In Praise Of Good Indonesian Ethnography:  
Giving Voice To Local Social Diversity

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Today I would like to speak on a subject that I am particularly interested in: ethnography. An ethnography is what I would call ‘a primary product of anthropology’. Ethnographies are what anthropologists use to help construct their theories and comparisons. Ethnography thus provides a means of social understanding and good ethnography, as I hope to define it, does this subtly with exceptional insight.

In discussing ethnography, I also want to cite specific examples of what I consider to be good ethnographies and consider what these ethnographies reveal about social life in Indonesia. Each of the examples I have chosen deals with a different social group in Indonesia so that by examining these studies, it is possible to open a window on the remarkable social diversity in Indonesia.

I do this from a personal vantage point. All of the Indonesian ethnographies that I wish to discuss are based on PhD theses that I have supervised. So I feel that I know them intimately and know how they came to be written.

I come from a tradition of social anthropology that began at Oxford and has always placed ‘ethnography’ at the centre of its research efforts. It was the Professor at Oxford, Sir Evan Evans-Pritchard, when I was a graduate student, who set out for me what I have always considered the two essential criteria of a good ethnography.

These two criteria can be simply stated but they both required further explanation to be understood and appreciated. The first criterion is that every good ethnography should capture the ‘grain of the wood’ of the society that it attempts to describe. Just as a tree species can be identified by the distinctive patterning of its wood, so this injunction uses a botanic metaphor to allude to what is paramount, particular, and distinctive about a way of life. The ethnographer’s task is not to describe a society according to some predetermined template but rather to delve deeply into the inner workings of a society and its culture and then to attempt to portray that society accordingly but in an imaginative and creative way. This criterion assumes that each society – each way of life – has its own defining concerns, its inner workings, its special features and some kind of recognizable self-identity and that the task of the ethnographer is to convey that self-defining tonality. Good ethnography, by this criterion, has to be done from the inside

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1 This presentation can be considered a continuation of a discussion that I began in what was intended to be an earlier ICSSIS presentation: “A Complementarity of Methods: Ethnography and Comparative Analysis,” Jurnal Etika No 2, 2010 pp. 235-249.
out. It can not rely on a pre-fabricated checklist – a ‘notes and queries’ approach to culture and society. Every ethnography becomes a creative endeavour.

The second criterion is equally important. The first criterion asserts that an ethnography must have a focus. It can not be simply a collection of information. The second criterion asserts that it is not sufficient that an ethnography have a clear and focused argument. It must provide enough ethnographic information so that a reader can do more than just evaluate its argument. It must be rich enough in ethnographic detail that the reader can also, if necessary, formulate an alternative interpretation – or interpretations. Thus the value of a good ethnography is that it remains interpretable for future analysis. Ethnographers write not just for their generation but for future generations who may wish to look back and reinterpret their work. As such, ethnographies are contemporary documents written to become historical material for the future. This is particularly critical in the case where an ethnography is the first (and in some cases, the only) account of a particular way of life – an instance of a particular way of life. This second criterion imposes a heavy burden on any ethnographer and makes it important that ethnography be filled with more than is necessary for a particular theoretical argument – that it possibly contain what might seem irrelevant to or, even worse, contradictory of its main argument.

These two criteria push ethnographic writing in different directions – making the production of ethnography both an art form and rigorous scientific description. Applied too vigorously, it might seem impossible to write a ‘good’ ethnography. Certainly, not all ‘good’ ethnographies are ever totally successful. But if they are able to begin a process of understanding, they can be built upon by subsequent ethnographies. In this sense, good ethnographies are the building blocks of a continuing ethnographic effort to understand the diversity and complexity of human existence.

Having set some very high standards, I want to call attention to a number of Indonesian ethnographies that I consider to meet the two criteria of good ethnography. But in the process, I want to make a further argument. Generally in Indonesian studies, the tendencies are to look in the direction of literature or history. What I would like to suggest is that to understand Indonesia, the best way to begin is by reading key ethnographies. What these ethnographies do is ‘give voice’ to the social diversity of Indonesia: each ethnography offers a different local voice speaking in its own language with its own cadence and focus.

Originally, as the name implies, ethnographies were intended to document specific societies or populations but as anthropology has developed, the idea of an ethnography has itself developed so that today an ethnography can focus on any ‘way of living’. This need not be an entire social formation but instead can concentrate on any of a variety of social groupings – large or small, localized or, in some cases, linked in communication across borders – a school, a congregation, a cult – wherever there is a community of interest and concern. An ethnography can be single-sited or multi-sited, historically based or contemporarily constituted. In all case, it must focus on people and their relationships to one another.
In looking at different ethnographies, I want to move around the country beginning in Java, then move to Flores and from Flores to Timor. This is itself a long journey but just one journey among many. One could just as easily follow a trail of ethnographies from Sumatra to Kalimantan and on to Sulawesi and Papua. At the same time, I want to look at different kinds of social formations: a city and its surroundings, a millenarian movement, an agricultural school, a small society and a ritual centre, all of which show the diversity of Indonesian life.

I want to begin with a remarkable ethnography that focuses on Cirebon, the town on Java’s north coast that was of great historical importance in the development of Islam on Java. Although today it can be seen as a modernizing metropolis similar to other cities on Java, it is the site of a cluster of edifices that reflect its significant past and a place of enormous social and cultural vitality.

Notably, Cirebon has centuries-old court centres, represented in the palaces of two closely related Javanese dynasties: the Kesepuhan and Kanoman kraton. More importantly still, Cirebon is the site of an enormous Islamic pilgrimage (ziarah) complex that features the tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati, who is considered one of the Nine Wali Songo or Muslim saints responsible for bringing Islam to Java. Equally important in the Cirebon region are hundreds of Islamic boarding schools – pesantren – some of which claim to date from the 17th or 18th century.

Given this historical concentration of Islamic institutions, it is appropriate that the ethnography of Cirebon by Abdul Ghoffur Muhaimin should be entitled The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims. This is an easy ethnography to read because it is clear and straightforward but it is not an easy ethnography to fully comprehend in just one reading. There is so much packed into this study that it requires several readings to properly appreciate.

One of the challenges in studying Cirebon is that of language. Cirebon is a substantial Javanesespeaking enclave in the wider area of West Java where Sundanese is spoken. Cirebon, however, has its own distinctive dialect of Javanese. So to be able to communicate and understand properly the cultural nuances of the Cirebon area, an ethnographer should ideally be able to converse in Cirebon dialect as well as in Sundanese and Javanese – and to understand everyday ceremonies of life in Cirebon, it is important to be acquainted with the Arabic used in these rituals. As a native of Cirebon, Abdul Ghoffur Muhaimin has all these skills as well as a deep understanding of Islam gained from studying in one of Cirebon’s most important pesantren, Buntet.

Like all ethnographies, Muhaimin’s ethnography works at several levels. It provides a comprehensive introduction to the Islamic traditions of Java as they have developed in Cirebon. These are the traditions most closely associated with Nahdlatul Ulama.

The first part of this work provides a clear exegesis of Islamic beliefs and then goes on to examine the ritual practices associated with these beliefs. It examines the Islamic calendar and the ceremonials associated both with annual events and with events of the life cycle. Set in Cirebon, the work looks at the veneration of the Muslim saints such as Sunan Gunung Jati but it also examines veneration of holy men at other lesser sites.
throughout Cirebon. It then goes on to look at the importance of pesantren education in the maintenance of these traditions and also the role of tarekat, the Sufi orders linked both to specific pesantren and to the courts of Cirebon. In effect, this study provides a remarkably detailed examination of the relationship, both current and historical, among the key institutions that uphold Islamic life in Cirebon and more widely in Java. To my knowledge, there is no other study of its kind that provides so comprehensive a view of the practice of Islam on Java.

Interestingly this judgment seems to be shared by others. Since its publication by the ANU E Press four years ago, Muhaimin’s ethnography has been an electronic bestseller. Each year since its publication, there have been tens of thousands of downloads of the book and each year the number of downloads has increased. Last year, this ethnography was the second most popular book published by the ANU E Press with 77,400 downloads.

It is important also to note that Muhaimin’s ethnography belongs to a line of ethnographies produced at the ANU on different Islamic topics. The first of these was a study by Zamakhshyari Dhofier on a pesantren, Tebu Ireng, located in Jombang in East Java. This was the first full-length anthropological study of a specific Islamic boarding school. To do this, the study also provided an examination of NU’s tradition of pesantren education.

Dhofier published a version of his ANU PhD thesis in Indonesian translation in 1982 with the title: Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai. The book initiated a series of similar studies directed to understanding the diversity of pesantren education. Only later did he publish the full English version of his thesis but by then the Indonesian version had been reprinted many times and had sold over 75,000 copies. It has since remained a bestseller and has continued to be read more in Indonesian than in English.

Now let me consider a very different kind of Javanesse ethnography. This is one that focuses not on a town or local region but on a Javanesse spiritual movement. From Cirebon in West Java, the scene shifts to Blitar in East Java. For centuries, the Javanesse have looked to the figure of the ‘Just Ruler’ – the Ratu Adil – who was expected to appear and to free the Javanesse from their colonial (and post-colonial) shackles initiating a period of peace and justice. A student of mine, Raharjo Suwandi, was extraordinarily fortunate in being able to study a group of Javanesse led by someone who was known as Embah Wali who were preparing for the coming of the Ratu Adil.

Originally when he set off for fieldwork in East Java, his intention was to do his research on another topic, but when he arrived in Blitar, he encountered the group led by Embah Wali. Their movement stressed the importance of being Javanesse and of maintaining traditions that centred on the values embodied in the stories told in Javanesse wayang. The group held a complex set of beliefs and had fashioned performance practices that involved continuous formal dancing. Although most followers were farmers and day-labourers, they built themselves a large pendopo in the courtyard in front of Embah Wali’s house, learned classic forms of dance as performed at the Yogyakarta court and, at least once a week, took part in a form of wayang that
relied on human actors whose words were spoken by a puppeteer. All of this was consistent with an emphasis on being Javanese.

Raharjo Suwandi’s ethnographic account of this movement was published in the prestigious *Verhandelingen of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* in 2000 as *A Quest for Justice: The Millenary Aspirations of a Contemporary Javanese Wali*. Few anthropologists have ever been able to study a movement of this kind from the inside. By living with the group, Raharjo was able to gain the trust of its members, probe the ideas of their leader and explore the relationships among the closest of those followers who first joined Embah Wali and had developed the movement with him over decades. There is probably no study of its kind in anthropology with this depth of understanding.

One of the key features of Raharjo’s work is the way he traces the development and adaptation of the group. This development continued after his initial fieldwork and Raharjo was able to document the movement’s development in a number of subsequent films he made with the filmmaker, Patsy Asch, and myself.

Raharjo’s first fieldwork was carried out in the early 1980’s; his thesis was submitted in 1985; and shortly thereafter, in September 1985, we were able to go to Blitar and film the group’s activities and interview Embah Wali and his followers. The result is a set of two films that offers a lively portrait of the group and a glimpse of its guiding ideas.

The first of these films, *In the Play of Life: A Wayang Performance in East Java* was released in 1992. It introduces some of the key ideas of the group and features a ritual performance of *wayang* on 1 Suro in 1985; the second film, *Consulting Embah Wali* was released in 2000 (in the same year that Raharjo’s ethnography was finally published). This film interposed conversations with Embah Wali together with the reminiscences of some of his followers about the origins and development of the movement.

Raharjo has since died but his legacy lives on. There exists a record of over eighteen hours of video-film on the movement. This material has now all been digitized with the idea – or more accurately, with the hope – that it will be possible to continue to document the movement in its present form, long after Embah Wali has died. An important aspect of ethnography is that it leads on to further ethnography.

Before leaving Java, I want to look at one more quite unusual ethnography – a study of farmer field school that were established in Java to teach farmers methods of integrated pest management – in effect to enable them to regard their fields as a kind of laboratory from which to learn lessons for the future. In an ethnography entitled *Seeds of Knowledge*, which and was published by Yale University in its Southeast Asian Studies Monograph series in 2004, Yunita Winarto who is now a Professor here at the University of Indonesia has describes in beautiful detail how different farmers in West Java carried out experiments in their fields based on what they had learned in the local Integrated Pest Management Schools that they attended. In my Foreword to this book, I described it as an unique document – an extraordinary examination of how local knowledge takes shape through the interactions of numerous individuals. As such it is
more than just an ethnography of a group of farmers in West Java – it is a ethnographic study of human learning.

I now want to move east from East Java to the island of Flores – specifically to an area of central Flores. The ethnography that I want to highlight is the ethnography written by Philipus Tule on the population known as the Kéo. It is just one of the many islands of eastern Indonesia with considerable linguistic and social diversity. From east to west, the island of Flores has at least a dozen distinguishable ethnolinguistic groups. The Kéo are one of these groups.

Philipus Tule comes from Kéo and his ethnography is based on his ANU thesis and published by Studia Instituti Anthropos with the poetic title: Longing for the House of God, Dwelling in the House of the Ancestors. Were one to judge from the table of contents, this ethnography appears to follow what might be considered a standard format. It begins in a straightforward fashion in describing the ‘ethnographic setting’ of the Kéo: the geography, demography and seasonal activities of the population. It then goes on consider Kéo ideas of identity and their identification with their territory. In the words of the Kéo: “We are the people of the land”. Tule then goes on to examine Kéo village life, social organization and relationships of kinship and marriage – all of which are intimately interrelated.

It is important to recognize that this ethnography is the first study of its kind to focus on the Kéo. Where little or nothing is known of a population, there is something of a tacit obligation to provide as full an account of the society as is feasible and to begin that account with the basic information needed to recognize and appreciate their distinctive way of life. The unfolding format of this ethnography is in part necessitated by the fact that this ethnography is the first to provide a glimpse of this society, but rather than making this the mechanical documentation of a society on Flores, Philipus Tule is able to infuse his account with an insider’s grasp of matters of social and spiritual importance to the Kéo. This makes his study good ethnography.

This ethnography does, however, have a particularly interesting focus. Philipus Tule is a Catholic priest who comes from a clan that has both Catholic and Muslim members. In fact, in kinship terms, Father Tule’s closest supporting relative, his mother’s brother, is a prominent member of the Muslim community of Kéo. Father Tule has other connections with Islam. As an ordained priest, he has studied in Rome and there as part of his studies, he learned Arabic and did formal studies on Islam. He thus straddles two communities and the special focus of his ethnography is on the way Kéo Muslims and Catholics interact, intermarry and despite their religious differences, share common social obligations to each other as members of Kéo society. This particular and highly personal ethnographic focus makes this study both exceptional and interesting. As such, it, too, qualifies as good Indonesian ethnography.

Now I would like to shift further to the east – to an area in west Timor close to the border with Timor-Leste. This is an area that further reflects the social diversity of Indonesia but also the historical continuity on which this diversity is based. In the traditional narratives of Timor and in European historical records dating back to the 16th century, there are accounts of a ruler (or rulers) on the central south coast of the island
whose authority extended across much of the island. In 1756, the Dutch East India Company concluded a treaty with the existing head of this alliance of local states, whom they described variously as the “Emperor” of Timor and the “supreme ruler” of the Belu kingdom which comprised at that time twenty-nine subordinate local polities. This ruler was located at a place known as Wywiko Behale or, in present-day spelling, Wewiko-Wehali. Although the Dutch claimed to have signed a treaty with this ruler, it was not until the 20th century that they were able to establish any formal contact. To do this, they were obliged to use military force to penetrate the realm of the ruler and still he refused to speak with them. As they were to discover, the ruler whom they had regarded as ‘Emperor’ of Timor was in fact a ritual authority – not an active political figure.

The ethnography that I want to consider is a study of this Timorese ritual centre at Wehali. That this ‘centre’ still retains authority to this day is itself remarkable but just as remarkable is a one of its most defining features. In Timorese terms, Wehali is a Rai Feto: ‘A Female Land’. The Great Lord of Wehali who was also known as the ‘Dark Lord’ was a representative of the earth. In all aspects, this Lord was ‘feminized’ as was the ‘centre’ over which he presided.

Thus Wehali is a totally female-centred area: all land, all property, all houses belong to women and are passed from one generation of women to the next. By contrast, all the surrounding areas are male-ordered and goods and property passing in a predominantly male line from father to son. Whereas in these male-ordered groups, there is a division between wife-givers and wife-takers, in Wehali, there are only husband exchanging groups. As the female centre for Timor, Wehali is symbolically conceived of as giving husbands to the other domains on Timor. These groups continue to trace their origins to Wehali.

Wehali sits at the centre of a complex web of historical relations that extend out from its different ritual houses and that are continually being renewed through marriages and the regular performances of life-giving rituals.

Tom Therik has beautifully documented these traditions in his ethnography, originally an ANU PhD thesis in Anthropology, which is entitled: Wehali: The Female Land: Traditions of a Timorese Ritual Centre. Like other good ethnographies, this study gives voice to the population that it studies. In the case of Wehali, this is, in particular, a poetic voice used in the performance of the essential life-giving rituals that Wehali carries out to enliven the land and sea and to maintain relations between heaven and earth. Until Tom Therik’s research, these Tetun rituals remained unrecorded. They are richly metaphoric and structured in a rigorous canonical parallelism that required exceptional effort to fathom. As such they represent a special poetic voice. To give an example of this special voice, I would like to provide an invocation directed from Wehali to all of the earth:

Oh ancestor, fathers,
Distant ancestors, recent ancestors,
Commoner ancestors, noble ancestors,
Please forward this plea,
Please pass it on,
Pass it on, please
This our saltiness, our misery
To the father who can not be summoned by name,
To the father who can not be called by name
Who lives in the low tide and in the place above,
Who can not be reached by stretching our hands,
Or by standing on tiptoes,
The one who just sits, who just sits firmly
At the top of a star, at the top of the moon.
Send down the raw, send down the cool
Good rain and good sunlight
For the people of the earth, for the people of the world
To be able to tap palms, to weed gardens
So that gardens produce a harvest, palms give forth juice.²

In citing these various ethnographies, I have attempted to show that if one is to understand Indonesia at the local level and if one is to appreciate Indonesia’s extraordinary diversity, it is important to read the ethnographies, especially the good ethnographies that have been written about Indonesia. Fortunately for the several decades, there has been an outpouring of excellent ethnographies. There is now hardly an area or topic in Indonesia for which there is not some relatively good ethnography. My recommendation is to start reading!

**Bibliography**

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Tule, Philippus
*Longing for the House of God, Dwelling in the House of the Ancestors*

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² This is the invocation by Piet Tahu Nahak recorded by Tom Therik in *Wehali*, pp198-199. I have altered slightly the English translation provided by Tom Therik.