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# Indonesians overseas - deep histories and the view from below

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## **Adrian Vickers & Julia Martínez**

### **Indonesians overseas – deep histories and the view from below**

Indonesian mobility is often regarded as a present-day fact. In 2007 the number of Indonesians reported working abroad had reached 4.3 million, bringing in an income of US\$6 billion in remittances (Widodo et al. 2009). By 2010 the numbers working abroad would have well passed 5 million, especially considering the numbers ‘smuggled’ across the Indonesian-Malaysian maritime borders (Ford & Lyons 2011).

In recent years attention to Indonesian migration has seen important studies of workers, particularly women workers. Beginning with studies of Indonesians working in Malaysia (Jones 2000), attention has now spread to the wider movement of workers throughout the Middle East and East Asia (Loveband 2004). One of the major publications on labour migration points out that it is often women from eastern Indonesia, from the poor Province of Nusa Tenggara Timor, who form a significant number of these mobile workers (Williams 2007).

While the scale of movement may be significantly larger, the nature of Indonesian mobility is not at all new. The largest proportion of people have moved to find work, although others have moved for religious, social, educational and political reasons. Mobility is built into deep cultural patterns and is a norm of social life. In our research on the movement of peoples from present-day Indonesia to Australia, we have found that patterns of moving overseas began in societies where movement between islands and sub-regions within current Indonesian borders was well established before those borders came into being.

Compared with the literature on the Chinese, Japanese and Indian diasporas, there has been little recognition of Indonesians as a migrant people.<sup>1</sup> More than 40 years ago Craig A. Lockard (1971) published a survey of Javanese emigration calling for

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<sup>1</sup> We are using ‘Indonesian’ here as a general term to describe the peoples who lived in the region that is today known as Indonesia. In specific historical documents, Indonesians were known by a number of loosely applied terms, such as ‘Javanese’ (which was used as a general term to include anyone from the Dutch East Indies), ‘Malays’ (another general term which included peoples both from the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya and Straits Settlements), ‘Macassans’ (usually reserved for people who sailed from the port of Makassar), and ‘Koepangers’ (initially used for people from the eastern islands who were recruited via the port of Kupang, Timor).

further research into this neglected aspect of Indonesia's history. Since then there has been a number of specific country studies, but little work has been done to link the different forms of mobility to find common patterns. Up until recently there were only a few studies on Indonesian political refugees overseas, mainly of the Leftists who contributed to the Indonesian Revolution from Australia (Lockwood 1975). Lingard's work has shown that such a political story opens up a wider set of issues of cultural and social interaction, represented by the marriages between Indonesian activists and Australian women (Lingard 2008). In 2010 a special issue of the *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs (RIMA)* was the first significant contribution to the wider study of political refugees and exiles from Indonesia, including those from the anti-communist killings of 1965–66. This group included a number of students whose overseas study left them stranded in a category of political unacceptability. This current special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay World* is intended as a step in a long-term set of studies that will bring together understandings of Indonesians in different parts of the world. Sean Brawley, Kate McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic explore examples of exiles and political networkers extending Indonesian influence overseas in this issue. We see the explanation of mobility as an historical question.

Historical understanding of Indonesian mobility needs to be informed by two dimensions: the cultural norms and habits which make it easy to move between places, and the economic and social forces that have shaped patterns of movement. Our research has been on Indonesians in Australia, which like the interchange with Malaysia and other nearby countries, has been based on maritime contact. By starting with the internal dimension particularly of maritime movement, we wish to expand on how Indonesians may understand their participation in global patterns of migration.

Many factors have influenced Indonesian migration, but trade and maritime movement are linked together as part of movement involving Indonesian agencies. The peoples who are now Indonesians have been linked into regional and global systems for a very long time. According to Jones (1964) the geographical range of seafaring Indonesians extended as far as the coasts of Africa. He argues that Indonesians arrived in Madagascar not later than 400 CE and continued on by sea to the West Coast of Africa to Ghana and the Congo. Using as evidence the prevalence of xylophones and other cultural factors, Jones concludes that there was an Indonesian colonisation of Africa no later than the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

International trade in Southeast Asia is very ancient, its earliest evidence is the transmission of bronze drum types, traced back to Dongson in Vietnam, but found in Bali and other parts of present-day Indonesia, probably having arrived after 500 BCE. Sea trade with India and China may have already existed at that time, although the earliest evidence for that comes some 500 years later. Certainly the 9<sup>th</sup>-century depictions of large ships on Borobudur temple in Central Java demonstrate the strength of Indonesian boat-building technologies. By 1000 CE large-scale trade was already taking place, and by the time that Europeans had established a presence in Southeast Asia, after 1511, the region was already a major focus of global commerce (Reid 1988–1993).

Although the eastern part of Indonesia is regarded now as a remote area, much of the early international trade was concentrated there. The islands of Maluku (the Moluccas) were the source of spices – nutmeg, mace and cloves – and the spice trade was also accompanied by other forms of commerce, bringing Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain into Indonesia, and other commodities, such as sandalwood and trepang (sea-slugs or sea-cucumber) to large markets, particularly China. Thus not just Maluku, but also Timor and surrounding islands, were important global centres, leading in the latter case to the division of Timor, first between the Netherlands East Indies and the Portuguese empire, and then between Indonesia and Timor Leste or Timor Loro Sae.

In talking about trade, writers have tended to look at the mobility of traders from outside, the Chinese, Indians, Arabs and others who have been both temporary and permanent settlers in major and minor ports (Ho 2006). Caught up with trade mobility, however, has been a set of other movements of Indonesian people, from aristocrats to slaves. While most of all this movement is now associated with urbanisation, it has broader roots, and broader implications, particularly in relation to maritime movement (Vickers 2004).

While aristocrats and princes move for mainly political reasons, and slaves because they have no choice, at the in-between levels of society maritime movement has often been seasonal, and facilitated by cultural perceptions of origins and alliance. Practices of moving outside one's area of origin to find work or to make one's fortune are well entrenched in most Indonesian societies, most famously as the *merantau* of the Minangkabau of Sumatra, by which young men go out into the world, leading to

large-scale chain migration into other parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, famously represented by the availability of their ethnic Padang cuisine. Those who have the greatest movement across Indonesia's current international boundaries are the people whose everyday activities belong to the sea, the fishing peoples of the archipelago. For these people the current borders make very little sense, and even worse, cut across their sea 'fields' (Balint 2005).

The most famous of the seafaring peoples are those from South Sulawesi, usually referred to as Makasar/Makasarese (Macassans) and Bugis (Buginese), but who also include peoples from Mandar and the boat-building island of Buton. The movement of the Bugis was intensified by local politics in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and led to troops of Bugis and Makasar people serving as mercenaries as far afield as Thailand. Their more regular regional movements have extended out to neighbouring islands in the Philippines, to Singapore and the Malay Peninsula, to northern Australia and New Guinea. These maritime migrations were often described as 'visits' by fishing fleets rather than permanent migration, and yet we know that such visits resulted in intermarriage and cultural exchange as in the case of the fleets that visited the north coast of Australia (Macknight 1976).

Rote is one of the major sources of fishermen coming to Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Balint 2005), although more often than not these fishermen come from elsewhere. Many are Bajau or Sama-Bajau, the so-called Sea Gypsies, who trace their origins to the Tukang Besi Islands south of Sulawesi and who provided their navigational knowledge to the Makasar and Bugis seafarers (Stacey 2007). As their nickname implies, the Bajau are extremely mobile, and sub-groups have operated between the Sulu Sea and Australia for centuries. Members of different Rotenese ethnic groups have played a key role in eastern Indonesia from Portuguese and Dutch times. Fox (1977) documents their role in Kupang, where increasingly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century people from Rote and other nearby islands came to dominate the west coast of the island of Timor.

Kupang became the main node of seafaring networks throughout eastern Indonesia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As well as the Rotenese people who became important actors in Kupang society, significant influence came from the peoples of Alor and surrounding islands. Drawing on traditional systems of clan or group alliances, they have worked with those from neighbouring islands such as Pantar and Timor

(Gomang 1993; Wellfelt 2007). In the case of Alor, certain groups, such as the Muslims of the island of Ternate (off the coast of the main island of Alor, not to be confused with the island of the same name in Maluku) have specialised in diving for pearl shell, trocus and trepang (Wellfelt 2007: 6). On nearby Lembata, the people of Lamalera have long sea-faring traditions that include their role in whaling (Barnes 1996).

Mobility takes place through the extensive trade networks that exist in Indonesia. People from the chain of islands off the east of Seram (Ceram) have formed extensive trade networks into Papua New Guinea, not just on the Indonesian side, but across the trans-Fly region to the south, where the traffic in bird-of-paradise feathers tells us that this trade has been going on for a long time (Swadling 1996). Indigenous traders have linked up with Arab and Chinese to develop collaborative networks (Ellen 2003).

Studies of Indonesian ethnic groups frequently demonstrate that mobility is built into cultural views. Many societies have ‘stranger-king’ myths, similar to those of Pacific cultures, and even the Balinese view of their royalty as coming from the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit is a variation on this myth. Such myths are reinforced by a variety of forms of imagery by which ships play a major role in ceremonial symbolism, for example representing the form of a village, or vehicles between the mundane world and the afterlife. Connected with this kind of ship imagery and the stranger-king is the idea that most peoples have their origins elsewhere, either from neighbouring islands, as on Savu (Kana 1983) and Tanimbar (McKinnon 1991), or from legendary centres such as Majapahit (or Java in general), or Melaka (Vickers 1993). Such symbolic forms include recognition of affinities with the ‘Other’, meaning that journeying to their place of origin is made easier by a sense of already knowing the foreign. The Mambai of Timor Leste, faced by complex sets of colonisation and conflict, narrate their origins as cosmopolitan:

White and black  
Timorese and Portuguese  
Australians and Germans  
Dutch and Japanese  
They have one mother  
They have one father  
[who] gave birth to white and black

Gave birth to the Malaila and the Timorese

(Traube 1986: 54)

Trade and maritime economies are also linked to forms of forced migration. The same sites that were important for trade have long been important centres of piracy, including slave raiding (Barnes 1996: 13–15). The stratified societies of Indonesia have a variety of forms of slavery, bondage and dependency (Reid 1983), and these have been combined in both pre-colonial and colonial times into international slave trading. There was overlap between indigenous forms of maritime migration and the colonial slave trade. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch East India Company (VOC) stimulated the slave trade in order to find labour for their new ports from Desima in Japan to Batavia and their colony at the Cape. This resulted, amongst other things, in forced migration of Indonesians to present-day South Africa (including 20 to 30% women), creating the mixed community called ‘Cape Malays’. The slaves were joined by political exiles, including Javanese princes and Makasar sultans, creating complex new communities. The descendants of these early migrants to Africa have in recent years tried to rediscover their Indonesian roots (see Saarah Jappie, this issue).

In Sri Lanka, the new community found a very different social role in the colonial military (Hussainmiya 1990). The comparison between the South African and Sri Lankan cases is revealing. In both, Dutch colonies were taken over by the British, and the Indonesians there subsumed into a race-based category of being ‘Malay’. Paul Thomas explores the inter-colonial history of one of the members of this community. Despite their common heritages, the two communities do not seem to have had contact.

Another term also appears in the long story of Indonesian mobility to the Middle East, that of the indigenous category of *‘jawi’*, used to describe Muslim people of the archipelago (and sometimes all of Southeast Asia), as well as the adapted version of Arabic script used in writing Malay. While many Jawi were only visiting the Arabian Peninsula temporarily to make the *haj*, others stayed on longer as students or religious teachers. Their significant presence in the region was enough to excite the interest of the Dutch who set up a consulate at Jeddah. The links were to be important for Indonesia’s religious and political development (Laffan 2003).

Other significant student bodies developed in Cairo, but educational mobility has remained important for Indonesia, from the small number of students who went to study in the Netherlands in the colonial period, to the thousands who go each year to study throughout the world at present. Because of the colonial connection Indonesians have been in the Netherlands since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, including those who as political exiles helped to shape the Indonesian nationalist movement (Poeze 1986). One of the most prominent group of Indonesians remaining in the Netherlands are those who might not want to be seen as Indonesians, the Moluccan community. Many of them left their homes because of their links to the Dutch military or the colonial regime, and some remain exiles longing for their own Republic of the South Moluccas or RMS. However recent studies have labelled the Moluccans ‘a waning diaspora’, since many see themselves as part of Dutch society (Amersfoort 2004).

The slave trade continued until 1860 when the Dutch abolished it. Unofficially the trade continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, overlapping with the period when labour migration was supposed to be only undertaken by nominally free indentured labourers, so that peoples of Flores, Sumba, Solor and Alor were subject to slave raiding up until recent times (Barnes 1996: 15). Likewise the smuggling of slaves, ‘coolies’ and sex workers backwards and forwards from Indonesia and China into present-day Malaysia and Singapore continued across the ‘porous borders’ of the South China Seas into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Taglicozzo 2005).

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century thus saw a slow transition from slavery to indentured labour, with a blurring of distinctions between the two in many cases. After the abolition of slavery in 1860, Indonesians were sent on contracts of indenture to work in Australia, in the German colonies in the Pacific and for the British in Singapore, North Borneo and elsewhere in Malaya. Precise figures for this period are difficult to ascertain but in Western Australia after the 1870s there were over 1,000 men per year employed in the pearling industry.

The constant movement between western Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula means that it is very difficult to date the presence of Indonesian workers across the present-day borders, but the numbers were significant by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Emmer & Shlomowitz 1995). This followed on significant Indonesian migration to Singapore between 1825 and 1881, when the ‘number of Javanese in Singapore increased from 38 to 5,885’ (Spaan 1994: 94). Spaan (*ibid*) notes that by that time Javanese were in the majority but that there were also Makassarese, Bugis,

Boyaneses from Bawean Island, and Balinese and Madurese. The Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, Dindings, and Malacca) stopped the use of contract labour in 1916, while in the Federated Malay States workers were imported up until 1932 during which time Indonesians were employed on rubber plantations. North Borneo also employed Indonesian labourers, in larger numbers after 1907 as the Dutch officially permitted plantations to recruit Javanese workers. By 1911 the population of Javanese in North Borneo was 5,511. After 1915, numbers of Indonesian workers remained high, peaking at 8,714 in 1927 (De Silva 2009: 58). De Silva estimates that some 1,490 Indonesians, mostly women, remained on in North Borneo. Throughout the indenture period approximately 31% of recruits were women. Her work shows how indenture, initially seen as system of importing labour for plantations in Indonesia (Termorshuizen 2008), has been important as the basis of exported labour as well.

For the most part indentured labour migration, which was fixed by contracts of two to five years duration, was imagined as a temporary form of migration. But it was not always the case that people returned home after the expiration of their contract. In many instances the migrants included both men and women who were willing and able to remain overseas and formed an ongoing community. These communities differed according to the laws of their new homes and according to the degree of intermarriage with other peoples. Most Indonesians who travelled overseas did so because of poverty and limited employment opportunities in the Dutch East Indies and in many cases it was these same factors that inspired Indonesians to remain overseas where they were able to secure a better standard of living (Maurer et al. 2006).

The Dutch had made various attempts to limit labour movement including an attempt to place a ban on free migration in 1887, although this was eased in less than a decade. It took some years before the official indentured migration trade commenced and this occurred on a country-by-country basis as the Dutch tried to ensure that contracts would be enforced. This was in part to ensure that wages, holidays, food and accommodation were appropriate, but there was also an understanding that providing so-called 'coolie' labour to other colonies, during a time of labour shortage could be a profitable business.

Not surprisingly, the first shipments of indentured labour went to the Dutch colony of Suriname in 1890. Some 32,962 Javanese workers and their families were

brought into Suriname between 1890 and 1939 to provide labour on sugar plantations (Emmer & Shlomowitz 1995; Hoeft 1998: 61). Rosemarijn Hoeft (1998: 20) noted that between 1902 and 1910 alone a total of 5,433 Indonesians left Batavia and Semarang for Suriname. Although some of these returned to Java, the descendants of these workers form a significant part of the current population of Suriname, and seek links back to Java.<sup>2</sup>

The plantations of Indochina, particularly in southern Vietnam, then known as Cochinchina, also imported Javanese workers, particularly after the Dutch agreed to allow immigration on five-year contracts in 1909.<sup>3</sup> Little is known about the total numbers of Indonesians in Vietnam or when recruitment ceased but in 1928 there was still a demand for their labour.<sup>4</sup>

The French government were quick to secure labour for New Caledonia soon after 1896. New Caledonia became home to the second largest Javanese community outside Indonesia with some 20,000 immigrants sent between 1896 and 1955 (Maurer et al. 2006). Javanese going to New Caledonia were sent on five-year contracts, after which they had the right to either seek repatriation or an alternative employer (Muljono-Larue 1996: 28).

The labour needs of New Caledonia were supplied by a range of other imported workers including Vietnamese, Reunion Indians, Japanese and Pacific Islanders. Javanese were favoured for work on coffee plantations and as domestic servants in rural areas (Shineberg 1999: 141–3). In the mines Javanese were employed alongside Vietnamese. The main reason for considering Javanese as an alternative to Vietnamese was that the wages set for Javanese workers were one-fifth that of Vietnamese (Muljono-Larue 1996: 26).

By the 1970s, when a new generation might have started to forget the old customs, Roosman (1978) noted that the consulate that had been established in the 1950s played a part in sustaining Javanese culture and arts, and saw the revival of Javanese culture as a post-war phenomenon. He argued that before the war, there were few Javanese communal groups apart from a Muslim funeral association known as *marabou*, a *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) system and a soccer club. In

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<sup>2</sup> The subject of new research by Pam Allen.

<sup>3</sup> Report to Governor-General Indochina on Javanese Contract Labour, 1909, p. 11, GGI 42591, Archives nationale d'outre-mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence.

<sup>4</sup> Telegram from Monguillot, 1 March 1928, GGI 42596, ANOM.

comparison, in the 1970s there were many formal celebrations of Indonesian heritage and activities organised by social clubs in Noumea (Roosman 1978).

According to Marie-Jo Siban, founder of the Association Indonésienne de Nouvelle-Calédonie, a resurgence in historical consciousness was prompted by the centenary celebration in 1996 of the arrival of the first Javanese in New Caledonia. It was, she claimed, a commemoration of ‘their courage, their sacrifice, their perseverance’ (Maurer et al. 2006). In that year, Fidayanti Muljono-Larue published a history of Javanese migration to New Caledonia. In 1999 Marcel Magi organised the association Asal Usul to record the memoirs of ‘*des anciens*’ and to restore interest in Indonesian traditions. Magi was born in Noumea of a *niaoulie* mother and an Indonesian father who had arrived from Yogyakarta in 1938. When Jean-Luc Maurer published his history of the Javanese in New Caledonia his work became an important part of this process. He wrote in collaboration with Marcel Magi and with a contribution by Marie-Jo Siban (Maurer et al. 2006).

The study of Indonesian indentured workers to Australia is less developed. Lockard (1971), in his survey of Javanese emigration made no mention of Australia other than in relation to migration to Papua New Guinea. The Queensland sugar industry was best known for its use of Pacific Islander labour but as tighter regulations were introduced governing their employment the sugar growers turned to alternative sources. In 1885 sugar growers introduced several hundred workers from the Dutch East Indies, from Banten and Sunda. They came on three-year contracts of indenture with free passage home at the end of their contract. One newspaper report expressed the opinion that Javanese were ‘a docile and industrious people accustomed to agricultural work in a country nearer to the Equator than the Johnstone River or any part of Queensland’.<sup>5</sup> The British consul in Batavia, N. McNeill, did not anticipate that many men would remain in Queensland because, he argued, ‘the difficulty experienced in obtaining women to accompany them would be a strong reason for their returning’.<sup>6</sup> This was despite the fact that the terms of their contracts provided wives with free passage and board.

Vincent Houben refers to Indonesian workers in German New Guinea and Queensland, but he regards the Queensland case as marginal with only a few hundred

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<sup>5</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 26 October 1885, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, Javanese for Queensland. 24 September 1886, p. 6.

immigrants. In referring to Queensland, Houben (1994) is not including the Torres Strait, but rather focusing on the sugar industry, better known for its use of Pacific Islander labour.

After the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, effectively banning Asian labour immigration, the numbers of Indonesians on sugar plantations dwindled. The Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) company records in its 1916 list only 13 Javanese and 4 Malays. One Javanese man who had arrived in the early 1890s was described as having had 22 years of continuous service to the company.<sup>7</sup> Tracing the descendants of Javanese immigrants in Mackay, North Queensland, Houben (1994: 19) suggested that the fourth generation Javanese had ‘nearly lost their specific cultural characteristics’ which suggests a degree of intermarriage and acculturation.

It is curious that historians of Indonesian immigration have not paid greater attention to the pearl-shell industry. Here, unlike in the sugar industry, Indonesians continued to be employed up to the 1950s because the pearl-shell industry was exempt from the Immigration Restriction Act. The largest numbers of Indonesians went to Western Australia, particularly the pearling port of Broome, with smaller patterns of migration to Darwin and the Torres Strait. Their history has tended to be subsumed into the broader story of Asian immigration that emphasises the role of the Japanese or Chinese, although recognition of the Indonesian role was advanced by Regina Ganter, despite being limited by colonial terminology (Ganter 1994; Ganter et al. 2006). If we include those termed Malays, Javanese and Koepangers (who embarked in Kupang but came from various islands around Timor) and take in the entire period, there were around 2,000 contracts issued for the Torres Strait area alone from the 1870s to the 1950s. At various periods in the history of Broome there was a similar number of workers described as Malay or Kupanger at any one time. Martínez (this issue) details the larger story of workers recruited from Kupang. In her other work she has opened up the complex question of how these workers have intermarried with indigenous communities and the battles that workers had from the 1950s to the 1970s in trying to be able to stay in Australia (Martínez 2005, 2011).

The essays in this current collection represent, then, selected moments in a much longer history of Indonesian mobility. There are many more areas that remain to be researched in depth, from the roles of political travellers, to the Indonesian

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Aliens at Queensland Mills, 1916’, Colonial Sugar Refining Company Papers, CSR 142/1479, Noel Butlin Archive Centre, Canberra.

workers employed in gas exploration in the North Sea or the cruise line industry in the Caribbean. In most cases it is the stories of individuals that help to make sense of that mobility, since they tell us about motivation, and about the degree of choice involved in moving overseas. These studies show that the boundaries of 'Indonesia' are indeed fluid, but since the modern nation-state and its colonial predecessor were very much defined by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not surprising that Indonesians have not been limited by modern borders. These stories are not revealed by the usual kinds of political history, since they are very much histories from below.

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