematically described and illustrated 350 plants, all unfamiliar in Europe, and provided much of the empirical basis for the so-called Linnaean system still fundamental to botany today. In his day, in other words, Indonesian was integrally connected with the frontier of scientific work. Like Bontius he had a high opinion of his female informants, but especially of his Malukan wife Suzannah, tragically killed in the great earthquake and tsunami of 1674, whose essential contribution to his work he graciously acknowledged. A monument to him in Ambon was destroyed in World War II. If nobody has yet rebuilt it, I suggest a new one be created and honored, this time including his partner Suzannah.

Fourthly, the ‘Age of Commerce’, when Nusantara was at the Centre of World Commerce. Proceeding a little further back again, the Archipelago played a very central role in world history in what I call the ‘Age of Commerce’, which others have called the ‘Age of Discovery’, the Early Modern period or the Renaissance. The world was transformed in the 16th and 17th centuries, and much of the reason was the hunger of Europeans for the spices of Indonesia. They didn’t know where the cloves and nutmeg came from, except that it was somewhere known vaguely as ‘India’. The Portuguese made it to India around Africa in 1497, while Columbus didn’t make it as he had hoped by sailing westward in 1492. He discovered America instead, of course, and his successors found a lot of silver and gold instead of spices. But his voyages were only supported to do this because he promised to find the spices of India, and that’s why he called everybody he met ‘Indians’. The Spanish continued to hope they could get to the spices by going westward, which was why they sent Magellan around the world, and eventually colonized the Philippines. These pioneer navigators have been exhaustively documented from a European perspective, but my major work was devoted to trying to contextualize them as but one strand in a massive expansion of Asian

long-distance trade fueled by the rapid growth in the money supply of silver and gold (Reid 1988-93).

The next century and a half was a prosperous and critical time for Nusantara, as Muslim, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English traders competed for the spices and drove prices up. Southeast Asian ports became a central place for the exchange of ideas between different parts of the world, and for the interaction of different models of how to organize trade. This period is still much in the minds of Europeans because it coincides with the reformation, the critical religious contest that also defined the modern states. We Anglophones see endless documentaries and popular movies about King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I. Why is the period not so popular with Indonesians, even though their Archipelago then became the crossroads of the world? In Nusantara it was even more dramatic a time of discovery of the world, of science, of new states, and of the critical contests about which religious systems would prevail. For the birth of a capitalist world order, what happened here was also central. Indonesian history and world history were fully entangled.

Of course, we know who the winners of these dramatic contests were by the late 17th century—the VOC in the spice trade, and a localized Sunni Islam in the religious contest. But that should not make the contests any less exciting, both in terms of explaining the nature and problems of contemporary Indonesia, and as an entry point into world history at a time Nusantara was central to it. After the VOC victory it was a major story in the development of capitalism, and of imperialism world-wide. Indonesian historians need to be in the forefront of understanding these things and contributing to the debates.

5. Gender. Indonesia has much to tell the world about Women's History, everyday history of the Family, and the domestic side of modernity.

Today's world is undergoing extraordinary transformations of what is considered the norm in gender and family relations. In the cities of the richer parts of the world, including Japan, Korea and Taiwan, people are postponing marriage or not marrying at all, having very few children, while women demand absolutely equal rights in the workplace. Some Islamic reformist movements are going the opposite way, in demanding a subordinate legal position for women as they imagine obtained in 7th Century Arabia. The history of gender demands attention at a global level to place these radical changes in perspective, and here Southeast Asia has a lot to say. Before the 20th century it exhibited the most balanced gender pattern of anywhere in the world, with women no more dependent on men economically than men were on women. The ways in which this balanced gender pattern has interacted with various modern ideas and pressures is of particular interest to the whole world at this time (Reid 1988-93, I: 146-172; Reid 2015: 24-5, 268-72, 314-18; Reid 2014).

6. Finally, and most importantly, Indonesian history has much to say to the world about the history, and likely future, of our global environment.

The environment is the issue that rightly arouses youthful passions today. The world's two most destructive volcanic eruptions of modern times occurred at Tambora in Sumbawa (1815) and Krakatau (1883), situated at opposite ends of the extremely eruptive zone of Java, Bali and Lombok, also famous for their high fertility. They darkened and cooled the whole planet and produced years without summer in Europe, though this causation has only recently been understood. The only disaster thought to have seriously endangered the survival of humanity

(*Homo sapiens*) since its African origins occurred in Sumatra– the eruption that created the crater of Lake Toba 74,000 years ago and caused six years of global winter. Climate research has identified other sudden cooling episodes causing crises in the northern hemisphere, notably in 536CE, 1258 (probably caused by a mega-eruption in Lombok) and the 1580s. These probably had their origins in tropical volcanoes, which alone have the capacity to affect the whole planet through prevailing wind patterns. Southeast Asia’s are the prime suspects (Reid 2014A).

Southeast Asia’s environmental history is therefore more important for the planet in geological terms than probably any other large region, before we even begin to discuss the issue of biodiversity. And yet it is still the least well studied –particularly in Indonesia itself. To do it justice, historians of Indonesia must be deeply engaged both with their global counterparts and pioneers in the area of environmental history and with geologists and climate scientists. History is absolutely critical to the survival of our human species, and of the planet itself, and nothing could be more urgent for our young people to tackle.

Conclusion

Having spent much of the last 70 years disentangling Indonesian history from global history, the task of we historians today is to re-entangle it. We need to help our students and our readers to see that history is the best way to understand our planet and the peoples and problems on it. We need to show that Indonesia, and the separate parts of Indonesia, is a vital part of that global story.

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