

# Social Sciences and the Indonesian Historical Diaspora

1<sup>st</sup> David Reeve

*Arts and Social Sciences  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney, Australia  
d.reeve@unsw.edu.au*

**Abstract**—There are significant Indonesian/Malay diasporic communities in South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname and New Caledonia, the former two formed out of early Dutch colonialism from about the 1650s, the latter two from late colonialism around the 1890s. This is a worthy topic for an inter-disciplinary research approach from the Indonesian social sciences community. At present the research tends to be country-specific, with a great neglect of comparative study. These are small communities struggling to maintain their interests and identities within large populations where they have difficulty in being heard. They have lived through tumultuous political events but still insist on their Indonesian, Malay and Javanese roots. But the next generation seems less interested in their historical ties with the Malay world. These identities are under threat.

**Keywords**—*Indonesian, history, diaspora*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The early leaders in Indonesian social sciences were a small elite who knew each other well, and who discussed interpretations of Indonesian society together – people like Koentjaraningrat and Parsudi Suparlan in anthropology, Harysa Bachtiar in sociology, Sartono, Taufik Abdullah, Onghokam and A.B. Lapien in history, and various figures in political science.[1] There were also important researchers in Indonesian literature, in archaeology and philology. This group of early post-independence intellectuals, Dutch-educated, were cosmopolitan and international, in the tradition of pre-independence scholars like Poerbatajaroko, Mohamad Yamin, Priyono and Sanusi Pane, to name just a few, who ranged across many fields.[2]

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is a summary of research results using the historical method approach. In the historical method there are 4 stages: 1) heuristics, which is the collection of sources from sources of various forms and types of sources; 2) criticism, at this stage the source is examined for physical authenticity and authenticity of the contents; 3) interpretation, which is the interpretation of the analysis of the sources that have been carried out, so that a series of coherent historical stories are arranged; and 4) historiography, this stage writes history into a scientific writing format.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Sketching the diasporic communities*

I would like to briefly sketch out the dimensions of these diasporic communities in 2018. Taking South Africa first, the country has a population of about 58 million people, of whom the Cape Malays number something over 181,000, concentrated in the two major cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg. [3]The Cape Malays are about 0.3% of the entire population and about 4.5% of the population of Cape Town. Sri Lanka has a population of some 21 million people, with Muslims being about 9%. The Sri Lankan Malays are scattered across the country, rather than being concentrated as in South Africa, and with a population of about 40,000 represent about 0.2% of the population and 2% of the Muslims. These are very much tiny minority populations, with all the problems of trying to defend their interests against (or with) the much larger communities that surround them.[4]

The two diasporic communities that came out of late colonialism now live in Suriname and New Caledonia. The population of Suriname is only about 564,000 people, in an area larger than Java. Of these, some 72,000 plus are identified as Javanese, about 13% of the population, and playing a significant role in Surinamese politics.[5] New Caledonia is still a region of France, a province, with a population of about 280,000, with the ‘Javanese’ estimated at perhaps 11,500 – though another estimate is 7,000 – and at the larger figure about 4.4% of the population. In comparison to Suriname where the Javanese are very visible and important in politics, in New Caledonia they seem to maintain a low profile, being more French in public and more Javanese in private.[6]

### B. *The state of research*

There has been over the last decades a lack of comparative studies on the diaspora of the Malay world, with almost all studies being country-specific, and the work of a few pioneering individuals. Those few individuals mostly come from the diasporic communities themselves or are foreign scholars from the previous colonial powers, who have the relevant language skills and interest. Thus, work on Suriname is largely the preserve of Dutch scholars and the major scholarly work on New Caledonia is by the French scholar Jean-Luc Maurer, also with some local researchers, though Pam Allen from Australia has more recently written short articles on both Suriname and French Caledonia.[7]

In Indonesia, the interest in the diaspora is also mainly confined to language-specific departments in a couple of major universities. Research funding has always been a problem for Indonesian academics. Funding mostly comes from government projects, which have focused on themes closer to home.[8] There is some interest in Suriname in the Javanese and the Dutch study programs at the University of Indonesia and some research on the Cape Malay community in its Indonesian department, where Syahrial has been working on the *hikayat/kietaab*. Subiyantoro of the French department at the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta has written on Javanese language issues in New Caledonia. [9]

Two Indonesian initiatives in history and anthropology, a 1950s thesis on Syekh Yusuf of Cape Town by Tukinah, and Parsudi Suparlan's ground-breaking study of Suriname society and politics in the 1970s, both from the University of Indonesia, have not been followed up. With the new government interest in the Indonesian diaspora, evidenced by an encouraging speech by president Joko Widodo to the Indonesian Diaspora Network in October 2015, the current interest may be translated into more substantial multi-disciplinary research projects.[10]

In the case of the Cape Malays, the classic work was written by Izac David du Plessis in the 1930s, with 19 editions in English from 1944 to 1990, a work now regarded as romantic and orientalist (see Todeschini & Japha). More recent work on the slave trade, particularly by Worden and R C-H Shell, has shed much new light on the whole of the slave community, but forebears of the Cape Malay community are only a small part of these works. [11]The most substantial new work has come from the academic Mohamed Haron, himself of Cape Malay descent, and now a professor at Botswana University. He has researched the more recent dilemmas of the Cape Malay community, for example whether to call themselves Cape Malays or Cape Muslims, and has also extensively analysed the ways in which the Malaysian government has looked for links with the Cape Malays since the 1970s, the rival for the Indonesian government in seeking the allegiance of that community. His background is in Arabic and Islamic studies, and his more recent work is on Islam in Africa.[12]

In Sri Lanka it is the work above all of B A Hussainmiya that has lifted the history of the Sri Lankan Malay community above the level of enthusiastic but indiscriminating local historians, with two pioneering books *Lost Cousins* and *Orang Rejimen*. More recently, Hussainmiya has held a senior post at the University of Brunei, and since then his energies have gone into several books on Brunei history and politics. For both Cape and Sri Lankan history, what we know of the Javanese aristocrats exiled there comes from passing references in Merle Ricklef's classic works on 18th and 19th century Javanese history.

These studies have erected the essential framework of the history of the Cape Malays and Sri Lankan Malays, but the life and thought-worlds of the two communities have not yet been much filled in. Some current work is heading in that direction. Jean Gelman Taylor has been working on the wills of South African slaves, combing these legal documents for evidence of their lives, giving these long-dead slaves a voice. Sri Lankan Malay has attracted the interest of a small but

dedicated group of linguists, whose work on that language will provide much evidence on the history and thinking of its speakers (for a recent reference S. Nordhoff).[13]

Romola Asmara, a Sri Lankan Malay has recently completed a doctoral thesis on the endangered status of Sri Lankan Malay, and has returned to an academic position in Colombo, where she is active in promoting her community. Sarah Jappie, an Australian of Cape Malay descent – with South Sulawesi ancestors, completed a Master's thesis at Cape Town University in 2010, investigating the 'biographies' of a collection of *hikayat/kietaab*. In 2018 she has completed a doctoral degree at Princeton on the interpretations of Syekh Yusuf in South Africa, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. [14]

Probably the most exciting project is that of Ronit Ricci at the Australian National University, who is conducting an extensive project on the literary history of the Sri Lankan Malays, of which her articles on a Malay newspaper published in Colombo in 1869, and her discovery of a Javanese epic poem written in Sri Lanka, dating back to 1831 are an early taste. There is much to come from the current work.[15]

### *C. The Indonesia Diaspora Network (IDN)*

The first Indonesian Diaspora conference was held in Washington in August 2012, indicating a new and unprecedented level of interest from the Indonesian government in citizens of Indonesian descent living abroad. It aimed at greatly strengthened links between Indonesia and its diasporic communities and a common policy towards them. In return it sought a greater degree of organization between those communities and Indonesia, and a commitment for the overseas communities to become involved in the development of the home country. [16]

Rather than previous feelings in Indonesia that communities overseas were somehow disloyal by choosing to live and work in another country, the new approach was to regard them as a significant national asset. It was followed by the congresses held in 2014, 2015 and 2017, and out of these congresses came the Indonesian Diaspora Network (IDN), which now has branches in 32 countries. A core element of the IDN program is dual citizenship.[15]

The main interest of the first conference was on Indonesian citizens living abroad but the second conference extended its focus to the older 'historical' communities, including those in South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname and New Caledonia. This was a big event, with over 6000 people attending, and attended by the Indonesian president and a raft of ministers. It was an emotional and euphoric event, with the theme of 'coming home' (*pulang kampung*). [16]There was a substantial delegation from New Caledonia with 27 representatives, from Suriname with 7, a small but vocal group from South Africa, and a representative each from Sri Lanka and Madagascar, The Suriname home affairs minister began his speech in Indonesian, continued in English and finished in Javanese.[17]

Common themes were of the little people of history being exploited by colonial demands from cheap labour, of difficult lives in strange environments, and of substantial pride in the ways these communities had - over time - lifted themselves

out of the lowest levels of society, and in the ways that they had maintained their identity.[18]

#### D. The future

This Indonesian diasporic initiative had struck a highly positive response with the communities overseas. But for the communities in South Africa and Sri Lanka this was a second and much later invitation to regard themselves as part of an international Malay world. The Malaysian government had been building links with these communities since the 1970s, as part of a debate within Malaysian society about the meaning of 'Malayness'. And more recently, since 2008, the Malaysian government has been aggressively promoting its trade connections with Africa in general and South Africa in particular, becoming a major supplier of halal food to South Africa and to its Cape Malay community. [19]

In each of these four countries the Indonesian/Malaya diasporas have used their historical identity as a basis to make claims on the various governments and as a basis for communal identity and pride. The rise of Indonesian nationalism the 1920s to 1940s have them a new sense of pride, even more so with the proclamation of Indonesian independence, and Indonesia's increased global role from the Asia-Africa Conference of 1955.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In each of these countries to Indonesian/Malay diasporas have faced very threatening events, such as apartheid and its collapse in South Africa, insurrections and war in Sri Lanka, a military coup and an insurrection in Suriname, and the Kanak rebellion and independence movement in New Caledonia. They had to position themselves very carefully to survive these bloody events over which they had little influence. But in the 21st century, these identities may be fading away, as the younger generations grow less interested in their grandparents' culture, language and orientations. This is an important topic that should and can be researched now in Indonesia, a collaboration of history, sociology, anthropology and political sciences with language and literary studies, for broader and deeper insights. The rise of the IDN indicates that this is a time when such research is appropriate.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] P. Alen, "Mulih nDjowo: Repatriation and Nostalgia for Home Among the Javanese of Suriname," Sydney, 2015.
- [2] P. (eds) Hoefte, R. and Meel, "Departing from Java. Javanese Labour, Migration and Diaspora," *NIAS Stud. Asian Top.*, vol. 66, 2018.
- [3] P. Allen, *Indonesians speaking French*. Indonesia: Inside Indonesia, 2010.
- [4] B. A. Hussainmiya, "'Lost cousins : the Malays of Sri Lanka', Bangi, Selangor: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia," *Dunia Melayu*, vol. 2, 1987.
- [5] M. Haron, "Conflict of Identities: The Case of South Africa's Cape Malays," 2011. [Online]. Available: <http://phuakl.tripod.com/eTHOUGHT/capemalays.htm>.
- [6] P. Allen, "Diasporic representations of the home culture: case studies from Suriname and New Caledonia," *Asian Ethn.*, vol. 3, pp. 353–370., 2016.
- [7] M. Haron, "Gapena and the Cape Malays: Initiating Connections, Constructing Images'," *Sari*, vol. 23, pp. 47–66, 2005.
- [8] S. Nordhoff, *The Genesis of Sri Lanka Malay. A Case of Extreme Language Contact*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- [9] B. A. Hussainmiya, *Orang Rejimen: the Malays of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment*. Bangli, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1990.
- [10] M. C. Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi, 1749–1792: A history of the division of Java*, London Ori. London: Oxford University Press., 1974.
- [11] Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985.
- [12] R. C.-H. Shell, *Children of bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838*. New England: Wesleyan University Press., 1994.
- [13] D. Reeve, "Community and Culture: Introducing the Indonesian Diaspora of South Africa and Sri Lanka'," *Spektrum Budaya: Festschrift HUT Ke-84 Toeti Heraty*, pp. 43–76, 2018.
- [14] J.-L. Maurer, "The Javanese in New Caledonia: The Terrors of Exile and the Hazards of Integration," *Cah. d'Archipel*, vol. 35, 2007.
- [15] R. Ricci, "The Malay World, Expanded: The world's first Malay newspaper," *Indones. Malay World*, vol. 41, no. 20, pp. 168–182, 2013.
- [16] P. Suparlan, *The Javanese of Suriname: Ethnicity in an ethnically plural society*. Arizona: Arizona State University, 2005.
- [17] R. A. Rassool, "The Sri Lanka Malays: 'dominated from the outside, dominated from the inside,'" University of Melbourne, 2014.
- [18] R. Ricci, "'The discovery of Javanese writing in a Sri Lankan Malay manuscript,'" *Bijdr. tot Taal-, Land- en Volkenkd. (Journal Humanit. Soc. Sci. Southeast Asia Ocean.*, vol. 168, no. 4, pp. 511–518., 2012.
- [19] F. & J. D. Todeschini, "Cultural identity and architectural image in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town," in *The End of Tradition*, N. AlSayyad, Ed. London, New York: Routledge., 2004.