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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### INDONESIA

From 1854 to 1862, the English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, friend and rival of Charles Darwin, toured the East Indies in search of evidence for the theory of evolution.

The archipelago, he wrote, seemed to have "a climate, vegetation, and animated life altogether peculiar to itself."

Wallace's work in classifying flora and fauna led him to perceive the island chain as "a connected whole." Yet in his chatty travelogue, **The Malay Archipelago** (Harper, 1869; Dover, 1978, paper), he found variety, too. The Portuguese colony of Timor was "a most miserable place," while Dutch-ruled Java was "probably the very finest and most interesting tropical island in the world."

As Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz reports in **The Religion of Java** (Free Press, 1960, cloth; Univ. of Chicago, 1976, paper), the people of that crowded island have developed a mixture of religious beliefs found nowhere else. Geertz describes their peculiar mysticism as a way "not of turning away from life but toward it."

To the west of Java is oil-rich Sumatra. Its inhabitants pride themselves on being more direct than the Javanese, whom they regard as excessively refined. Indeed, some Sumatrans did not give up the practice of eating people until early in this century. As ethnologist Edwin M. Loeb writes in **Sumatra: Its History and People** (Oxford, 1935, cloth; 1973, paper), cannibalism was for the Batak tribe of the Sumatran highlands "a severe form of capital

punishment," reserved for traitors, spies, and imprudent commoners who committed adultery with the wives of noblemen.

In contrast to Loeb's sobering examination of Sumatra is Miguel Covarrubias's lively **The Island of Bali** (Knopf, 1937). Covarrubias first cites a legend: When Java fell to the Mohammedans, the disgusted Hindu gods decided to move to Bali.

"Everybody on Bali seems to be an artist," writes Covarrubias, a Mexican painter. He lived on the tiny island for two years in the 1930s; he thought he was witnessing the last years of a pure culture "doomed" by modern commercialization. Yet Bali's painters, dancers, sculptors, and musicians thrive today, despite the invasion of this "last paradise" by thousands of tourists each year. And Balinese Hinduism flourishes with its "constant demand for music and dance," notes UCLA ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood in **Indonesia**, edited by Ruth T. McVey (Yale, 1963; 2nd ed., 1968).

Beyond Bali lie the islands of eastern Indonesia. Far from Java's temples, Sumatra's oil, and Bali's art, the hundreds of islands in the vast area bounded by Australia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines are scarcely known in the West.

In **Villages in Indonesia**, edited by Raden Mas Koentjarningrat (Cornell, 1967), anthropologist Peter Goethals describes the life of an eastern Indonesian farmer in Sumbawa: His rice seedlings are threatened by fire-resistant weeds, and when the surviving rice matures, it attracts

marauding monkeys. Ants, mice, birds, and wild pigs are constant dangers, requiring a round-the-clock watch on the fields during the growing season. As food stocks run low in the last months before the April harvest, the farmer and his family subsist on plain rice and boiled greens, and for all but the rich few, life becomes a matter of "inertia, drowsiness, and resignation."

Of all the islands, Java inevitably attracts most scholarly attention; it is home to over half of Indonesia's population, the locus of commerce and political power, and the center of the nation's culture. So writes art historian Claire Holt in **Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change** (Cornell, 1967). She surveys three aspects of that culture: first, the ancient art of Java's classical Hindu-Buddhist period; then the living traditions of dance and *wayang* (shadow plays that could be called Javanese opera); and finally, modern Indonesian painting, which is heavily influenced by Western art.

As Dutch sociologist and historian W. F. Wertheim comments in **Indonesian Society in Transition** (The Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1956; 2nd ed., 1959; Hyperion, 1980, reprint of 1st ed.), the tough European merchants who settled in the East Indies "could hardly be said to radiate Western culture." Not until the 20th century did any Westernization—whether in art or education—seep below the aristocratic layer of Indonesian society. When European influence did penetrate, young Indonesian students responded most enthusiastically to the ideas of socialism and nationalist revolution.

Both in Holland and in the East Indies, the Dutch were not interested in dialogue: The Indonesians would rule only when they were "ripe for

selfgovernment." Historian Bernard Vlekke observes in **Nusantara: A History of Indonesia** (Quadrangle, 1943; reprint, 1977), that "it was never said . . . *what* qualifications a people must have to be 'ripe for selfgovernment.'"

As it turned out, what first developed in Indonesia was a ripeness for rebellion. Cornell's George Kahin tells how independence was won in 1949, in **Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia** (Cornell, 1952, cloth; 1970, paper). With victory, a new generation full of "energy and creativeness" set up a parliamentary-style government that, Kahin wrote, "gave promise of taking root."

The title of Herbert Feith's book sums up what happened instead: **The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia** (Cornell, 1962). Feith, an Australian political scientist, attributes the 1957 collapse of democracy to postwar disillusionment and a "decline in revolutionary spirit."

That decline is the subject of Mochtar Lubis's melodramatic novel **Twilight in Djakarta** (translated by Claire Holt; Vanguard, 1963). Lubis, an Indonesian writer and journalist, portrays corruption at the top and desperation at the bottom. One senior official urges a fellow bureaucrat to use his official position to obtain an import permit for a car. Then, buy the foreign automobile at 62,000 rupiahs, he says, and resell it for 125,000: "You can buy yourself a second-hand car for about fifty thousand . . . and you are left with a clear seventy-five thousand profit." Meanwhile, a Javanese laborer explains his plight to a friend: "Read—cannot. Write—cannot. Become skilled—cannot. Most I have—two hands and two feet."

Australian novelist Christopher

Koch's **The Year of Living Dangerously** (St. Martin's, 1979) takes place in 1965, when popular uneasiness in Indonesia escalated to panic. The novel is essentially an expatriate's meditation on Sukarno. Through an odd friendship with a half-Chinese dwarf, an ambitious Australian journalist becomes caught up in the disintegration of Indonesian politics. An outcast in every way, the dwarf finds refuge in his faith in Sukarno. "When a great poet writes about his country, he actually gives it a soul it didn't have before," argues the dwarf. "Well, Sukarno's done the same thing in his speeches. He's *created* this country."

Both Koch's novel and **Sukarno: A Political Biography** (Praeger, 1972), a rather dry account by Australian political scientist J. D. Legge, end with the military takeover that toppled the champion of "Guided Democracy."

Since then, the joke goes, holding general elections in Indonesia means electing Indonesian generals. Today, with the civilian opposition outlawed, frightened, or co-opted, argues Harold Crouch in **The Army**

and **Politics in Indonesia** (Cornell, 1978), "the most important power struggles . . . take place within the military elite." Some of the losers of those struggles have been arrested. More often, they are comforted with diplomatic posts or prestigious and lucrative jobs in the state bureaucracy. One trouble with this closed system, says Crouch, a political scientist at the National University of Malaysia, is that in excluding civilians, it becomes unresponsive to civilian discontents.

The massacre of 1965 haunts Indonesian politics, observes Clifford Geertz in the concluding essay of **Culture and Politics in Indonesia**, edited by Claire Holt, Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, and James Siegel (Cornell, 1972). The Javanese, Geertz writes, have a saying: "The crocodile is quick to sink, but slow to come up"—that is, popular passions in Indonesia build slowly, beneath a calm exterior, and then surface gradually but inexorably with overwhelming force. Today, as in 1972, when Geertz wrote the essay, both Indonesians and Western specialists are watching for the crocodile.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This essay is based on suggestions from Sidney Jones, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania on leave from the Ford Foundation. Additional titles were suggested by James Peacock and by Audrey Kahin of Cornell University.*