

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* by Anthony Reid, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1979, xx + 288 pp.

The Indonesian national revolution, particularly in its early stages, evolved from myriads of revolutions which occurred throughout Indonesia. This book focuses on the revolutions in northern Sumatra (Aceh and East Sumatra), which have been regarded as the most complete social revolutions of all the early diverse revolutions, and attempts to clarify the actual courses of the revolutions in order to explain what the revolutions in northern Sumatra actually were. In this way, the book tries to explicate what kind of revolutions ever occurred in these specific regions at this very specific time, and why they were to converge into the Indonesian national revolution. Consequently, the study thus illuminates some historical origins of Indonesian political system as we know it today.

The author, Anthony Reid, is presently a senior fellow in Southeast Asian history at the Australian National University. In 1969, he also published *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain, 1858–1898*.<sup>1</sup> In this book, he examined the process in which Aceh, an independent sultanate in northern Sumatra, had come under the Dutch control through the long Aceh-Dutch War. *The Blood of the People* follows the history of Aceh after this period, that is, the transformation of Aceh from a subordinate part of the Dutch East Indies to that of the Republic of Indonesia.

This book, however, discusses not only the revolutions in Aceh but also the revolutions in East Sumatra. It has been considered that the nature of the revolutions in Aceh and East Sumatra differed greatly. Therefore Reid provides the categories of *pemuda* ("youth") for the main body of the revolutions, *pergerakan* ("political movements") for the nationalist leaders, *Islam* ("Islamic movements") for religious leaders, and *kerajaan* ("traditional rulers") for the anti-revolutionary political force, in order to compare those distinct revolutions. This particular subject is presented in Reid's previous papers.<sup>2</sup>

*The Blood of the People* is composed of nine chapters. Chapters 6–8 provide the book's core and describe the course of the revolutions in 1945–46. The preceding Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the period of the Japanese occupation. In these chapters, Reid proposes a new interpretation as to the effects of the Japanese occupation on

<sup>1</sup> A. Reid, *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain, 1858–1898* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> A. Reid, "The Birth of the Republic in Sumatra," *Indonesia*, No. 12 (1971), and "The Japanese Occupation and Rival Indonesian Elites: Northern Sumatra in 1942," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (November 1975).

these revolutions.<sup>3</sup> In Chapters 1–3, the author examines the transformation process of traditional kingships in northern Sumatra under the Dutch colonial rule. In this context, the author basically agrees to James T. Siegel's analysis of prewar Aceh presented in *The Rope of God*.<sup>4</sup>

A brief summary of the contents of *The Blood of the People* is as follows. As already mentioned, Chapters 1–3 describe the transformation of traditional kingships under colonial rule. Previously, there were three major political cultures in northern Sumatra: Acehnese, Batak, and Malay. The feature of traditional Malay sultanates was their sacred aura of sovereignty, which enabled them to build up flexible alliances with any ethnic groups. On the other hand, the Bataks who lived in inland areas traditionally lacked a centralized political system. As a result, the Malays who lived in coastal areas maintained superiority as cultural, economic, and political mediators over the Bataks in their transactions with the outside world.

Under the Dutch colonial rule the East Coast of Sumatra, inhabited by the Malays and the Bataks, became the center for the plantation economy. The Dutch used the Malay sultans both politically and economically as their ideal allies for indirect rule, while the sultans accumulated wealth under the patronage of the Dutch. Yet, their amicable system began to disintegrate in the depression years, and the problem of land came to be the main issue of social conflict. Meanwhile, the cities such as Medan and Pematang Siantar began to develop and a new "Indonesian culture" to emerge. Nationalist movements appeared in this cultural setting. The nationalists, capitalizing the land issues, tried to extend their influence to rural and agricultural regions and in time they found themselves opposing the sultans. It was the agricultural population of the Bataks who suffered both the break down of traditional ownership of land in the Dutch colonization process and the restrictions on land cultivation imposed in the depression years. In reaction to this, the Bataks, especially the Karo Bataks, joined nationalist political parties or sought for some other forms of organized oppositions, as is shown by the formation of the *aron* "secret society."

Acehnese traditional authority, the sultanate, on the other hand, was much centralized and had its power firmly based on royal monopoly of trade. There also existed over a hundred *ulèëbalang* as war leaders and entrepreneurs. In the course of the Aceh-Dutch War, however, the Dutch abolished the sultanate in Aceh and adopted a policy, whereby *ulèëbalang* "feudal lords" were fully made use of in the administration of Aceh. Thus, under colonial rule, *ulèëbalang* were able to expand both their economic and political power, although traditionally they had never been feudal lords. In this manner, *ulèëbalang* accumulated land and virtually came to monopolize the rice, especially in the most densely-settled rice-growing area in Aceh, the plain of Pidie. The small number of Acehnese who received Western education were mainly the children of *ulèëbalang*. The masses usually received Islamic education conducted by *ulama* ("Islamic teachers"). A movement called PUSA (Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh or All-Aceh Ulama Association) was formed in 1939 to reform Islamic education.

<sup>3</sup> Previous research on the Japanese occupation in Aceh was carried out by A. J. Piekaar in *Atjeh en de Oorlog met Japan* [Aceh and the war with Japan] ('s-Gravenhage/Bandung: Van Hoeve, 1949).

<sup>4</sup> J. T. Siegel, *The Rope of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

PUSA's importance did not lie in its organization as such, however, rather, in its appeals for social reform through the enlightenment, which succeeded in subsuming diverse social forces and movements. Thus PUSA became the nucleus of the widely diversified anti-establishment social forces.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the political changes in northern Sumatra during the period of Japanese military occupation. The Japanese military invasion of Sumatra in March 1942 meant the end of the Dutch-*kerajaan* rule, and the opening of a new era to both Aceh's PUSA and all the nationalist political parties in East Sumatra. The Acehnese drove the Dutch out of Aceh Besar in a revolt against them on the eve of Japanese landing, and the Japanese army was hence able to make a triumphal entry without any bloodshed. In East Sumatra, there was a notable upsurge of the *aron* movement in the period between the Dutch retreat and the gradual establishment of the Japanese military administration. The *aron* organized the attacks on the Dutch-supported village chiefs who had tried to prevent the "illegal" cultivation of the *aron* members. In both regions, Aceh and East Sumatra, the vulnerability of the *kerajaan* was revealed, and dissatisfaction accumulated under the Dutch-*kerajaan* rule behind the superficial peace and order became apparent. This outbreak of violence, however, was repressed once again by the establishment of the forceful Japanese military administration.

The author examines the relation between the Japanese occupation and the revolution as follows. The causes of social revolutions had already been fostered under the Dutch colonial rule. The Aceh uprisings and *aron* rebellions, once surfaced in the confusion created by the Japanese landing, came finally into their full swing at the time of the Japanese retreat as the social revolutions. Past research conducted by Piekaar regarded the "divide and rule" policies of the Japanese military administration as the direct cause of the conflict between *ulèëbalang* and PUSA, and the subsequent Aceh revolution. In contrast to this interpretation, Reid sees that the Japanese "divide and rule" was merely the resultant of the process in which various Indonesian social forces were mobilized according to the sometimes contradictory policies initiated by mutually independent elements of the Japanese military administration. Moreover, he implies that, it was utilized by the two contesting forces in Aceh, PUSA and *ulèëbalang*, in strengthening their powers. Therefore, following Benedict Anderson's argument,<sup>5</sup> Reid finds that the significance attached to the Japanese military administration just prior to the revolution lies in the mobilization of Indonesian *pemuda* into the war efforts. In the latter stages of the Japanese occupation, many young men were channelled into *giyūgun* ("voluntary corps"), *heiho* ("auxiliary soldiers"), TALAPETA (Young Farmers' Training School), other military and para-military organizations, and propaganda activities. Apart from their military trainings, they were also put through a spiritual trainings which heavily emphasized self-sacrifice, patriotism, and discipline. In this way, the Japanese occupation stimulated the formation of *pemuda* as a potential political force. On the other hand, *kerajaan* became alienated from the masses because the Japanese forced them to comply with their harsh demands. This was also a time

<sup>5</sup> B. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

when *pergerakan* and *Islam* were expanding their influence through the propaganda activities.

The central section of the book, Chapters 6–8, describes the process of the northern Sumatran revolutions. When the Japanese surrender became known, *kerajaan* administrators believed in the Dutch return and began to prepare to welcome the Dutch. The *pergerakan* propagandists were at a loss to know what to do in this situation. It was *pemuda* who, following the revolutionary situation of Java, began to strive towards independence. In October, the Dutch returned to Medan from detention camps and the Allied forces landed on Belawan. The national flags of the Republic of Indonesia were flown at the very same time, and the massive march in support of independence took place. At this critical moment, the Anbon ex-soldiers of the Dutch colonial army (KNIL) clashed with *pemuda*. The affair led the *pemuda* movement into the armed struggle. In 1946, following Java, the Sumatran Persatuan Perjuangan (struggle union) was established in East Sumatra, under the influence of Tan Malaka. The revolutionary spirit rose to yet a greater height at the six-month anniversary of the revolution of February 17. The cities overflowed with anti-*kerajaan* slogans, and on March 3, the Sumatran Persatuan Perjuangan caucus ordered a simultaneous coup to liquidate *kerajaan* throughout all of East Sumatra.

In Aceh, particularly in Pidie, antagonism between *ulèëbalang* and PUSA escalated, resulting in both parties competing for the arms and repeating clashes. The nationalistic urban *pemuda* (Ali Hasjmy, etc.) who had participated in propaganda activities during the Japanese occupation, reformist PUSA, and Pidie farmers who had been dissatisfied with *ulèëbalang* oppression, overthrew the Pidie *ulèëbalang* in the Cumbok War in January 1946. Only two of the twenty-five *ulèëbalang* in Pidie survived in the killing. The Army of the People's Struggle (TPR), well supported by the Islamic armed force, Mujahidin, drove on to liquidated *ulèëbalang* from all parts of Aceh.

*Kerajaan* disappeared from northern Sumatra. In Aceh, and in East Sumatra, particularly in the Karo Batak region, the character of the revolution can be seen as a true social revolution, supported by peasants, which wiped out the remnant of the colonial system. However, the revolutions in East Sumatra other than the Karo Bataks were spontaneous in its nature without any strong leadership, and ended in the disruption of social order and embitterment of ethnic conflicts. *Pemuda* as feuding warlords sought for the booty from the revolution.

As this summary has indicated, the descriptions of the revolutions in northern Sumatra in *The Blood of the People* have succeeded in setting out relevant historical facts in the revolution. The author visited northern Sumatra, Java, the Netherlands, Malaysia, Britain, and Japan in order to collect historical documents of the Dutch colonial era, the Japanese occupation, and the revolutionary period, as well as conducting interviews with those people who had lived through those years. The book should be highly recommended for its thorough conclusive factual presentation.

And yet, the question remains whether the author's attempts to compare the revolutions in Aceh and East Sumatra by employing such categories of *kerajaan*, *pergerakan*, *Islam*, and *pemuda* have succeeded. It is clear that they are meant to be culturally defined categories since they have all been written in their Indonesian spelling forms in this English-written work. Despite this, the book offers no explanations

of the cultural meanings of the categories. Moreover, as their substitution in the title of the last chapter by "Princes, Politicians and Peasants" shows, it is not clear as to just why the author had to choose these culturally defined categories. However, the understanding of the symbolic process is crucial, particularly for the revolutionary period when all the words and deeds assume symbolic and deeply cultural meanings. The title *The Blood of the People* (*darah rakjat*), and *merdeka*, the principal symbol of the Indonesian revolution, are perfect examples of this. And yet, the book offers no explanation of the cultural meanings behind *darah rakjat*, and in the case of *merdeka*, the translation given is freedom, that is, national independence.

Benedict Anderson devoted an entire chapter for the analysis of *pemuda* as a culturally defined concept, and described the *pemuda* movement as "an engine running at break-neck speed without a driver to put it in gear." It is interesting to note here that Xarim M.S., one of the most prominent leaders of the revolution in East Sumatra, used a very similar metaphor for the *revolusi sosial*. Whilst driving his war booty car, he said "What is the use of *Merdeka* [freedom] if it is not to be enjoyed? What is the significance of Maybach [his booty sportscar] by comparison with the Tsar's Palace Lenin occupied?"<sup>6</sup> The seemingly contradictory expression stated in this book, "The more chaotic the situation in Sumatra became... the greater was the *pemuda* determination to support a national identity" (p. 253), is well explained within the very words of Xarim who enjoyed *merdeka* to the full.

Farther analyses of revolutionary symbolism such as that attempted in Java would contribute to deepening our understanding of the revolutions in Aceh and East Sumatra, and consequently to our understanding of the Indonesian national revolution as a whole.

(Saya Shiraishi)

<sup>6</sup> H. Mohammad Said, "What Was the 'Social Revolution of 1946' in East Sumatra?" trans. B. Anderson and Toenggoel Siagian, *Indonesia*, No. 15 (1973), p. 179.