

Letters from corresponding editors

THE THIRD INDONESIAN NATIONAL HISTORY SEMINAR, october, 1981

The third Indonesian National History Seminar will be held in Jakarta in October 1981. While in western countries such large gatherings are increasingly felt to be unproductive and specialists nowadays tend to huddle together in exclusive workshops and seminars on narrow topics, Indonesia has decided to continue the tradition of a broad national get-together to take stock of what has been achieved and to set the course for the next decade. In Indonesia, where the number of professional historians is still small, but enthusiasm for history is growing, such a large seminar acts as a powerful stimulus for a large diverse group from modern to traditional scholars and enthusiastic amateurs. Like the first two, this third seminar promises to become another giant Randu-alas tree, marking the development of historiography in Indonesia.

The first seminar was held in 1957. Organized at the initiative of the University of Indonesia and the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, it aimed to determine what Indonesian history was, and more practically, to create a framework according to which textbooks to be used in schools might be written. To get rid of Stapel, and not just turn him upside down, was one of the main concerns. The old Neerlandocentric view should be replaced by an Indonesia-centric view, or even a nation-centric view according to the more extreme ideas of Moh. Yamin. Periodization was dealt with by Sartono and Sukanto. Historical thinking and a-historical thinking was treated by Soedjatmoko - to mention a few of the topics. In many ways the first seminar started a discussion which has even not yet subsided. The results of the first seminar disappointed many people. Soedjatmoko's (et al.) *An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography* (1964) can be seen as a direct result grown out of disappointment with the first seminar.

Although the first seminar failed to provide Indonesian Historiography with a theoretically firm or even common basis, it did start Indonesian historiography, as written by Indonesians, on its diverse paths. In retrospect one might say that the first seminar produced more common assumptions than the controversies would lead one to believe. But whatever Indonesian historiography should be, one can only say what it is by looking at the writings. In 1957 not enough had been written by Indonesians to allow a fair judgement.

The second seminar in 1970, sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Culture, was designed to take stock of what was actually written by historians in Indonesia. The seminar was divided in six sections: pre-history, ancient histo-

ry, the arrival of Islam, the colonial era (or the Indonesian reaction to western expansion), the national movement, and the modern era. A great number of papers were presented and after the seminar the Ministry of Education and Culture felt that enough had been produced in the several sections to warrant the writing of a national history. Though this optimism was not shared by all Indonesian historians, the Ministry went ahead and in 1971 ordered the compilation of a national history. The section-heads of the 1970 seminar, with a few changes, were sent to the United States (Berkeley) and to the Netherlands to collect more ideas and materials. The result was the ill-fated *Sejarah Nasional* published in six volumes a few years later. Unfortunately, the book was in many ways a failure. It had all the unevenness of most concerted efforts, but even worse the effort proved in the end not all that "concerted", and it created deep, often personal, rifts in the community of Indonesian Historians.

In view of this background the third National History Seminar promises to become an important event, since it is likely to generate some of the major trends and controversies for the coming decade. This year the seminar is sponsored by the Directorate of Culture of the Ministry of Education and Culture. This has the important consequence that the number of participants, formerly mainly limited to teachers and professional historians, will be enlarged with local representatives of Indonesia's Historical Service.

This time the seminar can be said to have a dual purpose. On the one hand it accepts papers in the six sections set up by the second seminar, and like that seminar, it intends to take stock of what has actually been achieved by Indonesian historians during the last decade. On the other hand, however, four new sections have been created: on traditional historiography, local history, ethnohistory, and oral history. This facilitates papers by regional representatives and simultaneously aims to help local historians to develop regional sources in the context of Indonesia's national historiography by stressing the specific techniques required by these four subjects.

At the third seminar Indonesian Historiography, like the Randu-alas tree mentioned above, will shed its leaves and show its flowers. Undoubtedly some observers will be disappointed, if only because their expectations were too high. For Western observers there will be a rare opportunity to see what kind of work is done by the great majority of Indonesian historians, outside the small circle of internationally well-known scholars. Even if Indonesian historiography is not always well - what kind of historiography is? - the third seminar is bound to

show that it is definitely very much alive.

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