INTRODUCTION
Identifying with Freedom

By now, Is knew the society she was entering. She had found a circle of acquaintances far wider than the circle of her brothers, sisters and parents. She now occupied a defined position in that society: as a woman, as a typist in a government office, as a free individual. She had become a new human being, with new understanding, new tales to tell, new perspectives, new attitudes, new interests—newnesses that she had managed to pluck and assemble from her acquaintance[s]. And all of this proceeded, untouched, amid the suffering of day-to-day existence.

The essays in this forum offer sharply focused and critical perspectives on the consequences, both intended and unforeseen, of reform in Indonesia since the resignation of President Suharto on 21 May 1998. Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, a huge archipelago of fascinating diversity and complexity, is now poised to assume a leadership role in Southeast Asia, with China on the rise and the moribund Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) coming back to life (Sheridan 2005). Until recently, little about Indonesia has been coming to the attention of North America and Europe, the heartland of colonial empires new and old, except when terrorists or natural disasters, such as the tsunami of 26 December 2004, strike with deadly and newsworthy effect. Now, as former President Jimmy Carter told the assembled mourners at the funeral of Coretta Scott King on 7 February 2006, an event watched by millions on television around the world, Indonesia is a democracy. It is on the front line of George W. Bush’s ‘war on terror’. Not coincidently, the United States has resumed arming Indonesia’s military, still fresh from its brutal war against an independence movement in the province of Aceh and its genocidal repression of freedom in East Timor.

The overriding issue in Indonesia today, therefore, as a new age of democracy, American militaristic intervention, and Chinese economic dominance begins to dawn in Southeast Asia, is ‘freedom’—what it means, who defines it, how it is exercised, where it will lead. In 1945, young revolutionaries, like

Tony Day
the character Is in the passage from a short story by Indonesia’s most famous writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer ([1952] 1989: 182), quoted above, were “gilapolitik” (politics-crazy), as they struggled for both personal and national “independence” (kemerdekaan). More than half a century later, after 32 years of authoritarian rule under Suharto and his New Order (1966–1998), Indonesians are crazy about many kinds of freedom (kebebasan)—freedoms that are subjective and sexual as well as public and political. The essays in this collection examine some of the manifestations and paradoxes of kemerdekaan/kebebasan in Indonesia today. They suggest that Indonesians are endeavoring to show the world what democracy will look like in a uniquely plural, Asian nation, one in which Islam is dominant but not hegemonic, in which support is strong for both a secular state and a society that is multi-cultural and free.

The forum opens with five essays that examine the cultural dimensions of freedom in Indonesia. The essays by Boellstorff, Brenner, and Robinson engage with the question of freedom in an area that is foundational to the construction of both individual and national identity in the globalized era generally: gendered subjectivity. Boellstorff argues that since the 1970s, gay and lesbi men and women have constructed Indonesian identities for themselves, with the help of the mass media, especially television and films. This process, he claims, might appear to work in opposition to the heterosexual norms propagated by the New Order state but is in fact deeply intertwined with these norms and their assumptions regarding identity, community, and national belonging. Boellstorff (2005: 87) calls this a process of “dubbing culture.” Although identifying with foreign examples of gay culture, gay and lesbi people “are completely Indonesian, but to be ‘completely Indonesian’ requires thinking of one’s position in a transnational world” (ibid.: 81–88). Indonesian gays, Boellstorff suggests, are not so much Southeast Asian participants in a global, middle-class gay movement fostered by the Western media as they are committed, cosmopolitan Indonesian nationalists who insist that gender freedom is fundamental to what being Indonesian actually means.

The question of Indonesian gay identity is linked to the struggle for gender equality in marriage. Under the New Order, heterosexual, monogamous marriage became the only form of marital union to receive the full blessing of the state, a strategy that facilitated the containment of an Islamic movement on the rise as well as the revolutionary potential of women’s emancipation. “[I]deological control over women and the family was vital to maintaining control over the nation,” writes Suzanne Brenner (2005: 96). Since the late 1800s, in fact, the marriage question has been one of the most important and disputed areas of debate over how to construct a modern Indonesia. For the early nationalists, the struggle against arranged marriage and the social stigma attached to inter-racial unions was integral to the striving for emancipation from colonial rule (Foulcher and Day 2002: 49–60, 85–143; Siegel 1997: 54–114). Some also argued that a strong, independent Indonesian nation should be built on the foundation of secure, monogamous marriages and that the practice of polygamy would hinder its development into a modern society. For the majority Muslims of Indonesia, marriage has long been an issue where a battle...
line between religious law (shari’a) and the secular Indonesian state has been drawn. In the midst of this struggle, Indonesian women have become emblematic, not just of national and Islamic identity, but of what it means to be a modern individual of any gender (Brenner 2005: 116). With deft irony, Brenner’s essay shows how democratization since 1998 has also stirred up new waves of patriarchy in Indonesia, as evidenced by resurgent support for polygamy. There is now also a strong possibility that conservative shari’a restrictions on women may be introduced at the local level in the newly decentralized archipelago. Brenner’s most important point, however, is that, viewed comparatively against the histories of regime change elsewhere in the world, the resurgence of patriarchy in Indonesia has less to do with Islam than with the unintended social consequences of the destruction of authoritarian regimes. Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, like Christian fundamentalism in the United States, is in part a class-based reaction to new (im)moralities and social dislocations brought about by mediatized, global capitalism. Once again, as in the days of the New Order, the family has become a critical battleground in the fight for freedom.

Indonesian women appear to be in no need of paternalistic intervention, however. Robinson records and celebrates the activism of Indonesian middle-class Muslim women who are themselves making use of the rich resources of the Islamic tradition, in all of its local and global expressions, to argue their own case for equality and freedom in the sight of men and God. Robinson’s argument goes to the heart of what is wrong with ‘the war on terror’: its violently freedom-destroying, neo-colonial reductionism. As many have argued, a healthy pluralism of Islamic views is alive and well in contemporary Indonesia, even in regions such as Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia, where long-simmering violence has been given reductive religious labeling linking it to ‘terror’.6 Brenner and Robinson also implicitly raise a question. Will middle-class Muslim women continue to lead the way in brokering new freedoms for Indonesian women generally, or will they falter in the face of continuing, if not growing, social inequality in Indonesia, conditions that foster fundamentalist and paternalistic rejection of freedom around the world?

The essays by Errington and Garcia shed light on the crucial, ongoing role of language and print capitalism in the making of modern Indonesia, a subject that the writings of Benedict Anderson have made familiar to students of nationalism everywhere. While it is true that from the late nineteenth century onwards, the Malay language and its Indonesian variant, Bahasa Indonesia, have served admirably as a linguistic medium for the formation of a strong national identity, in which secular, Islamic, modern, and cosmopolitan elements have continued to be synthesized in dynamically creative ways (Anderson 1996; Laffan 2003: 142–180), Indonesian, as Errington suggests, is a problematic linguistic tool for the construction and maintenance of an independent identity in the global age. Errington argues forcefully that its very ‘un-nativeness’ is a strength, evidenced by the amazing role of Indonesian as a language of anti-Indonesian resistance and now as a lingua franca in multi-lingual Timor Leste, the former East Timor. Yet this very strength may also contain a weakness. Indonesian’s lack of any
‘natural’ connection with a powerful cultural center, either indigenous or foreign, makes it easy to colonize and dominate (Foulcher and Day 2002: 4–9; see Jennifer Lindsay’s comments in note 9). As García shows, the writings of the latest Indonesian literary movement, known as Generation 98, reveal that Indonesian, successively colonized by the Dutch and then the New Order state, is still being liberated for use by private Indonesians. It is hardly surprising that in tandem with their struggle for freedom in other areas of private and public life, women writers are the ones who are taking the lead in the process of literary emancipation (see Ayu 2005; Utami 2005). But how many other Indonesians are in fact participating in this ongoing revolution? How many readers worldwide are even faintly aware that it is taking place?

Increasingly more, but overall still very little, fiction or non-fiction moves either in or out of Indonesia via the medium of the national language, which until roughly the eighteenth century served as the major lingua franca for the trading world of all Southeast Asia. Today that lingua franca is English, and Indonesian gives its speakers only limited access to thought worlds beyond its own insular shores. Arguably, given the problems facing readerships and publishers examined by García, radio and television, both now broadcasting programs in regional languages as well as Indonesian, are playing the leading role in stimulating Indonesians to ‘dub culture’, in ways that may also lead to the strengthening of regional as well as national and transnational identities (Jurriens 2002; Sakai 2004; Widodo 2002). Encouraged by political decentralization, the dissemination of rediscovered linguistic differences may encourage the formation of multiple regional nationalisms that will compete with a unitary Indonesia and its national language as primary sources of imagined community. Be that as it may, García suggests that the right to free expression in any medium or language is a fragile one, threatened by shadow economies and oppressive forces that subvert law and order, poorly guaranteed in any case by Indonesian law, in an increasingly politically decentralized and culturally fragmented nation-state.

Just what the words ‘nation’, ‘state’, and the hyphen that connects them might now mean is the central theme in the last five essays in our collection. Dove examines a nation that appears to be fragmenting, violently, into warring ethnic communities, a process that is being encouraged by political decentralization, legislated into law in 1999. Ethnicity was all but ignored in analyses of Indonesian politics prior to 1998, even though ethnic categories, ‘reinvented’ and elaborated into ‘customary laws’ (adat), were an important tool of Dutch colonial rule, and the dominance of the ethnic Javanese during Suharto’s regime was widely resented by other ethnic groups (Suharto was himself Javanese, as was most of the military and government elite). But Dove shows how the Dayak of Borneo have turned to ethnicity to account for their violent actions, for many of the same reasons that nationalists everywhere have identified themselves as members of what Anderson has famously termed an “imagined community” (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 57). By forming a community based on ethnicity, Dayak empower themselves to act as free agents rather than remain victims of neo-colonial control and objects of ethnographic
Introduction: Identifying with Freedom

In adopting a cultural ‘counter-narrative’ to explain and take responsibility for their own violence, Dayak exercise a freedom of self-definition that may ultimately strengthen, even though it appears to threaten, the basis for national community, one that becomes truly plural in its unity, as expressed by the national motto in the Old Javanese language, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” literally, “Divided into parts, it is united.” From the days of colonialism until the end of the New Order in 1998, cultural pluralism, like the national language itself, has been strongly influenced by the state. Now it may be becoming a resource for the creation of a more deeply rooted sense of national belonging.7

On the other hand, what we may instead be witnessing, as Barker and Slater both suggest from different perspectives, is not the democratic reimagining of a more culturally plural Indonesian nation, but the collapse of the unitary Indonesian state. The actual unity of this state may have always been more mythical than real, which is not to say that it was, therefore, any less oppressive. Even during the periods of greatest centralization, from early times the ‘state’ in Indonesia has been a plethora of loosely co-ordinated political networks and micro-states, each claiming sovereignty over its own community of followers (Day 2002). ‘Communists’, ‘organizations without form’, and ‘criminals’, the labels for those groups whose exclusion during the New Order era bestowed sovereignty on Suharto’s state, have been succeeded by ‘Madurese’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Christians’, ‘Chinese’, ‘thieves’, and ‘witches’, outsider ‘others’ whom different groups, for different reasons, have been licensed to kill or rape, even pulverize beyond recognition, in the name of particular notions of sovereign community (Agamben 1998; Colombijn 2002; Siegel 1998, 2006). The ‘informal networks’ that survived the Suharto era to form the collusive, predatory Jakarta elite analyzed by Slater—as well as similar lower-level Suharto-era bureaucratic networks, which are competing for dominance in the regions, cities, and towns (see Hadiz 2004)—are among the thousands of petty state groupings vying for power in Indonesia today.

I might have said “vying for Power,” because the situation described by Dove, Barker, and Slater calls to mind the analysis in which Anderson (1990) defines “the idea of Power in Javanese culture.” Power, like Agamben’s notion of sovereignty, is something wild and external to the political order. Bruce Kapferer (2004: 6) calls sovereign power an “unconstrained capacity to act.” It “antecedes questions of good and evil” (Anderson 1990: 23) and is the vital “constitutive force” of all order and morality inside the state (Kapferer 2004: 6).

If this theoretical model is at all applicable to the politics of contemporary Indonesia, some of the freest and most powerful people in Indonesia today are the preman, the thugs-for-hire who carry out much of the violence and whose name derives from the Dutch word vrijman (freeman), a term for merchants who were not employed by the seventeenth-century Dutch East India Company but were permitted to continue trading with the company’s blessing as long as they served the company’s financial interests as well as their own (Ryter 2001: 130). As one contemporary preman put it in a magazine interview quoted by Ryter (ibid.): “Preman means a free person, exactly
free-man. I am one of these. A preman is a person who is free, not tied by any knot, free to determine his own life and death, so long as he fulfills the requirements and the laws of this country. But I am free to choose, to carry out the permitted or the not permitted, with all of its risks.” The preman is a social outsider who acts like a sovereign, able to obey or flout the law at will, a truly stateless ‘free man’, whose violence against others at the behest of those who are even more powerful and free than himself generates the sovereign power of the state. The preman is a New and post–New Order variant of a kind of powerful, sovereign male individual with a long and violent history in the annals of the archipelago.

And so it is perhaps not surprising that large numbers of Indonesians have taken flight from the reign of this kind of free-for-all sovereignty in search of well-being elsewhere. No single ethnic group has contributed more to the economic, intellectual, and cultural development of modern Indonesia than its citizens of Chinese descent, and yet they have been singled out repeatedly, in colonial as well as post-colonial times, for persecution and violent mistreatment, as happened during the riots that erupted in May 1998 following the shooting by the army of innocent university students in Jakarta. Since the resignation of Suharto, much has improved for Chinese-Indonesians. Chinese writing can be seen in public, Chinese customary rituals are now publicly observed, Chinese-language books are on sale, and courses in Mandarin are everywhere (Hoon 2004). Indonesians of Chinese descent, now allowed to be ‘different’, are however still treated as non-Indonesian ‘others’, as the individuals interviewed by Nonini in Australia make clear. But like the gays, women, and Dayak who appear elsewhere in this forum, the refugees studied by Nonini are themselves agents who attempt to control their own destinies. They choose to be ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indonesian’ in different ways, depending on their gender and varied subjectivities. Like many Indonesians, they are “flexible” (Ong 1999) in how they construct their citizenship and their cultural identity. But their ‘cosmopolitanism’ does not convey the kind of blithe, protean, transnational yet patriotic individuality celebrated by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998, 2006). These are people who struggle—linguistically, socially, economically—to survive, belong, and succeed. Their freedom is back-breaking work, filled with the experience and memory of tragedy, just as it is for the characters in the short story by Pramoedya quoted at the beginning of this introduction, whose freedom co-exists with, but does not cancel out, the “suffering of day-to-day existence.”

Yet as Ryter points out, not every Indonesian asylum-seeker is fleeing persecution by the state. Ryter’s essay reveals how Indonesian gangsterism and entrepreneurial opportunism have taken to the global street. The paradox noted by both Nonini and Ryter is that asylum-seekers, whatever their motives for leaving, remain committed to their national Indonesian identities. Like diasporic communities from China, India, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and others, they bear witness to the fact that the ‘nation’ lives on in the global era as a fundamental form of imagined human community, even when it is lived at long distance.
What is the meaning of ‘freedom’ in Indonesia today? The essays in this forum suggest that it lies somewhere between *kemerdekaan* and *kebebasan*, between freedom from the oppressions of the past and the freedom to build many new kinds of future, both individual and communal. What these futures will look like is still unclear. How Islam and democracy will co-exist and develop in mutually affirmative ways remains one of the most fascinating developments for outsiders to watch. Given the fact that Indonesia has not only the world’s largest Muslim population but also its most successfully independent, secularized, and pluralistic one, much rests on the success or failure of the Indonesian experiment in building democracy as a model that could be followed elsewhere. Indonesia has a long history of cultural and ethnic tolerance, yet as these essays demonstrate, it is a history punctuated by outbursts of deadly mass violence. Perhaps violence and democracy are not necessarily incompatible.8

The essays in this collection, all written by non-Indonesians, express ambivalence about some of the directions in which Indonesians, with their hard-won freedoms, are now heading. It is possible to draw the conclusion from what is written here that there is more dedication in Indonesia today to securing private and local spheres of freedom by dismantling the oppressive restrictions imposed by the New Order on individuals and regions than with reconstituting a strong, democratic, national community, united in its resolve to chart an independent course in a world threatened by economic inequality and US imperial domination. The rampant materialism of late capitalism and the irresistible allure of extremist ‘individualism’, so appealing to middle classes everywhere in the world today, may produce nasty, unintended results in Indonesia, not least of which would be the dominance in national life of a kind of religious fundamentalism that is both anti-Western (the source of all that is ‘immoral’ about ‘freedom’) and anti-Indonesian, opposed to the very foundational principles of secular multi-culturalism upon which the Republic stands. And there is still China to be reckoned with, how its rise may affect Indonesia in social, political, and economic terms.

But Indonesians are now free to differ, and therein lies great hope, albeit fraught with danger, as one of the most cosmopolitan of Indonesian nationalists, Goenawan Mohamad (2002: 3–5), has argued in an essay written in Indonesian entitled “Differing.”9 Goenawan is composing his essay in December, at year’s end, when people “slowly turn the key in the door to their rooms and listen to the world asking: are we really all the same?” His starting point is the honor killing of a 16-year-old girl in Palestine. Is this murder the expression of a ‘cultural difference’ or the violation of a person’s right to life under universal human law? The event is both particular and universal. “Everything that exists gets its identity through being different, and every existing being is always within a situation of comparison with the other.” Resorting to words for difference in his native Javanese, Goenawan can think of this process of universal differing as playful but finite, since it is always halted by violence and death. There is always, as in the case of the murdered girl, a need for justice, for the adjudication of others. “Suddenly there is a need, a longing perhaps, for ‘the same’,“ and as Goenawan observes, the Malay/Indonesian word for ‘same’
(sama), is the root of the word for ‘fellow beings’ (sesama). “The world is a conversation between these differing sesama or fellows.”

And so is a nation, a community of different human beings, united in the desire for freedom and justice. This desire also calls for a state that can guarantee “relative difference” (Goenawan’s phrase, my italics), free of “hate, anger and murder,” for all.

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Tony Day was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines from 1967 to 1969 and taught Southeast Asian and Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia, from 1978 to 1998. He has been a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, and a Fellow of the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. He is now an independent researcher living in New Haven, CT.

Notes


2. See Reid (1998) and Taylor (2003: 304–305) for discussions of the word merdeka (free, independent). In the course of its long history, merdeka has come to mean “freedom for personal development realized through duty to society” (Taylor 2003: 305).

3. A good example of the meaning of the word bebas (free, unimpeded) in the sense I am using it here can be found in the following excerpt from an advertisement for Ayu Utami’s 1989 novel Saman (see Utami 2005), a ‘classic’ from the Generation 98 group of post-Suharto authors: “Discusses sex, love, politics, and religion and feelings that fuse together between characters, who are portrayed as being without rigidity, without guilt, as totally free (bebas sebebas-bebasnya) as an Ursula Brangwen, the principal heroine [in The Rainbow] of the writer D. H. Lawrence, who dances naked on a mountain top without inhibition.” Accessed online at http://www.kompas.com/tbgramedia/product_detail.cfm?bid=47851.

4. For more on the role of the media and the Internet in contemporary Indonesia, see Sen and Hill (2000) and Hill and Sen (2005).

5. Susan Blackburn (2004: 123) writes: “Some women leaders—and a few men—argued that the state must ban polygamy for nationalist reasons. At the 1928 women’s congress, a strong opponent of polygamy, Siti Sundari, made a connection between moral outrage and nationalism. ‘If the Indonesian nation wants to become a nation that has a place of dignity in the world,’ she argued, ‘it must be built on households based on mutual love.’ Polygamy was indefensible: ‘The stronger our households, the stronger the Indonesian
Introduction: Identifying with Freedom

1. The happier and more secure the marriages of Indonesians, the happier and safer the Indonesian nation."

6. On Islamic debate in Sulawesi, see Donohoe (2004). The position papers on terrorism in Indonesia prepared by Sidney Jones for Crisis Watch consistently argue for greater understanding of the diversity of Islam in Indonesia. Jones’s reports and other informative materials on Islam and terrorism worldwide can be found at http://www.crisis-group.org/home/index.cfm?

7. Perhaps the reimagining of a more deeply Indonesian national community after Suharto, by means of a new exploration and appreciation of ethnic identity, is what Ayu Utami is attempting in the following passage from her novel Saman, in which the narrator, using free indirect discourse (a rhetorical device that is itself an act of social inclusion) and eroticized references to ethnicity, describes the growing attraction of the protagonist Laila to a Sumatran Batak, who becomes her lover: "He spoke the flat Jakarta vernacular. But his hard Batak accent was evident from time to time, especially when he was arguing. She loved to listen to it. Possibly because she was already attracted to him. Or maybe too because she was born of parents who never really liked the domineering Javanese. Her name was Laila Gagarina, a signal to an Indonesian that she was a post-1960s child of Minangkabau origins. Her father was obviously an admirer of Yuri Gagarin. Her mother was a Sundanese with ambivalent feelings about Java. Laila felt that his strong Batak accent contained a quality of honesty, of forthrightness. Or maybe she was merely projecting her own hopes onto this man to whom she was increasingly attracted" (Utami 2005: 20).

8. In any case, it is important to build a future, democratic or otherwise, based on reality, not myth. Writing in the New York Times (15 February 2006: A23) in response to the furor over the publication of Danish newspaper cartoons defaming the Prophet, Karim Raslan, a Malaysian lawyer, author, and commentator on Indonesian politics, observes from Jakarta: “Yes, we [Southeast Asian Muslims] are part of the extended family of believers, the ummah. We cannot help but feel some sense of solidarity with our co-religionists in Damascus, Tehran or Cairo. But the explosiveness of the Arab street doesn’t translate, somehow, to the tropics. Many of us have a growing suspicion that we are culturally different from our Arabic- and Urdu-speaking brethren, perhaps more tolerant and less emotional.” Karim has possibly forgotten about the “explosiveness” of the slaughter of up to a million so-called Communist Indonesians by their fellow citizens in 1965–1966, the genocide carried out by Indonesians in East Timor between 1975 and 1999, and the rape and murder of what some estimates put at more than 1,000 Chinese Indonesians in May 1998.

9. The Indonesian version was published on 24 December 2000. In her introduction to the essay collection, Goenawan Mohamad’s translator, Jennifer Lindsay, comments on the creative word-play in “Differing,” and so illustrates Errington’s contention that the peculiarly “un-native” Indonesian language is capable of expressing a “decentered, flexible” subjectivity in a globalized world (Mohamad 2002: xiv). She also offers another observation, suggesting that the process of turning ‘official’ Indonesian into a deeply expressive wellspring of national identity and subjective freedom is far from over: “All this [i.e., Goenawan’s] experimentation with the Indonesian language comes at a time when Indonesian—particularly in the media—is being increasingly impoverished by the lazy use of English, or Indonesianised English. This is considered trendy. Indonesian, and Malay and regional language root words are not smart. And Goenawan’s enriching of the written language comes at a time when the miracle of Indonesian’s transformation into truly a first language … is so strikingly evident for most of the population. This means above all the transformation of Indonesian into a real oral rather than written language, and this has been happening over the past thirty years, particularly over the past twenty with the invasion of television bringing Indonesian speech, and predominantly Jakarta colloquial speech, into farflung homes” (Ibid.: xv). See also Lindsay’s examination of the question of what to call Indonesia’s national language, another aspect of its ‘un-native’ status, in her “The Malaise of ‘Bahasa Indonesia’” in the 15 February 2006 edition of Jakarta Post.
References


