

Indonesia



Joost Coté, ed. and trans. *Realizing the Dream of R. A. Kartini: Her Sisters' Letters from Colonial Java.*

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DREAMS WERE once the stuff of politics in the Dutch East Indies, not only for the men whose individual interpretations of those dreams have survived in the pantheon of Indonesian historiography, but also for women who were “awakened” by the close of the nineteenth century. Yet we do not know much about the women: who they were, whether their aspirations were the same as or diverged from their “nationalist brothers,” or even when and where they could be identified as nationalists in their own right.

We know of Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879–1904), a Javanese aristocrat whose letters were edited and published posthumously in 1911 by her former patrons, Dutch colonial progressives, into a collection titled *Door Duisternis tot Licht* [From darkness into light] (KARTINI, 1976). The subject of several biographers and historians, Kartini stands out in Indonesian history as symbolic of the radical break with the past, a precursor of the nationalism that was to come. Kartini became famous as an avid letter writer advocating the education of Javanese women, one whose brief tracts suited the politics of pamphleteering and the popular press very well. Her early death in childbirth in 1904 sealed the importance of her writing and her thoughts into a prototype for future (male) Indonesian nationalists to draw upon for inspiration. Her most important legacy though, that of feminism through education, is rather more neglected. But how did Kartini become Kartini, mother of the nation? From where did her political views and feminist ideas come from? How was it possible that a “Javanese princess” (as she was championed internationally) generated such publicity even in her lifetime, and what was the nature of late colonial modernity in Java? The letters by Kartini’s younger sisters that Joost Coté has translated do much work in solving several of these mysteries. As Coté explains in his book *Realizing the Dream of R. A. Kartini*, it is clear that Kartini’s dream of greater emancipation for Javanese women became identified as solely her own because of the force of her personality. But it was her equally vibrant and intelligent younger sisters, who sustained in their sisterhood the practical materialization of those ideas (women’s education, enlightened motherhood, the people’s welfare, family obligation), who prove the myth unfaithful to the original circumstances that produced it.

In descending order, the younger sisters who survived Kartini are Roekmini, Kardinah, Kartinah, and Soematri. Quite close in age to Kartini, all four were privy to the same Western education and set of European acquaintances, albeit

in varying degrees of intimacy. All four participated in the discourse of Javanese nationalism, opening schools for girls, writing opinion pieces about education and politics, even becoming signatories of *Jong Java*, an association that represented the political aspirations of modern, educated youth. Coté's introduction to the volume gives a brief biography of each of these active women, as well as the European interlocutors they wrote to. The book is organized as chapters that belong to the individual letter writers, allowing the reader to gain a sense of each woman's voice and vocation by the end of each chronologically arranged set.

The resultant feeling of having read these letters can only be described by the word that has survived the Indies Malay lexicon in today's Indonesian language: *bingoeng*. *Bingoeng* is the old spelling for the Indonesian word *bingung*, a word which connotes being confused, perplexed, muddled. It is this combination of meanings that point to the lack of clarity that one comes away with, and that I express here as the sense of ambivalence that these sisters convey in their writing. They write in chatty, effusive, passionate Dutch, as Coté tells us in the introduction and in various appreciative footnotes about the wordplay the sisters engage in. Roekmini's gushing expressions of affection to Rosita Abendanon-Mandri, her European *moedertje* (little mother), are good examples of bourgeois European girls' manners at the time, fulfilling Victorian expectations of sentimental girlhood. (One might compare her style to the now-antiquated goodness of the girls in Louisa May Alcott's writings.) Yet none of these girls cast their eyes down in false modesty as they read, observed, critiqued, and made demands.

But they also wrote obliquely, sideways as it were, maintaining Javanese traditions and manners that indicate their privileged aristocratic backgrounds. Most tellingly, it is in the realm of pain and personal tragedy that such moments emerge. The women write to their European friends in a disparaging and light way about Javanese customs, especially in the descriptions of their own impending marriages—"we Javanese" must do this and that, while clearly disagreeing with these practices. But when they write about the trials of their brother Kartono, sent to the Netherlands for higher education, their grief over his failings as well as in their realization that a male member of the family is necessary to protect them following the death of their father, they become reticent in their anguish. There is too much emotion that cannot be named. The "saga" of modernity then, as Coté argues in his introduction, is not simply a clash between two divergent worlds, but the simultaneity of both worlds appearing to color and subvert their dreams with their full awareness—the field of education and marriage for women, and dashed hopes of career advancement for men. The push and pull of modernity had its successes lauded by the colonial government, but the failures were far more widespread, and speak to the contingency of seeking Dutch approval for "native" actions.

That these letters should activate the feeling of *bingung* also attests to the strength of the historical research that the scholar has carried out in this book. History is never complete, nor can the task of the historian be to complete it. That Kartini's sisters' letters survived in an almost intact archive, and that they were so diligent in taking up this medium of letter writing to express their political views and social observations seems a miraculous thing. We now have more than one

way of knowing Kartini's dream. Her dream for Javanese nationalism and progress for women was refracted into four different iterations by four women claiming to know Kartini's legacy intimately. Who else but her sisters could have had access to her most fervent dreams and desires?

But the past is more complicated than we think it. One cannot add "gender" or "feminism" as categories in Indonesian history to bracket them off as correctives to their previous neglect. It is still a common imperative in Indonesian historiography to talk of straightening out (*meluruskan*) history, such that revisionism can only do its work of *correcting* history. In Indonesia, many radical actions are pleaded as a moral corrective, whether in the tactics of student activists in the 1970s protesting Soeharto's regime, or even in the present where the religious fundamentalism of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) aims to "correct" by violent means those Islamic sects gone astray. Corrections cover a wide variety of practices, including translating, editing, adding or substituting facts, and sometimes reaffirming what we already knew but could not confirm. What Cote's book has done is to show that even with the most meticulous research, and even with the publication of these letters that show the breadth of social change in the Indies in a few short years, additions to history never fulfill, but certainly complicate.

Here, Coté has succeeded in breaking the supposed continuity of Indonesian history by proving that Javanese nationalism, already in itself an exception to Indonesian nationalism, was fragmented and overwhelmingly unprogressive in its attitudes toward women. Certain histories, even those of educated, articulate women such as these four sisters, remain at the fringes of the dominant male-centric model of Indonesian nationalism. But in looking at the fringes, certain historical processes of identity formation become apparent. It is evident that Kartini's sisters never stopped being Kartini's sisters; they were loyal to her memory, perhaps even at the expense of valuing their own experiences after her death; they were steadfast to her ideals of aiding native Javanese women, however attenuated their views were by their social position and Western education. They did however cease identifying themselves as aristocratic Javanese and became modern women, wives, and mothers. They worked, earned wages, opened schools, and managed families. They detached themselves from a colonial system of patronage and dependency by entering that next new product in urban Java—the educated middle class. After Independence in 1945, all had undergone full conversion, whether by force or by choice, becoming Indonesian.

The youngest sister Soematri writes to their longtime correspondent Rosita Abendanon-Mandri fairly late in life, but prior to Independence, that "Times have changed, Moedertje, they bring with them sadness and suffering. You see I am gradually becoming part of that older generation who sees with regret how everything has changed, at least according to my old-fashioned opinion. The world is restless, internally and externally, one is always looking for variety, change, sensation" (297). Coté would like us to believe that modernity is comprised of these tugs and these regrets, a pain that is different from the struggles that accompany the triumphant narrative of nationalism. The need for new sensations overtook the sisters' older mode of thought, and the politics of memory are cast. If there is

one last matter of “ambivalence” (*bingung*) that I would end with, it is that this book presents the counterpoint to the prevalence of postcolonial Dutch nostalgia about the Indies (GOUDA, 1995). *Realizing the Dream of R. A. Kartini* explains in a gentle way why it is that postcolonial Indonesia has excised the Dutch from its memory. One by one, the sisters stop writing to their Dutch friends; it is a “symbolic disengagement from the colonial connection,” as well as a “closing of the account” (56).

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