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Sunda-“Java” and The Past: A Socio-Historical Reflection

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Abstract

This piece directs its attention to the psycho-historical consciousness between two major Indonesia's ethnic groups: Sunda and Java. The 14th century of Bubat War in Majapahit, East Java and the Central Java Mataram Kingdom's "occupation" over the Land of Sunda in 16th and 17th centuries had created psychological problem that marked an uneasy relations between both of these ethnic groups, when the nationalism fountainhead is referred to the heyday histories of the East and Central Java's kingdoms. The Sundanese nationalism finally was flown into modern Indonesian nationalism. By choosing the latest, the Sundanese were freed from the past bitter memories.

Keywords: *sundanese, javanese, islamic history, ethnic.*

A. Introduction

Being emptied from a clear perspective, I try to start this “scribbles” with a simple thing, that is viewing the socio-political history which suddenly comes into my mind as I am recalling Prof. Sukron’s rationale in “forcing” me to do his wish: the fact that I ever wrote about Javanism. Despite it was stated by glance, the statement contains a specific historical and cultural meaning. Why? Because although the *Tatar Sunda* (the World of Sunda) —as it is understood in this seminar as well as publicly acknowledged— is in the Island of Java, yet unconsciously Prof. Sukron has differentiated between “Javanese” and “Sundanese”. How thus this unconcious structure could be explained

historically?

In the 1918 Congress on the Advancement of Javanese Culture held in Solo, Central Java, which was organized by the “Javanese Nationalism Committee”,¹ Soetatmo Soerjokoesoemo (born: 1888) and, in 1914, who had helped to establish “the Javanese Nationalism Committee”, stated that the crux of the Javanese nationalism was the *budi pekerti* (character) which was practiced by *sang pandita ratu*: a wise man within the ancient Javanese culture who

1 Takashi Shiraishi, “Satria’ VS ‘Pandita’: Sebuah Debat dalam Mencari Identitas”, in Akira Nagazumi, (ed.), *Indonesia dalam Kajian Sarjana Jepang: Perubahan Sosial-Ekonomi Abad IX & XX dan Berbagi Aspek Nasionalisme Indonesia* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1986), p. 165.



sought to isolate himself from the noisy world by way of *bertapa* (practicing ascetism) in order to attain the spiritual ability to see the world clearly. This ability would make him to be able to impartially stand over the whole of societal and political groups without being tempted by a particular interest. Accordingly, the *pating pendelik-jumpalikan* (unorganized nature) of the Javanese life could be put into order.² The basic reference of this Javanese nationalism was the peak development of Javanese political power in the past: the Majapahit era. This is described by A. Muhlenfeld, a Dutch who was also a participant of the Congress: “They see the Majapahit as a pure and ideal example of golden age, and from this it could be traced the core of the Javanese culture, by which they would be able to reconstruct the second golden age in Java.”³

This Javanese-traditionalist-based nationalism idea hadn't gone without being challenged, however. Tjipto Mangunkusumo, one of the pre-war leading figures in the nationalist movement, and had equipped himself with Western educational knowledge, denounced Soetatmo's idea. Kusumo saw that this kind of nationalism was out of date. He stated “[J]avanese culture will have a totally new traits if the Javanese seek to transform themselves to be the Indies people; and in this transformation process the Javanese culture, chiefly its elements that had become barriers for the progress development of the people, will banish, since it was the Javanese traditional Hinduism, especially caste or class system as its institutional manifestation, that had brought the creativities and initiatives of the people into their death and also brought the moral destruction. In Tjipto's point of view, the liberation of the people from the clutch of the moral destruction could only be materialized if the Javanese culture banishes and the Javanese people reembodying

2 Takashi Shiraisi, “Satria' VS 'Pandita”, p. 175.

3 Takashi Shiraisi, “Satria' VS 'Pandita”, p. 173.

themselves to be the people of the Indies.”⁴

Up to at this stage, as will be mentioned, discussion on the Sundanese affairs becomes an exciting case academically. Had the Sundanese become the followers of Soetatmo's idea or Tjipto Mangunkusomo's? And, what had made them “finally” boarded into the same boat in the course of history of this country? As a reflection, this political and intellectual developments deserve to be traced further in seeking the place of the “Sundanese-Javanese” relations in Indonesia.

B. Psycho-Historical Dynamic

Putting this in perspective, we could add another provoking question: By stating the glory of Majapahit era, what will come to our mind in relations to Sundanism-“Javanism”? An international historian Vlekke could offer his help: “The noblemen of Sunda preferred death to dishonor, and as further delay would only have made their situation worse, decided to attack at once.”⁵ This is related to a 14th century story when the king of Majapahit desired to propose the daughter of the King of Sunda his wife. After having a prolonged negotiations led by Prime Minister Gajah Mada, the King of Sunda was invited to come with his daughter to Majapahit. In a large entourage, this West Java King happily arrived in the capital and took the camp at the northern part of the city. Vlekke describes this cheerful atmosphere: “The Sundanese were proud that a daughter of their king was to be the official queen of the mightiest empire of Indonesia. For them, the wedding meant the inauguration of an alliance between the two kingdoms, in which the poor state of Sunda might share some of the wealth of its eastern neighbor.”⁶

4 Takashi Shiraisi, “Satria VS 'Pandita”, p. 170.

5 Bernard H. M. Vlekke, *Nusantara: A History of Indonesia* (The Hague and Bandung: W. van Hoeve Ltd, 1959), hlm. 71.

6 Bernard H. M. Vlekke, *Nusantara*, hlm. 70-71.

However, this sense of proud did not last long, for:

Then prime minister, cold and disdainful, stepped in to wreck all their hopes. From the beginning he had been an opponent of the marriage, which he considered beneath the dignity of his master. He made the Sundanese understand that he would merely allow them to deliver their princess to the royal harem as the tribute from a vassal king to his overlord. Instead of wedding, simply a ceremony of acceptance would take place, in which His Majesty, the king of Majapahit, would graciously agree to accept the princess as one of his many wives.⁷

It was this Gajah Mada's arrogant attitude that had made the war between the Sundanese and the Majapahit troops unavoidably broke. Though less in numbers and perhaps less might in the battle field either, the Sundanese troops, took initiative to fight. Why? For they, as depicted by Vlekke above, choosed the dignity over humility. It is this bloody story enshrined in the *Kidung Sunda* (a Javanese romance chivalry) that is popularly known until today as the *Perang Bubat* (Bubat War). A war that invariably incites centuries bitter memory for the Sundanese toward the Javanese.

Accordingly, if "the Javanese nationalism" was based on the glory of Majapahit, as proposed by Soetatmo in the early 20th century, would the Sundanese accept it while the bitterness of the Bubate War defies to go? With historian Anthony Reid's comment on the feeling expressed by a Sundanese educated person R. Koesoema Soedjana in his writing "Aan mijn Javaasche broeders" (*Wederopbouw*, 1 [1918]), we find a bit clue to answer the question: "More in sorrow than in anger, a Sundanese

correspondent asked how he could be expected to feel a pride in Javanese heritage as it was presented by Soeriokoesoemo's *Wederopbouw*, and whether dwelling on the past was the right way to promote a sense of unity."⁸ This means that every time the Javanese tried to share their feeling with the Sundanese by promoting the glory of the Majapahit, they would invariably fail to solace the later. For, however good this intention, it nevertheless would inevitably incite the bitter memory to the Sundanese. This is clearly impressed in the Koesoema's statement above. Although in fact the aforementioned Koesoema's statement was merely a response to the "persuaded style" of Soetatmo's depiction —by regarding the Sundanese was the important part of his "Javanese nationalism" concept— a sense of sorrow on the part of Koesoema resisted to go. Then, what was exactly Soetatmo said on this point? Through Reid, we got the Soetatmo's paragraph:

Sundanese and Javan —even if the two do not stand on the same cultural level—are nevertheless one and the same culture which governs the people of Java. It is the culture of Pajajaran, which later took a higher flight in the time of Majapahit, in which today the people of Java consciously or unconsciously live ... The founders of our present culture were the Sundanese themselves in the time of Pajajaran. That there are now Sundanese who no longer recognize their own culture after this reached a higher development during the reign of Brawijaya, has its own explanation.⁹

8 Anthony Reid, "The Nationalist Quest for an Indonesian Past", in Anthony Reid and David Marr, (eds.), *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., 1982), hlm. 285.

9 Soeriokoesoemo, "Waarom Javaasche en Geen Indisch-Nationalism?", *Wederopbouw*, 1 (1918).

7 Bernard H. M. Vlekke, *Nusantara*, hlm. 71.

The 1918 Koesoema’s bitter memory even continues to stay until today. This, for instance, reveals in my conversation with the former rector of Bandung Padjadjaran University (Unpad) Professor Ganjar Kurnia. At this occasion, Prof. Kurnia stated that such a bitter “Sunda-Java” relations is not only related to the ancient Bubat War, but comes down to the more recent days: the Javanese Mataram kingdom’s reign over the the World of Sunda in the 17th century. “The Mataram people,” Prof. Kurnia describes, “ordered the people of Sunda to evict the Dutch in Batavia. As the the Sundanese strode to attack the Dutch, the Mataram people took over the strategic posts left by them.”¹⁰ Although Professor Kurnia did not mention what specifically it was in history, we could guess that the event related to the Story of Dipati Ukur (*Cerita Dipati Ukur*)—a head of Sundanese regents whose body was ripped by the Mataram soldiers since he was suspected to rebel against the Mataram, after being failed to destroy the forces of the Dutch in Batavia. This tragic story had not only become a folk legend,¹¹ but had also been formulated in the form of *kaulinan urang lembur*¹² (literary: villager boys’ song):

*Jaleuleu jaaa/tulak tuja
eman gog*

*Seuereuh leuweung bai/jampe
kolot bug*

*Ucing katinggang sosong
ngék*

Dr. Yayan Sofyan (born in Garut and growing up in Cianjur), a lecturer of the

Quoted by Anthony Reid, “The Nationalist Quest for an Indonesian Past”, hlm. 285.

10 Professor Ganjar Kurnia, interviewed in Bandung, early October 2015.

11 On this, see Dr. E. Suhardi Ekadjati, *Cerita Dipati Ukur: Karya Sastra Sejarah Sunda* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1982).

12 I am indebted in Bunyamin familiarly called Abun (my pingpong partner) for this understanding. Abun is a Tasikmalayan, one of the major cultural centers of the Sundanese.

Jakarta Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN), interpretes this *kaulinan urang lembur* as something to do with the Story of Dipati Ukur—especially his tragic fate. Although today it is being sang merely by the villager boys, substantially the *kaulinan* expressed a sorrow feeling and a political protest against the Javanese Mataram. That is why Dr. Sofyan tends to translate the text of the above *kaulinan* more in furious symbolic meaning:

Look, the Javanese soldiers have come/Get in home and lock the door neatly/Keep your life while I’m in the forest/At the top of the betel nut tree I will give you sign/When the Javanese come into village and house they must be die.¹³

But then, if all these things are the trully case, why then Prof. Sukron easily and without any hasitate mentions the Javanese affairs, that I studied almost two decades ago, as a rationale to justify his “enforcement” on me to be the “reserve” speaker in this seminar? Doesn’t Prof. Sukron come from the Sunda ethnic group and thus theoretically share the same bitter feeling toward the history of the “Sundanese-Javanese” relations?

C. Sunda: “Post Majapahit Nationalism”?

It must be admitted that academically the series of questions above depict the enigmatic nature of this subject matter. As a Sundanese, the aforementioned Prof. Sukron’s statement clearly indicates his stance in seeing this—otherwise ridden with emotional perspective—affairs through non-prejudice lens. And in all likelihood, Prof. Sukron’s view is also shared by millions of his ethnic fellows today. In other words, the passion of “Sundanese-Javanese” cleavage produced by the past historical course has waned. In a more demonstrative way, for instance, Tjetje H. Padmadinata (born: 13 Conversation with Dr Yayan Sofyan at the Ciputat UIN campus, Friday, August 21, 2015.

1938), a leading Sundanese *inohong* (public figure) stated that Gen. H. R. Dharsono (born: 1925), a Javanese, becomes the pride of the Sundanese for his smartness and bright military career in leading the Siliwangi West Java Regional Military Command (Kodam Siliwangi) in 1966-69. This is also the case with Gen. A. J. Witono (also a Javanese), when the later led the Kodam Siliwangi in 1971-73. This is important to reveal here for the Siliwangi Military Command's position has been entrenching in the heart of the Sundanese. It is no wonder then if Tjetje Padmadinata intentionally calls himself as the *Siliwangi Sipil* (Civilian Siliwangi). A sincere expression how the military command has been united with the Sundanese.¹⁴ This case could be expanded to the position of Professor Dr Med Tri Hanggono, the newly installed Unpad rector. Although he is a Javanese in origin, his ethnic difference is "exempted" for in his daily life and behavior, as stated by another Sundanese *inohong* UU Rukmana, the owner of the Sundanese magazine *Manglé*, "as *Sunda bageur*" (a good Sundanese).¹⁵ "He even doesn't hesitate," UU Rukmana continues, "to be the member of the anniversary committee of the *Manglé* whose party will be held on November 21 this year."¹⁶

However, at the same time, we also flatly witness the absence of Hayam Wuruk Road, Gajah Mada Road or Majapahit Road in all Sundanese cities up until today. This means that the centuries-old historical bitterness has been conserved in the Sundanese public landscape. Since the naming of roads is politically motivated, orchestrated by the local elite, doesn't the absence of the Majapahit-related traits in the Sundanese cities also a political expression? Don't these all —by returning back to the case of Prof.

14 Tjetje H. Padmadinata, *Siliwangi Militer di Mata Siliwangi Sipil* (Bandung) Rumah Baca Buku Sunda, 2011).

15 UU Rukmana, interviewed in Bandung, Saturday, October 31, 2015.

16 UU Rukmana, interviewed in Bandung, Friday, October 30, 2015.

Kurnia and Dr Sofyan mentioned above— reveal that the *auman sejarah* (the roaring of history), using the phrase coined by the poet Sitor Situmorang, remains echoing today among the Sundanese people? Wasn't a Sundanese economic professor once stated that he wanted to boycott the nomination of the pair Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono-Boediono, the 2009 presidential hopeful, simply because both of them are East Javanese in origin —where the Majapahit kingdom located?

Up to this second, the enigmatic that characterized the psychological-historical "Sundanese-Javanese" relations remains unresolved systematically. This, in part, because the rapid tramp of modernization had increased to blur the boundaries over which the genuine and "fake" Sundanese could be identified. "Who are, among the 20 million of its people today that could be regarded as the genuine Sundanese representatives?" This is questioned by a prominent Sundanese intellectual Ajip Rosidi in 1985 to reflect how modernization-induced conceptual blurring in identifying the Sundanese character has really been working. And Ajip continues this case in much more detail way:

The notable Sundanese generally live in the urbanized cities, and the Sundanese cities cannot be regarded of having Sundanese traits anymore. For those take a similar shape with other Indonesian cities. Who is among Ali Sadikin and Amir Machmud or Umar Wirahadi Kusumah could be called as the best Sundanese representatives? Who is closer to the nature of Sundanese between Djuanda and Sjafruddin Prawiranegara?¹⁷

As Ajip admits himself, he cannot answer the question satisfactorily. What can he do at best is providing a general

17 Ajip Rosidi, *Manusia Sunda* (Jakarta: Idayu Pers, 1985), p. 1-2.

feature of the Sundanese. However, this job is increasingly face the headwind. For, as a mondial and global forces, the modernization gigantic stride is quite penetrative and having the unimaginable dismantling stuff upon the socio-cultural roots of any societal groups. These penetrative and dismantling forces resulted in the transformation process that impersonally (and arbitrarily) have been uprooting individuals as well as wider groups from their original socio-cultural soil. As a result, those who are being transformed could not be identified anymore based merely on their original ethnic groups.

And if this perspective was used, the Sundanese case is an apt example in this context.

Compared with others, the Sundanese had been separated from the traditional Mataram power much earlier. For, since 1677, the Sundanese had been under the power of Western forces: the East Indies Company (VOC).¹⁸ Although it was true that the Javanese cultural influence remained in place for a certain long period of time over the Sundanese *ménak* (aristocrats),¹⁹ it could not be denied that by being much earlier under the Western rule the process of socio-cultural changes whithin this society had run rapidly. After having experienced of the agricultural and plantation exploitation during the 18th and 19th centuries, the Sunda region, chiefly its capital, Bandung, was immediately transformed into a Westernized city. “The first four decades of the twentieth century,” writes John Smail, “saw a radical transformation of the Indonesian elite in Bandung. The most importance influence behind this change was that of Western education which became increasingly available for Indonesian —

18 Mohammad Iskandar, *Para Pengemban Amanah: Pergulatan Pemikiran Kiai dan Ulama di Jawa Barat, 1900-1950* (Jakarta: Mata Bangsa, 2001), p. 38.

19 About this, see Mikihiro Moriyama, *Semangat Baru: Kolonialisme, Budaya Cetak, dan Kesustraan Sunda Abad ke-19*, translated from English by Suryadi, MA (Jakarta: KGP and The Resona Foundation for Asia and Ociana, 2003).

though there were never enough schools to satisfy the demand— after about 1910. Western education broke down parochial barriers both intellectually and socially; it provided another creterion for prestige besides birth and Islamic teaching; above all it was a passport to a small number of better jobs made possible by the developing economy: as clerk in private businesses and government offices, and civil servants, as teachers, as doctors, lawyers and engineers.”²⁰ Unlike the “Javanese”, this rapid change had gone without having to face significant political barriers. For, in addition to Islam—a religion which they had embraced since centuries ago— contains the progressive spirit and having its cosmopolitan nature, the Sundanese modernization process was not stemmed by the “traditional forts” or “the centers of entrenched tradition guardians” due to the Sundanese power centers (Tarumanegara in the 5th to the 7th centuries and Pajajaran in the 14th century) left no concrete monumental traces.

It is by being a much earlier modernized people that had pushed the Sundanese to look more into the future rather than into the past. This is because, through this typical history, the past for the Sundanese simply offers the bitter historical memory. “The Sundanese,” Tjetje Padmadinata said, “had been colonialized for three times. First, by the power of the Javanese rulers. Second, by the Dutch. And third, by the military Japanese emperor.”²¹ This is quite a distinctive collective experience that highly incomparable with the experience of other ethnic groups of Indonesia. So, if we return back to the ideas of the Majapahit-based “Javanese nationalism”, we will soon struck with the Sundanese’s psychological reluctance for this conserves their historical

20 John R. W. Smail, *Bandung in the Early Revolution, 1945-1946: A Study of the Social History of Indonesian Revolution* (Ithaca, New York: Modern Indonesia Project, Cornell University Press, 1964), hlm. 8.

21 Tjetje Padmadinata, interviewed in Bandung. September 2015.

bitter experience.

But, what factor then that facilitates the “Sundanese-Javanese” unity in the context of nationalism?

The answer is the kind of nationalism once provoked by Tjipto Mangunkusumo in the early of the 20th century: an Indies nationalism—that had gradually transformed into modern Indonesian nasionalism. And if we want to say it in a straightforward manner, this Sundanese historical and political consciousness is a “post-Majapahit nationalism” in nature.

Why?

For, if the crux theme has been the Indonesian nationalism, it becomes quite illogical for the Sundanese to turn their eyes back into the past.

D. Conclusion

It is relatively clear now that the Sundanese nationalism character inclined more to the one proposed by Tjipto Manungkusomo: “Indies nationalism”. Soetatmo’s Majapahit-anchored nationalistic idea was and is thus rejected. In addition to that this kind of nationalism had evoked their bitter historical collective memory, it had denied a striking political reality in the shape of a much larger community: “Indonesia”. To be sure, what is known, in terms of its geographical landscape, as “Indonesia” today is the Dutch creation. For, historically these hugely varied component of islands, ethnic groups as well as languages and social histories, had been remarkably integrated into a single “political administration” during more than three hundred years of the Dutch colonialization. But it represents only

a “preconstructed social world”, to use the sociological phrase introduced by Walsh.²² Beneth all of these were and are the cultural similarities among those varied ethnic groups within the boundary of *Nusantara* (Archipelago) produced by the dominant religion, that is Islam. Being collectively shared by the majority of Indonesia’s ethnic groups, this Islam-based culture has been bounding not only Java, but national-wide community as a whole.²³ The Sundanese nationalism thus was and is influenced by three factors of typical historical forces: the collective bitter memory of the past, the growth of a new political reality that encompassing huge geographical landscape much larger than Java (the Indies that then transformed to be Indonesia) and being the member of the shared culture produced by Islam.

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22 David Walsh, “Sociology and the Social World”, in Peter Wosley, (ed.), *Modern Sociology* (New York et-al.: Penguin Books, 1979 [1970]), p. p. 79-91.

23 I would admit here that my formulation here is heavily indebted to historian Taufik Abdullah who, in a 1994 discussion in Canberra, Australia, gave this interesting theoretical speculation.

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