

June 17, 2024

## Indonesia's Struggles Against Many Colonialisms

By: K. Vela Velupillai

A well-thought out and well-researched book on the history of Indonesia and its struggle for independence amidst colonial brutalities.

We know Indonesia as a collection of islands, subject to volcanoes that give rise to unpleasant tsunamis – the latest being the April 2024 eruption of Mount Ruang in the island of Sulawesi. But the most famous was the eruption in 1883 in Krakatoa in the Sunda Straits when Indonesia belonged to the Dutch ‘empire’ in the East Indies (however, ‘the most powerful volcanic eruption in recorded history’ (p. 61) was Mount Tambora in 1815’) – and from where Sukarno, with only ‘one’ name, came<sup>1</sup>. Legend has it that Sukarno was born a union of a Hindu Balinese mother and a Muslim Javanese father (p.91, but strangely David Van Reybrouck (DVR)<sup>2</sup> does not emphasise the Hindu-Muslim connection. Most people don’t know the role of the Dutch in the affairs of Indonesia, except in most general terms. DVR quotes, at the very outset (p. 5):

“[I]n the words of a classic expat joke, ‘Any idea where Indonesia is?’ ‘Uh .... Not really. Somewhere near Bali?’”

For the ignorant cognoscenti, DVR has written a very readable book on Indonesia, titled *Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World*. The Revolusi – and the Proklamsi – signify more than the English words ‘revolution’ and ‘proclamation’ (p. 7-8) mean, but the reader can attribute, as a first approximation, these meanings.

Who will read a print book of over 600 pages, in one volume? The sensible answer would be that only reviewers attached to well-known journals, periodicals or daily newspapers.

DVR is a 53-year-old (born in Bruges, Belgium in 1971) cultural historian, archaeologist, poet, playwright and academic author who was educated at Leuven, Cambridge and Leiden (where he obtained his doctorate with the dissertation on *From Primitives to Primates: A history of ethnographic and primatological analogies in the study of prehistory in 2000* (Sidestone Press, Leiden, 2012).

DVR’s archaeological background informs chapter 1’s statements about the origins of mankind (Java man) and of the Indonesian peculiarity of multi-religious tolerance, even while extolling the virtues of Islam’s egalitarian nature (p. 22); but DVR is not consistently against casteism (as Nivedita Menon, 2024, is).

### Use of oral history

DVR confesses to being ‘a great believer in oral history’ (p.12<sup>3</sup>) although he is not averse to ‘archival history’ (p. 534); but he applies (largely) the method consonant with his beliefs to his most consequent two books, on the *Congo* and *Indonesia*<sup>4</sup>, respectively. Thus, when DVR refers, on numerous occasions (in *Revolusi*), ‘during my fieldwork’ he invariably refers to oral history’ (different from the oral traditions of a traditional society, p. 94). Many ‘elderly’ veterans and inhabitants of old people’s homes in Belgium, Holland and Indonesia are an important part of the source of oral history of most chapters. But he forgets – sometimes – the thorny role of memory in oral history (DVR invariably employs over 90-year-old people to reminisce about events having taken place 50-70 years ago) and prestige, etc., in archival history.

Before I give a summary of the book and provide a hint of the way I would read it (implicitly) in its entirety, I need to mention two items. One has to do with spices vs. slavery and the other on the abbreviations for Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (viz VOC, Dutch East India Company).

Chapters 4 to 13 reflect the various colonial regimes that an eventually unified Indonesia was subject to; the longest period was Dutch, but the most brutal was – arguably – under the Japanese (1941-1945).

Lizzie Collingham’s colourful book on *The Taste of Empire* (Collingham, 2017) is, for example, accused by The Observer [reviewer](#) of being – whilst based on immaculate research on spices that underpin tastes – rather cavalier about slavery; I think DVR has the right

balance of spices and slavery, from the outset.

As for VOC, I suppose DVR is not aware that he defines two entities by this abbreviation: the ‘standard’ one (p. 12, p. 28) and the Vrijwillige Oefencorpsen (Volunteer Drill Corps, p. 148); but the context should make it abundantly clear, especially because the former is usually used as ‘VOC mentality’ (not with positive connotations)<sup>5</sup>.

*Revolusi* is divided into 15 chapters, a prologue and an epilogue together with acknowledgements, a bibliographical essay, a bibliography, notes (on the chapters), an index (not subdivided into author and subject) and a list of maps. I shall, mainly, comment on the 15 chapters and observe, albeit marginally, on the bibliography and the index.

## Indonesia in the 20th century

There is a prologue and 102-year old Djajeng Pratomo’s narrative gives content to DVR’s oral history in the first chapter (and Cisca Pattipilohy’s in the last chapter) that outlines VOC mentality and the social stratification of colonial society (class structure, assuming a three-fold division) in terms of the three classes of a steamship.

Chapters 4 to 13 reflect the various colonial regimes that an eventually unified Indonesia was subject to; the longest period was Dutch, but the most brutal was – arguably – under the Japanese (1941-1945). There were episodes of colonial rule by the UK (Mountbatten from Ceylon, chapters 10 and 11) and the US (MacArthur from the Philippines and Japan, chapter 13), too.

Chapters 4 and 5 fall squarely in the period spanned by World War I, the Russian Revolution and the various economic crises of 1914-1933 and 1934 -1941 (hyperinflation, massive unemployment, depression, currency crises etc.). It was also a time of a ‘changing of the guards’ , in that the US took over the leadership of the industrial countries, and it was the period of the League of Nations, the rise of fascism (in Italy) and Nazism (in Germany), the 1920 Conference in Baku of the Congress of the East, and the February 1927 Brussels conference of the League against Imperialism (and much else). I don’t think DVR is justified in the few remarks on the economics and certainly not on relying on MacMillan (2002) for the return to gold, or not (by the Dutch) – whether Versailles inspired or not.

Chapter 12 and 13 are peculiar in that DVR highlights Dutch army officer Raymond Westerling’s brutal methods in 1946; in its wake also the 1947 massacre of Galung Lombok.

Ordinary Japanese, particularly in the Kanto and Kansai areas, voiced their opinions in the 1930s on what they called the oil embargo imposed by the ‘ABCD-line’ (standing for the American-British-Chinese-Dutch embargo), but between the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the dastardly act against Pearl Harbour in 1941, by Japan, there was at least ten years; but they – the ordinary Japanese – had a valid point (p. 133 and chapter 5). The ordinary Japanese were well versed in the art of ‘chrysanthemum and the sword’ (pace Ruth Benedict!); perhaps Sukarno’s ‘collaboration with the Japanese’ (about which DVR is understandably silent) is based, partly, on this.

In chapter 10 DVR divides, for didactic purposes, the subsequent 4 chapters artificially into four phases in terms of the ‘party that had the upper hand politically’ in the period August 1945 to December 1949 -- i.e., the total annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the surrender of Japan -- till the inevitable independence of Indonesia (p.290); chapter 10 itself is devoted to the Indonesian Pemuda’s republican violence (mostly, but not exclusively, by its younger members) against the past Japanese occupying forces, former colonial Dutch masters and the British liberators who seemed to be paving the way for the Netherlands and the North Americans.

Chapter 11 is parenthetically (i.e., a few pages) about Gurkha veterans’ oral stories of post- World War II colonial battles in South and Southeast Asia, gleaned from DVR’s trip to Nepal in spring, 2017 (p. 331), the veterans are invariably older than 90 and some are well-aware of the tricky nature of relying on memories. It is also about the transfer of the capital of Indonesia from Jakarta to Yogyakarta on 4 January 1946 till the end of the war with the British and the Dutch in 1949 (but see p. 342).

DVR’s analysis of the aftermaths of the Bandung conference of April 1955 ... are not convincing – but they may be refreshing.

In chapter 11 there is also a discussion of ‘a provisional truce’ that was reached in the mid-1940s between Sutan Sjahrir, (the passionately anti-Japanese and anti-fascist) prime minister of the stunted republic of Indonesia, and the former Dutch prime minister, Willem Schermerhorn (p. 351). It led to the Linggajathi Agreement (map 22 on p. 354). The agreement was six pages in length,

containing 17 articles, and was initialled in Sjahrir's living room in Linggajati on 15th November, 1946 (p. 356). Sjahrir died at the age of 57 in a Swiss hospital; his body was flown back to Indonesia via a stopover in Schiphol airport in Amsterdam, where the sympathetic Schemerhorn gave an impromptu speech of appreciation (although Sjahrir had been discarded' by President Sukarno in independent Indonesia subsequently).

Chapter 12 and 13 are peculiar in that DVR highlights Dutch army officer Raymond Westerling's brutal methods (mostly in South Sulawesi, p. 371, ff) in 1946; in its wake also the 1947 massacre of Galung Lombok (p. 376, ff).

What DVR calls the first and second Police Actions, a euphemism for the Dutch Military offensive, in finding a rupture with the Linggajati Agreement, between the broad mass of Indonesian republicans (almost exclusively in Java and Sumatra) and a section of Dutch colonialists, I think deserves more, much more, space.

DVR's analysis of the aftermaths of the Bandung conference of April 1955, particularly on the formation of the various forms of the European Economic Community and the European Union, and on the effects of the UN, in chapters 14 and 15, are not convincing – but they may be refreshing. Allende, Fidel, Guevara, Nehru, Malcolm X, etc., adorn these concluding pages: but so, does Suharto, the CIA and the Jakarta method, – which is different from the 'anti-Mossadeque' method applied to Iran in the early 1950s!

## Conclusions

In the *New York Times* [review](#) of DVR's *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, J. M. Ledgard says the 'bibliography is alone worth the cover price;' the same could be said of *Revolusi* as well. In the latter book, over 26 pages (pp. 559-585) there are at least 570 items in the reference list.

There are minor infelicities in the book, President Nehru (p.442, Nehru was Prime Minister of India, 1946-1964), Martin Luther King (instead of 'Jr.' appended to the 'illustrious' name, p. 511) and John Kotelawala, the Prime Minister of Ceylon, was 'knighted' (p.499) are the most obvious – but they does not detract from the major achievements of the book.

DVR has written a well-thought, well-written book (albeit too long by about 200 pages) and there will be no reason to feign ignorance of Indonesia – in the future.

The index, as it stands, leaves much to be desired, but it requires at least three comments. One is that obvious entries are missing (*revolusi*, for example; and self-evident examples are not given their initial occurrence – *proklamasi* is given p. 88 and not p. 7). The indexer is given at least equal importance as the proofreader, copyeditor and the typesetter by the author (p. 527) and it is not known whether DVR overrode the indexer (for aesthetic reasons!).

DVR has written a well-thought, well-written book (albeit too long by about 200 pages) and there will be no reason henceforth to feign ignorance of Indonesia.

*Emeritus Professor Kumaraswamy (Vela) Velupillai is a retired academic economist, living in Stockholm, Sweden.*

## Footnotes:

**1** Some like Natas'a Mis'kovic'et et.al., (2014, edited) and Prashad (2007), who DVR refers to, add 'Ahmed' as Sukarno's first name, but I think they are wrong.

**2** I shall, henceforth, use the abbreviation DVR for the author (in a book replete with abbreviations – on p. 148-149 there are as many as six!).

**3** I shall denote the page numbers in the print edition.

**4** Congo: The Epic History of a People and Revolusi, the book being reviewed here; I am using the English translations.

**5** To make matters rather complicated, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, the prolific (Tamil) author, has written a new book titled Swadeshi Steam on Vallinayagam Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai ('Pillai' signifies the 'caste' – he belongs to the highest land cultivating groups), who is also known as VOC (in the British Indian context); see Mahadevan's fine review of the book (Mahadevan, 2024). DVR personifies the 'dangers' of untrammelled abbreviation symbols (there are six on p. 148)!

**References:**

Collingham, Lizzie (2017), *The Taste of Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World*, Basic Books, New York, NY, USA.

Mahadevan, Raman (2024), Book Review of *Swadeshi Steam: V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and the Battle against the British Maritime Empire* by A.R. Venkatachalapathy, *The India Forum*, March, 09.

MacMillan, Margaret (2002), *Paris 1919*, Random House, New York, NY, USA.

Menon, Nivedita (2024), Book Review, *Marked by Insight and Foresight - K. Balagopal on Caste, Class, and the State*, *The India Forum*, April, 22.

Mis?kovic?et, Natas?a, Harald Fischer-Tiné and Nada Boškowska (2014), *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade*, Routledge, London, UK.

Prashad, Vijay (2007), *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, New Press, New York, NY, USA.