

Guerrilla Warfare and the Indonesian Strategic Psyche

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“While this sultan was sitting in audience, I saw a man with a knife in his hand resembling a book-binders’ tool. He put this knife to his own neck, and delivered a long speech which I did not understand, then gripped it with both hands and cut his own throat. So sharp was the knife and so strong his grip that his head fell to the ground. I was amazed at his action. The sultan said to me, ‘Does anyone do this in your country?’ I replied ‘I have never seen such a thing.’ Then he laughed and said ‘These are our slaves, who kill themselves for love of us’ ... One of those present at this audience told me that the speech made by the man was a declaration of his affection for the sultan, and that he was slaying himself for love of him, as his father had slain himself for love of the sultan’s father, and his grandfather for the love of the sultan’s grandfather. Thereafter I withdrew from the audience.”

-Ibn Battuta, A Declaration of Affection for the Sultan of Mul-Jawa, 1349.¹

To Ibn Battuta, the great Islamic traveller and, to borrow an idea from Isaiah Berlin, one of the most civilised men of his or any other age, the evident culture of Java was a highly perplexing thing indeed demanding much long, and preferably distant, rumination. Throughout the ages of exploration, colonialism and internationalism, the Spice Islands, that archipelagic peppering of lands that sweeps from the Malay Peninsula to the lip of the Pacific basin, have always appeared that bit *more oriental* – obscurer, darker, more esoteric – to Western² eyes than the other civilisations of the Far Eastern world. One particularly troubling aspect of the extant culture of the region, from Ibn Battuta’s day to our own, is the apparent prevalence of violence as a currency in social dialogue. This aspect, this “phenomenon of violence”³ - particularly its apparent spontaneity and intensity - is rendered all the more perplexing to the Western eye by an evident antithesis; that greater Malay culture is essentially suffused with ideals of “a peaceful, mannered, ordered, developed, just and tranquil society”⁴.

¹ Ibn Battuta quoted in Newby, Eric, *A Book of Travellers’ Tales*, Picador, London, 1986. Pg. 352.

² In this context Western includes the Islamic world of the near East, most of our early exposure to South East Asia coming to Europe via Arab merchants and travelers who, as some of Ibn Battuta’s reminiscences show, were as perplexed by the cultures they encountered as later British, Dutch or Portuguese explorers.

³ Dittmer, Lowell, *The Legacy of Violence In Indonesia*, Pgs. 541-544 in “Asian Survey”, Vol. 42, No. 4, “The Legacy of Violence in Indonesia”, July/August 2002. Pg. 542.

⁴ Oyong Karmayuda, *Pencak Silat: An Indonesian Perspective – Realities and Philosophies*, Pgs. 11-12 in “Silat Melayu Ezine”, Vol. 3, Selangor Darul Ehsan, December 2005.

<http://www.malaysilat.org/malaysilat-volumes/volume4.pdf>.

Some analysts of Indonesian affairs have tried to rebut “the conventional wisdom that Indonesia is simply a violent society” and reject “arguments that locate the origins of violence in cultural characteristics that highlight the irrationality of the Indonesian crowd”, asserting instead that military and political elites, predominantly Javanese by implication, use this convenient cultural epithet to mask their role in the instigation, manipulation and coordination of politically expedient violence⁵. Of course *all* national or ethnic cultures have violent facets, a reflection of both their humanity and their will to survive the depredations of *other* cultures – even that most civilised of cultures, the Melians of Thucydides’, defended themselves heroically when crunch, in the form of Athens, came calling⁶. This accepted, then Indonesians should not be singled out with a “more violent” tag any more than other comparable societies. Also a reading of all but the most partisan histories of post-war Indonesia demonstrate clearly that the many violent episodes that blot the collective memory are a series of power struggles between opposing elites with the common denominator an Indonesian Army unrestrained in its willingness to use extreme violence to maintain its notion of order⁷.

Acknowledging this, we need also note that there are some aspects to Indonesian social, and particularly martial, culture that *do* indicate a different approach to violence and its utilisation than the strategic culture of, for example, New Zealand would countenance. For the purposes of this brief survey I will consider the notion of Javanese culture as the dominant force in Indonesian strategic culture and then examine this through a consideration of Indonesian guerrilla warfare theory.

So, to what degree is *Javanese* strategic culture *Indonesian* strategic culture? The answer, or more strictly *an* answer, is that it both *is* and *isn't*, a reply which lends itself to the accusation of being, inherently, no answer at all. On one level and very much predicated on our implicit acceptance that culture indeed influences strategy, Indonesia, a “great concatenation of islands with people of many different cultures and languages and stages of economic development”⁸, can surely not have a single strategic culture but must comprise a collective of strategic cultures, at one time complementary *and* potentially antithetical to each other. If we look only through the theological window of cultural

⁵ Zinoman, Peter and Nancy Lee Peluso, *Rethinking Aspects of Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Indonesia and East Timor*, Pgs. 545-549 in “Asian Survey”, Vol. 42, No. 4, “The Legacy of Violence in Indonesia”, July/August 2002.

⁶ Thucydides, *The Melian Dialogue*, Book Five, Verses 84 -116, in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Rex Warner, (Trans.), Penguin Classics, London, 1972.

⁷ One of the most balanced histories, a difficult achievement considering the emotions and outrage mass killings invoke, the author has recently read is Brown, Colin, *A Short History of Indonesia: The Unlikely Nation?* Allen and Unwin, Crow’s Nest, NSW, 2006. While Brown doesn’t gloss over any groups’ culpability in human rights abuses, he does remind us of the ‘grey bits’ and the complexity behind events that, from the outside can look quite black and white.

⁸ Smart, Ninian, *The World’s Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989. Pg. 483. Smart’s observations on religion and culture are helpful for a study of strategic culture – Smart came to study religion through his work for British Military Intelligence in Asia in the immediate post-war years of the late 1940s, also the formative period of the Indonesian strategic culture we are considering. See Scott London’s interview with Smart at <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/smart.html> accessed 1st November 2007.

estimation then we should be able to discern cultural differences in the strategic practices of Hindu-Buddhist Bali, “staunchly Islamic” Aceh⁹, syncretic Java and the animistic remnants of central Sulawesi. A study of the martial arts of Indonesia, *pencak silat*, shows a wide diversity of martial forms¹⁰, all more or less distinguished in their traditional states by local variants in, amongst other factors, spiritual influence, aesthetic mores, spatial characteristics and weaponry use and availability.

So, on one level, we could examine the notion of an Indonesian strategic culture as an accretion or fusion of regional strategic sub-cultures. However this approach misses one extremely important reality – that politically and militarily, the two primary considerations of ‘classical strategic culture’¹¹ studies, Javanese influence is paramount and with Java as the temporal nub of Indonesia, “its values are...applicable to the vast country as a whole”¹². Up to the period of European colonial consolidation, Java was the agrarian, mercantile and military locus in the Western half of the region¹³. Founding President Sukarno spoke of the great pre-Fifteenth Century Javanese empire of Majapahit as being “emblazoned on my heart”¹⁴. Today Javanese dominate the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI) particularly the Army (TNI-AB)¹⁵. Javanese have dominated the political life of the nation – Sudirman, Sukarno, Suharto, Moertopo, Murdani from the formative years and Wahid, Megawati (Sukarno’s daughter) and Yudhoyono from the *Reformasi* period have all been Javanese¹⁶ - with only the Sumatran influence from figures like Nasution, Hatta and Sjahrir coming close to this level of importance¹⁷. Even the political creed of the nation, the *Pancasila*¹⁸, and the state motto, “Out of many, one”, are all based on the Javanese syncretic embrace of their Islamic *and* Hindu-Buddhist heritage –

⁹ Noss, David S., *A History of the World’s Religions*, Tenth Edition, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1999. Pgs. 588-591.

¹⁰ Lewis, Peter, *The Way to the Martial Arts: The Styles, The Techniques, The Legends, The Philosophies*, Golden Press, Sydney, 1986. Pg. 129.

¹¹ i.e. the body of work described by Johnston, Alastair Ian, *Strategic Culture: A Critique*, Chapter One, Pgs. 1-31 in “Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History”, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995.

¹² Smart, Pg. 483.

¹³ Brown, Chapter Two.

¹⁴ Lyon, Peter, *War and Peace in South-East Asia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969. Pg. 57

¹⁵ Studies show that the infantry, the heart of the ABRI, has had some 76% of its senior officers Javanese with other corps showing similar and sometimes much higher proportions of Javanese domination. The positions these officers have occupied is revealing. In a study conducted by Ian MacFarling he noted 82% of Military Region Commanders were Javanese, as were 81% of the elite Kopassus airborne parachute units’ officers and 100% of the Commanders of the strategically vital Jakarta Military Region MacFarling, Ian, *The Dual Function of the Indonesian Armed Forces: Military Politics in Indonesia*, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1996. Pgs. 153-174. Kopassus, or Komando Pasukan Khusus, and its predecessors has been prominently used in all of the major internal security operations since the 1950s and has a reputation both for military prowess and societal abuse. Amnesty International has often highlighted alleged Kopassus involvement in human rights abuses. See e.g. *Indonesia Report 2005* [online] <http://web.amnesty.org/report2005/idn-summary-eng>. Accessed 1 November 2007.

¹⁶ In fact of all ‘official’ presidents of Indonesia, only the short-serving Jusuf Habibie has been non-Javanese and even his mother was from the island.

¹⁷ From collected reading of Brown, MacFarling ect.

¹⁸ Belief in God, national unity, democracy, justice and humanitarianism. See Dobbs-Higginson, M.S., *Asia Pacific: Its Role in the New World Disorder*, Mandarin, London, 1995. Pg. 307-9.

not the natural inclination of many of the more Islamicised regional cultures of the archipelago¹⁹. It is no accident then that one of the more powerful propaganda weapons the Dutch employed during the 1945-49 War of Independence was to ask the peoples of the 'Outer Islands' whether they were in effect swapping "the benign rule of the Netherlands with Javanese imperialism"²⁰. Ongoing regional resistance would indicate that neither option was particularly appealing to many non-Javanese²¹.

In conclusion we might see Indonesia as a 'cultural emulsion' where many less powerful strategic cultures are suspended in some colloidal relationship with the greater strategic culture of Java, appearing to be one unified thing from the outside but prone to disseverance when the conditions permit²².

Guerrilla warfare strategy has shaped the strategic culture of the Indonesian elite in two ways. First, the adoption of a guerrilla ethos by the nascent nationalists *empowered* them - it gave them both a physical methodology to fight the materially superior Dutch forces with and, through the psychological leverage guerrilla tactics give a popular native insurgency²³, a stronger "spirit and morale to struggle" than their external enemy²⁴ both current and future. Secondly, and in many ways more profoundly, the guerrilla aspect of the 'internal' rebellions, insurrections, counter-revolutions and attempted secessions carried out against the fledgling Indonesian state by militant Islamists, communists and various regional groupings²⁵ "oriented Indonesian army organisation and activities along police-action-cum-civic-action lines"²⁶. This embedding of guerrilla warfare tactics for counter-insurgency purposes into the strategic culture of the state is an example of what the revolutionary warfare theorist Régis Debray called the "revolutionising of the counter-revolution", the reiteration of the military's role in the political life of the state as a balance to the politico-military activities of internal opponents²⁷. The guerrilla ethos

¹⁹ Dobbs-Higginson, Pgs. 307-9.

²⁰ Wheatcroft, pg. 122.

²¹ Andrew Wheatcroft's conflict map of the independence period shows the main areas of resistance to the Dutch as Java, Bali and Southern Kalimantan. The main resistance to "the centrist aspirations of Indonesian nationalism" comes from Sumatra, Sulawesi and the Molucca Islands of Buru, Amboina and Seram. Wheatcroft, Pgs. 124-5.

²² My analogy is based on the behaviour of culinary emulsions, oil-acid dressings like vinaigrettes being the simplest to consider. Poured into a bowl (S.E. Asia), the oil (Java) and the acid and seasoning (the other islands) remain separate and distinct until friction (colonialism then revolution) is applied to create the emulsified whole. Left in the bowl, unless regular friction (strong governance) is applied, the oil, acid and seasoning will split, largely reverting back to a semblance of its original state in time. Nevertheless it is virtually impossible once the original ingredients have been mixed in the bowl to extract each completely and cleanly from the other.

²³ While some regional groups, notably the Ambionese, were either pro-Dutch, anti-Javanese or cautiously ambivalent, the overwhelming bulk of Javanese opinion was against Dutch rule and in favour of a pan-archipelagic Indonesian state. See Wheatcroft, Pg. 122.

²⁴ Tjokropranolo, *General Sudirman: The Leader Who Finally Destroyed Colonialism in Indonesia*, Ian MacFarling (Ed.), Libby Krahling, Bert Jordan and Steve Dawson (Trans.), Australian Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1995. Pg. 100.

²⁵ Wheatcroft, Andrew, *The World Atlas of Revolutions*, Book Club Associates, London, 1983. Pg. 122.

²⁶ Fairbairn, Geoffrey, *Revolutionary Guerrilla Warfare: The Countryside Version*, Pelican Books, London, 1974. Pg. 26.

²⁷ Fairbairn, Pg. 26 & 279.

and mythos became central to Javanese dominated strategic culture simply because the elite believed that moral and material shortcomings, governmental instability and weakness and the fractious effects of the Cold War meant the only strategy to maintain unity was to use “anti-guerrilla tactics within the country to fight rebel movements and...guerrilla strategy if our country is attacked by a foreign aggressor”²⁸.

The fullest expression of the Indonesian army’s founding doctrines is found in Abdul Haris Nasution’s 1953 *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare*. The work is a mix of reproduced strategic directives from 1947-8, Nasution’s theories of guerrilla warfare, his reflections on the period just past and the likely crisis’s to come, and outlines of his legal frameworks for military justice and “guerrilla government”. The work contains similar principles to those espoused or practiced by other theorists and practitioners from Michael Collins in Ireland, T.E. Lawrence in the Middle East and Mao in China in the early Twentieth Century, to contemporary insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nasution willingly shows his influences, frequently referring to some guerrilla activities as “Wingate”²⁹ actions, quoting Lawrence and drawing lessons from the recent and further past to develop and illustrate his well-thought out arguments. Where the work substantially differs from other theorist/practitioners is that General Nasution was one of the few men to have led both a guerrilla *and* a counter-guerrilla war. This dual perspective on the realities of ‘people’s war’ leaves the work refreshingly free of the dogmatic hyperbole and ideological contortions of similar revolutionary works from the period and manages to be both brutally direct in the methods it espouses and jarringly honest about the terrible price revolutionary guerrilla war exacts on everyone it comes in contact with, ‘the people’ most of all³⁰. Among the horror and cold brutality of the theory we clearly discern a humane and sincere man staring out.

Throughout the work Nasution emphasises the asymmetric nature of this form of warfare. “Guerrilla warfare is a tactic in defence which is executed by an army that feels itself far weaker in arms than the attacker; through this means of fighting which is continued for long periods of time, the enemy will have no opportunity to organise himself in all fields, they will even become increasingly weaker both physically and psychologically. It can therefore also be said that the guerrilla tactic is a tactic of squeezing out the enemy’s life blood.”³¹ From the original Spanish ‘little war’ of the Napoleonic occupation to present day Iraq this ‘strategic tactic’ remains effective.

Meant as a primer for men in the field, the guide repeats and reinforces its central themes without labouring the points, emphasising always the need for central, co-ordinating leadership, clear goals, action without unnecessary heroics, popular support and,

²⁸ Nasution, Abdul Haris, *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare and The Indonesian Defence System Past and Future*, Information Service of the Indonesian Armed Forces, Djakarta, 1953. Pg. 9.

²⁹ Referring to Orde Wingate founder of special operations troops Gideon Force and The Chindits. See e.g. Nasution, Pg. 19.

³⁰ Woodhouse, C.M., “Review: Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare by Abdul Haris Nasution”, Pgs. 287-8 in, *International Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Britain East of Suez: Special Issue, April 1966.

³¹ Nasution, Pg. 238.

crucially, time. One of his 'guides', or set of principles, in the work sets some simple maxims for his local commanders to remember:

- Do not fight in a frontal attack on an open field if it is not necessary and fighting power is not equal.
- Retreat when attacked by a stronger enemy.
- Inveigle the enemy to enter traps.
- Harass and attack lines of communication and convoys.
- Use the elements of time and room for action to the greatest advantage.
- Do not form concentrations to become targets for the enemy, but be in many small targets so that the enemy is forced to divide his troops into small forces which will be easy for us to wipe out³².

Resistance to the enemy does not just involve engaging the enemy's troops but destroying his political support as well. "To obstruct the setting up of an administration made by the (enemy): kill the henchmen of the (enemy); disrupt (enemy) trust in their henchmen; blacken the characters of henchmen of the (enemy), especially if they are influential people". This ruthless policy towards collaborators is extended, if less overtly, to civilians in enemy occupied territory. "Encourage every inhabitant not to co-operate with the enemy and explain the consequences of conducting a tactic of co-operation"³³. The need to proscribe ruthless, utilitarian tactics is never shied away from.

The book's twist comes near the end of the first section when Nasution flips from the guerrilla side of his COIN³⁴ to the anti-guerrilla side. "In studying guerrilla war it is best to conclude with an analysis of anti-guerrilla strategy which eliminates the total people's resistance, whether it takes the form of active guerrilla fighting and sabotage, or whether it is of a more passive nature, such as underground movements, propaganda and intelligence. Every invading army must be prepared for the existence of guerrilla troops behind his front lines...in the case of young countries in South East Asia, they must constantly be on the alert for guerrilla activities in their territory in peace as well as in war"³⁵. Clearly Nasution could see that, once independence was secured, the Indonesian army's future role would not merely be to guard against foreign aggression but to preserve the unity and promulgate the prosperity of the nation through 'constructive pacification'³⁶.

In his mind "the essence of counter-insurgency strategy" is that "the guerrilla fighter must be separated from the people. The guerrilla must be fought with his own tactics"³⁷. The first half is a process to "gradually win the people's heart and to weaken the guerrilla's

³² Nasution, Pg. 241.

³³ Nasution, Pg. 247.

³⁴ Common military abbreviation for counter-insurgency.

³⁵ Nasution, Pg. 55.

³⁶ While Nasution doesn't use this phrase as I have quoted it, he uses the two words in adjacent sentences to convey the same meaning I imply. Nasution, Pg. 55.

³⁷ Nasution, Pg. 66.

ties with the people”³⁸. This can only be done by paying primary attention to the political, socio-economic and psychological aspects of the unrest. The purely military aspect of the campaign is the least important, and pays less dividends, than the battle to secure the “appreciation and respect of the people”³⁹. Once this part of the “total over-all plan” is underway⁴⁰ then the military operation can fully commence. This must be “offensive, aggressive and active”, aiming to chase and annihilate the guerrillas through movement “day and night at undefined hours” and through “sudden appearances and invasions from directions not anticipated”⁴¹. His key is highly trained light infantry, familiar with the terrain and equipped with “knowledge of the people, their ideas, their customs and their problems”⁴².

So far, despite referring to Nasution’s humanity, we have only seen through the brief passages quoted a cold military technician, a soldier training his men in the art of nasty, cruel guerrilla war. If he had confined this early work of his to the task at hand we would still be left with a valuable document to examine and better understand the bipolar insurgency/counter-insurgency facet of the Indonesian strategic psyche. Thankfully though he gave some more, deeper insights into the price a nation historically, culturally and strategically endowed like Indonesia pays for independence, unity, revolution, freedom. Nasution understood the price early on, his thoughts giving a window to his nation’s future, one we are sadly familiar with. A passage is worth, I think, quoting in full.

“There are those who say that a guerrilla war brings more disaster than blessing, arguing that a guerrilla war is indeed destructive in nature. The destruction is intensive and extensive, not only materially because it uses sabotage and scorched earth, but also what is more, it causes psychological, political and social damage. A guerrilla fighter is bred on a spirit of destruction and is not easily repatriated into the community as an ordinary citizen. If one is accustomed to using harsh and brutal measures, he does not easily change and become a tactful and patient man again. If one is used to being active in underground activities, he is not easily moved to pay attention to legal rules. Most standards and values common in law-abiding countries and ordered societies have tumbled down and many have become old-fashioned. The spirit of revolution, of guerrilla warfare and of scorched earth is aimed at destroying the whole existing religious, legal, socio-economic order which forms the organisation of the dominating power. How can the guerrilla accept again a legal, political and socio-economic situation since to him it has the taint of the old system? Many nations and countries...continue to be chaotic years and decades after a guerrilla war overturns and rubs out the ethical, legal standards which are normally found in a society. Burning, sabotage, killing and kidnapping at the expense of the enemy have a heroic value. To have participated in guerrilla activities makes it difficult for one to adapt oneself to an ordered society, a society based on law”⁴³.

³⁸ Nasution refers to the people’s hearts often. This is contemporaneous to the use of the “hearts and minds” idea in the Malayan Emergency campaign. Who influenced who? Nasution Pg. 58.

³⁹ Nasution, Pg. 58.

⁴⁰ Nasution, Pg. 57.

⁴¹ Nasution, Pgs. 64-5.

⁴² Nasution, Pg 58.

⁴³ Nasution, Pgs. 50-1.

Despite his misgivings, his understanding of the horror of such war, it is still a form that he prescribes, a form born fully adapted to the Hobbesian state of nature that defines much of our world. And there is something of Hobbes in Indonesian strategic culture perhaps, some understanding that sometimes a need requires men to cede some rights, to give way to some greater authority for the sake of order. “Violence is not a consummatory value in Indonesian culture...to be exercised as an end in itself; it is rather an instrumental value, to be used against a perceived greater evil – some threat to the power or legitimacy of the incumbent authorities, some threat to economic welfare or political rights, or some systemic effort to thwart the pursuit of legitimate collective ideals”⁴⁴. Indonesia’s strategic environment is very different to our own and its leaders have chosen at times a path that we from our vantage point would not take. The problem is that in the jungle there are no clear signposts and paths don’t always end up in the places they seem to point to.

As Indonesia’s “foremost military intellectual”⁴⁵, one of its founding fathers, arguably its most notable early drafter of constitutional and civil law, and the figure more than most who steered the Indonesian military in the 1950s into a “middle way” between civilian primacy and a complete takeover of power⁴⁶, no understanding of Indonesian strategic culture is possible without some reference to Nasution and his body of work⁴⁷. There are many learnings to be gleaned from his writings on guerrilla warfare, ones, as Iraq demonstrates, that are far from redundant despite advances in technologies and revolutions in military affairs. For America’s friends and allies like the New Zealand Defence Force, it is worth recalling that interests have brought the Anglo-Saxon/Celtic/Polynesian nations of the South Pacific into close contact with the children of Nasution twice, and circumstances may bring us together in the jungle a third time. As before, it is unlikely to be a conventional encounter, but one where guerrilla culture is to the fore.

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⁴⁴ Dittmer, Pg. 542.

⁴⁵ MacFarling, un-numbered biography section between pgs. 116 & 117.

⁴⁶ Crouch, Harold, “Review: Abdul Haris Nasution. A Political Biography. By C.L.M. Penders and Ulf Sundhausen”, Pgs. 725-6 in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 4, Winter 1986-7).

⁴⁷ While relatively forgotten in the West today, *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare* was once discussed along side the works of Mao and was studied by many Australian officers in East Malaysia during the Konfrontasi period of 1963-66. MacFarling, Pg. 42.

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