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Decolonising Indonesia, Past and Present

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ABSTRACT

In the pursuit of an “authentically Indonesian” nation-state, for decades Indonesians have denied the civil rights of fellow citizens for allegedly being less authentically Indonesian. A key to the longstanding efficacy of such exclusionary ethno-nationalism is the failure to recognise the trans-national solidarity that helped give birth to independent Indonesia. Such solidarity is best illustrated in the extraordinary case of the making in Australia of a documentary film, *Indonesia Calling* (1946). A starting point of this article is the proposition that Indonesia’s cultural politics of the past and its future is never free from a protracted battle over what the nation is allowed, or willing, or able to forget and remember from its past. Mere disclosure of Indonesia’s past history with its cosmopolitan features will not necessarily lead to changes for the better in contemporary Indonesia, especially if the new revelation runs counter to the interests of those in power. Nonetheless, no substantial and long-term change for the better is possible for Indonesia without serious, open, critical re-examination of the revolutionary making of the Republic, and due acknowledgment that inauthenticity, plurality and trans-national solidarity are the hallmarks of the process.

KEYWORDS

Cold War; colonial; ethno-nationalism; identity; Indonesia; *Indonesia Calling*; Left; trans-national

One longstanding and deadly obstacle that has troubled Indonesia’s nation-building and its commitment to being one among many modern nations with dignity is the alluring fantasy of “purity” and “authenticity”, which finds expression in an essentialist and nativist notion of Indonesian “true” Self (Heryanto, 2016a, p. 23). In the pursuit of an “authentically Indonesian” nation-state, many Indonesians and their successive governments have for decades continually denied the civil rights of fellow citizens, for allegedly being less authentically Indonesian. There has been a wide range of formal policies and informal discriminatory pronouncements, which have been zealously enforced with a high degree of machismo. Repeated acts of physical violence against minority groups are condoned and rationalised by more than a few circles of the population, while being criticised by others.

A key to the longstanding efficacy of such exclusionary ethno-nationalism is the failure to recognise a national identity as a social construct. Such a failure is compounded by a protracted anti-colonial sentiment, nativism and xenophobia. For several decades Indonesia’s public discussion on its past has made little or no reference to the trans-national solidarity that helped give birth to independent

Indonesia. This article aims not only to bring back that past, but also to question and deconstruct the broader myth surrounding the nation's identity and history. Indonesia has a much more colourful history and much greater future potential than its successive governments have been willing to recognise and its citizens are able to remember.

As early as the mid-1950s, Ds F. K. N. Harahap, a key figure in Indonesia's earliest nationalist movement, expressed his frustration at the general tendency in Indonesia to overlook, forget or undervalue the significance of the politically-conscious Indonesian association in the Netherlands, called *Indische Vereniging* or *Perhimpunan Indonesia*, which was founded in 1908 (Harahap, 1958). Key figures in this association included some of the most radical Indonesian activists of various ideological orientations (including communism) and ethnic backgrounds (including Eurasians). Their activities varied, including the publication of propaganda materials demanding Indonesia's full independence as well as underground armed activities. Successive governments of independent Indonesia prefer to overlook that association. Instead, they celebrate the founding in the same year of *Boedi Oetomo* (an association of Dutch-speaking conservative Javanese literati of aristocratic background) as the Awakening Day of Indonesian nationalism.

Post-1965 Indonesian governments have further purged official history and public memory of the leftist elements, including the Indonesian Communist Party, President Sukarno in the later years of his presidency, and their respective supporters. These diverse left-leaning forces played leading roles in the struggle for this nation's independence. In the course of the Indonesian revolutions in the 1940s, the European and Australian left also played a key supporting role. Indonesia's denying and forgetting much of these revolutionary years also erased, even if not totally, a short-lived but extraordinary intimacy between Australia and Indonesia.

Such trans-national intimacy is best illustrated in the extraordinary case of the making in Australia of a documentary film, *Indonesia Calling* (1946), directed by Dutch film-maker Joris Ivens (1898–1989). Until very recently, this film and the debates it provoked in the late 1940s have not been widely known in Indonesia or among international analysts of Indonesia, with older generations of Australians and Australia-based historians being the exceptions. The film recorded mainly re-enactments of real events by people who participated in the first six months of the boycott of Dutch vessels in Australian waters.¹ How the film could have been overlooked by many for decades, what was at stake, and why in recent years public interest in it has slowly increased, are of special interest to this article.

Although some re-examination of the events of the 1940s is necessary, recounting the empirical details of “what might have really happened” is not the primary aim of this article, since others have already done this, and done it well (as cited below). Hence, a brief revisit to the past is sufficient to show how potentially unsettling that past can be to the nation's longstanding delusion of its imagined “pure” or “authentic” self in the present. It also suggests how much more needs to be done by scholars to intervene in public discussions of relevance and to redress this critical amnesia. A starting point of this article is the proposition that Indonesia's cultural politics of the past and its future is never free of a protracted battle over what the nation is allowed, or willing, or able to forget and remember from its past. As one Vietnamese-American novelist-cum-academic aptly puts it, “[w]ars cannot be fought without control over memory and its inherent opposite, forgetting” (Nguyen, 2016, p. 10).

Postcolonial Violence

In his well-known account of the origin and early spread of nationalism, Benedict Anderson characterises the nationalist sentiment as a “deep horizontal comradeship ... [that has made] it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for” the nation (Anderson, 1983, p. 16). Such a contention flies in the face of Indonesia’s (the country of his special expertise) experience since independence, where mass killings and the desire to kill on a large scale and for extended periods have been directed more to fellow nationals (rather than foreigners), on the basis of racial, ethnic, religious or ideological differences.

The New Order government (1966–98) banned Anderson from entering the country for two decades because of the discomfort that his scholarship brought the regime. On his first return to Indonesia in the wake of the downfall of that government, Anderson gave a public lecture in Jakarta. He opened his lecture with a remark about how nationalism has often been misunderstood in Indonesia and elsewhere. He suggested it was misunderstood as “something very old and [is] inherited ... something that arises ‘naturally’ in the blood and flesh...”, and said that this misunderstanding “typically gives rise to nonsense, and often very dangerous nonsense” (Anderson, 1999, p. 1). Yet Indonesia’s national mythology is not based on misunderstanding: since independence Indonesia has deliberately worked in earnest not only to reject much of its colonial cultural parentage, but also to invent a completely new and “native” culture.

By no means is Indonesia’s situation unique. Anthony Reid compares such an undertaking in Indonesia with cases in Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Poland in the latter’s rejection of the German-speaking culture, as well as with Korea and Viet Nam rejecting the legacies of Japanese and French academic cultures respectively (Reid, 2016, p. 6). Cheesman’s (2017) insightful analysis of Myanmar’s politics of “national races” or *taingyintha* is strikingly reminiscent of Indonesia’s dangerous obsession with authenticity, although the details in the two cases differ considerably. Examining the Indonesian case, Foulcher argues that Indonesia “never looked back to ask questions that produce postcolonialist answers... Rather, it looked forward” (Foulcher, 1995, p. 161). I would add that, when it looks back, it does so in a self-orientalising fashion, indulging in the delusion of the past glory of the ostensibly authentic traditions of the various ethnic groups.

From such a perspective, independent Indonesia appears to have been stuck in both colonial and anti-colonial states of mind. What promised to be fledgling elements of post-colonial Indonesia in the first half of the past century (see below) have been lost prematurely. In order to sustain the status quo in the present, the rich and complex history of the revolution in the 1940s must continue to be hidden, suppressed or denied (Heryanto, 2016a). Official historiography paints the Dutch and brief Japanese colonialisms largely as evils invading Indonesia’s pre-existing nation. Thus, the departures of the Dutch and Japanese colonial powers are widely understood not as an opportunity for a new and formidable project of building a vast and incredibly diverse nation, but as an unproblematic return to an entitled supremacy of the self-contained, resilient and authentic Indonesia.²

Since Indonesia's independence, differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or religious faith have alternately become a major trope of hostility and hate speech, sometimes intersecting with, or glossing over, underlying conflicts of economic resources, prestige and material interests. They have contributed to the popular illusion that some citizens, genders, lifestyles, political thoughts or religious practices are more authentically – and thus more legitimately – Indonesian than others. As a result, it follows that some are more entitled than others to the nation's resources or to hold public office.³

Surely, mere disclosure of Indonesia's past history with its cosmopolitan features will not necessarily lead to changes in contemporary Indonesia for the better, especially if the new revelation runs counter to the interests of those in power. Nonetheless, no substantial and long-term change for the better is possible for Indonesia without a series of serious, open and critical re-examinations of the revolutionary making of the Republic. Such change also requires due acknowledgment that inauthenticity, plurality and trans-national solidarity are the hallmarks of the process. Rather than being a historical investigation of the past per se, this article looks at an unusual political event of trans-national solidarity in the years leading to Indonesia's independence, from the perspective of the present. By so doing, it will hopefully help to reveal the reverse: how problematic Indonesia is in the present, and the kind of challenges it may have to face when attempting to move forward into the future.

Examining the production of *Indonesia Calling* as an important incident in the larger dynamics of trans-national and leftist solidarity, this article will highlight three issues. *First*, it recalls the remarkable political climate of the 1940s, which provided the conditions of possibility for a documentary such as *Indonesia Calling* to be produced. It was a high point, if momentarily, in left politics across many nations, including the Asia-Pacific, and among people of diverse professions, genders and skin colours. This sentiment was a response to the fascism that swept across many continents.

Second, the defeat of fascism in the middle of the past century did not lead to hegemony of the left in Australia and Indonesia. Quite the contrary. The Cold War brought a massive decline of the left in Australia, and its brutal elimination in Indonesia. Against such a backdrop, the extraordinary fraternity once displayed in Australian-Indonesian relations has since rapidly faded from public memory in both countries. The trans-national achievements of labour unions organising support for Indonesian independence has been something that political elites in both countries have preferred to forget. Acknowledging that brief honeymoon period would risk giving due credit to the great achievements of the political left in the Asia-Pacific, which Australia and Indonesia have suppressed with significant, but never total, success since the Cold War.

Third, and finally, with the end of the Cold War, anti-communism eased and the new political environment allowed a recent growth of interest in re-examining the violent past. To varying degrees of scope and impact, *Indonesia Calling* and Ivens have regained better recognition in Australia and the Netherlands alike, as well as in Indonesia to a lesser extent.

The Left Strikes

Early in *Indonesia Calling*, the narrator tells us

Let's start at the beginning. Here in Australia, we know the Indonesians well. For years they lived in our country, as friends and fellow townsmen. Their women learned the names of our vegetables. And mothers found their children are much the same. . . (Ivens, 1946)

On screen, we see Indonesian men in smart dress pass through the streets of Australian cities, reading local newspapers and hopping on trams. An Indonesian woman in *kebaya*⁴ dress walks along with her child buying vegetables in a local market. These statements and the accompanying images are doubly intriguing. They may constitute an overstatement of the reality in the Australia of the White Australia policy in the 1940s, and yet in this film they are presented matter-of-factly. They sound even more intriguing and too good to be true in the context of today's Australia-Indonesia relationship, characterised not only by mutual ignorance or indifference, but also by prejudice, distrust and hostility, as succinctly summed up by the familiar aphorism "beef, boats, Bali"⁵ in Australian public fora.

What social conditions provided the necessary energy for the formidable making of *Indonesia Calling*? As will be shown in this section, at the centre of the event was the convergence of leftist political forces, which were gaining momentum. People of a wide variety of professions and backgrounds took part in the making of the film and supported its circulation, not necessarily for the same, shared reason. Of special importance were maritime workers from various backgrounds, particularly Indonesian, Indian and Chinese, who happened to be on Australian soil and in Australian waters at the right time.⁶

Chinese workers settled in Australia earlier than their Indonesian or Indian counterparts. The Japanese invasion of China politicised these Chinese migrants, and provoked an anti-colonial solidarity more globally. Many of the Indonesians who worked for the shipping companies in Australia were formerly political prisoners of the Netherlands East Indies (henceforth NEI) government in the thick jungles of West Papua (Poeze, 2012, pp. 58–61). When the NEI government surrendered its colony to Japan in 1942, these prisoners were transferred to Australia. They were then released into Australian cities, following pressure from local civil liberties groups and the Australian government. Many of the Indonesians in Australia were excited upon hearing the news of the declaration of Indonesian independence that reached Australia via the radio. Several weeks later some of these Indonesians who worked on Dutch ships made the call for a total boycott, when they discovered ammunitions in these ships to be used in a military operation to re-colonise the new Republic. Their Australian, Chinese and Indian fellow workers responded positively. Fellow workers from other countries also showed their support.

The whole event was remarkable, especially when one considers its immediate context: the White Australia policy. According to Heather Goodall (2008, p. 43), in contemporary public consciousness, this event has been narrated primarily as Australia's attempt to break with its racist White Australia policy and extend special services to Indonesia. Goodall's (2008) powerful critique of the Australian-triumphalist discourse has helped correct the common misunderstanding, leading subsequent analysts to pay due recognition to non-Australian workers, and in particular to the role played by Indian workers. Goodall argues

that the latter made the greatest sacrifice, and yet their contribution had previously been overlooked by Australian unions, and under-represented in scholarship.⁷

Not only did these trans-national workers take political and economic risks in joining the boycotts in Australia; many of them would have been homeless and hungry for days at a time if not for the support of fellow workers such as the Chinese Youth League who provided shelters and meals for them (Gapps, 2015a; 2015b). Even with such support, some fell sick. These workers were also eager to participate in the making of *Indonesia Calling* without being paid. Apart from the opening scene (shot on 13 October 1945) and a few others filmed in the studio, most scenes in the film were a re-enactment of real events – by the same people – that had taken place just a few days earlier. Ivens described *Indonesia Calling* as “Australia’s first labour film” (1946, cited in Hughes, 2010, p. 285). Others have celebrated the film with a variety of epithets, such as Australia’s first documentary about the Third World; the first transnationally made film about “remarkable fraternity of international solidarity” (Hughes, 2010, p. 285), an “exemplary trade-union film” (Hogenkamp, 1997, p. 230); or “the 20th century equivalent of Max Havelaar in Dutch politics”, and a “futuristic vision of multicultural Australia” that came into being decades later (Hamilton & Kotevska, 2005, p. 8). Others have referred to it more critically as a pamphlet (Hughes, 2007, p. 29) or propaganda (Cutts, 1985, p. 351) film.

For their part, the professional artists assuming the highest technical and artistic responsibilities for the production of the documentary had their own struggle, operating with an extreme scarcity of material resources and equipment. Ivens and his team relied on “borrowed film equipment, and only 2,400 feet [732 metre] of black-and-white film, donated largely by Australian servicemen returning from Borneo” (Cottle & Keys, 2006). According to an Australian security file: “Kodak agreed not [to] supply Mr Ivens with film” (Hughes, 2009). The production company, The Australasian Film Syndicate, managed to raise roughly £1,000, mainly from donations from the Sydney-based Chinese Seamen’s Union and Chinese Youth League (Gapps, 2015b).

All of the above indicates the huge amount of energy, passion and courage that went into the making of the documentary. Where did they come from? As suggested earlier, the shortest answer would be the dynamics of the political left around the globe, including in Indonesia and Europe. Before elaborating this point, let me briefly note the constraints within which Ivens and his crew operated. It is also instructive to consider what brought Ivens to Australia in the first place.⁸ Already an internationally acclaimed film-maker, Ivens was approached by Charles van der Plas in Hollywood in September 1944. The latter was Chief Commissioner of the NEI for Australia and New Zealand, and the most important deputy of Huib van Mook, then Lieutenant Governor General of the NEI. In a meeting at San Francisco’s Palace Hotel, van der Plas invited Ivens to take the new position of Film Commissioner of the NEI, and to lead a team that would be responsible for making a series of films in the Dutch colony. These films were intended to show how benign the NEI government was in assisting Indonesians to liberate themselves from the Japanese occupation, and transform the country into an independent federal state under the Dutch Kingdom.⁹

The invitation puzzled Ivens, given his reputation as an ideologically left-leaning artist. Bert Hogenkamp thinks Ivens was selected precisely because he had the “anti-imperialist credentials” required for the production of propaganda material that would appeal to the US public and “opinion makers”, in addition to his celebrated skills in

film-making (Hogenkamp, 1997, p. 227). It is important to consider the prevailing sentiment in the Netherlands and its allied countries during those years. One burning topic of debates in Europe at that time was the rise of Asia and decline of the West. This debate caught the attention of the Indonesian public, as attested to by several reports in the widely read magazine *Star Weekly* (1947). According to William (1995, p. 53), even van der Plas, presumably the most knowledgeable high-ranking officer in the colony, was not fully prepared to accept the changes on the ground. Popular resentment in the colony was directed not only against the Japanese, but also against the Dutch (William, 1995, pp. 53–54). In Surabaya, for instance, soon after the declaration of independence, Indonesians took over control of government offices (*Soeara Rakjat*, 1945c; 1945d), radio station, electricity company and factories (*Soeara Rakjat*, 1945f), as well as releasing political prisoners (*Soeara Rakjat*, 1945e).

In response to those events, in the Netherlands (William, 1995, pp. 52–53) and Australia (Fetling, 2013), an alternative future for Indonesia became a subject of heated debate among state officials, which involved progressive and democratically-inclined politicians. With similar optimism, a new training program was set in Australia (1943–44) by the NEI government, to supply a new generation of would-be state administrators who were supposed to run post-war Indonesia (Brawley, 2012).

There was fresh optimism in the air following the Atlantic Charter (1941), paying due respect to the rights of colonised people to self-determination. Indonesian newspaper *Berdjoeng* (1945) cites Reuter on the speech by US President Truman in New York on 27 October 1945, reiterating the US's foreign policy on the principle of the universal right to self-determination. Another newspaper, *Soeara Rakjat* (1945b), reported criticism by Fenner Brockway of the British Labour Party, accusing the British Prime Minister of attempting to resurrect European colonialism in Asia. The same newspaper ran a report on Jawaharlal Nehru's complete and exclusive loyalty to the Indian nation and people, not any foreign forces (*Soeara Rakjat*, 1945n). The Indian nationalist leader was also reported to have criticised the mobilisation of Indian soldiers by the Allied Forces to re-colonise Indonesia (*Soeara Rakjat*, 1945g).

Perhaps the most celebrated event was the oft-reproduced speech by Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, conveying the Netherlands' new commitment to creating a new Indonesia based on equality and autonomy in domestic affairs. Being the most responsible officer among those running the Dutch government in-exile in Australia, van der Plas had been most outspoken in advocating the idea of creating a post-war independent and modern Indonesia based on the same idea of equality for all races (William, 1995, pp. 44–47); “a community in which Indonesians, the Dutch, the Chinese and Arabs can feel equally at home”, perhaps even a society “which can serve as an example to the world” (Schoots, 2000, p. 187).

On a more personal note, Ivens must have found the job offer attractive, as it came when he was deeply frustrated with his working environment in Hollywood. One of his major projects had been cancelled, as a result of the star actress pulling out at the last minute, because of concerns about her future career, upon hearing rumours of Ivens being a “communist”. Indeed, the FBI had been watching and following Ivens's activities very closely, and considered him a “dangerous Communist”, and possibly a “Soviet agent” (Schoots, 2000, p. 188). When he decided to sign the contract with the

NEI government, the US made it clear that once he left the US, Ivens would not be allowed to re-enter.

In the first week of March 1945, Ivens left the US for Australia, his main work base, from where he planned to travel to Indonesia to make the commissioned films. What followed was a series of unexpected events over several months, which threw his plans into complete disarray. First, in early August the Allied bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an abrupt end to Japanese occupation in Asia on 15 August 1945. More surprising to many, two days later Sukarno and Hatta declared Indonesian Independence, putting the NEI's bigger scheme of guided decolonisation into question. Before long, various groups in the colony had made public statements of loyalty to the new Republic (see, for examples, *Soeara Rakjat*, 1945h; 1945i; 1945k). Unfortunately, in other developments, youth groups and militias violently attacked the white population in Indonesia, killing thousands of them as well as those perceived to be closely associated with the Dutch, such as the Chinese and Ambonese ethnic communities.¹⁰ A local journalist with the pseudonym Tjamboek Berdoeri (1947) provided one of the best and most detailed accounts of the violence. This massive racially-based violence (dubbed “*Bersiap*”, literally meaning “getting ready”) has been one of the most sensitive topics in the Netherlands. In contemporary Indonesia it is almost totally unheard of. Njonja Peters estimates that “6,500 Dutch died and 16,000 went missing” (2011).¹¹

Ivens was unaware of the refractory violence in Indonesia. In Australia he experienced hostility from the US-led Allied forces and other Dutch officials who disapproved of his appointment as a Film Commissioner. When the first top NEI officials left Australia for Indonesia in October 1945 without him, Ivens understood his presence in Australia and his commissioned job were no longer needed by the NEI government. It was during this moment of uncertainty and helplessness that Ivens and his partner Marion Michelle saw from their apartment windows in Sydney the maritime workers boycotting the Dutch ships. It did not take him long to decide to throw his support behind this workers' action and record their protest. Previously, while he and Michelle had lived in Melbourne, they had become closely acquainted with some of the Indonesian political activists in exile. Siding with the Indonesian nationalists meant risking being accused of betraying his Queen and the NEI government, as well as breaching his contract, making Ivens liable to serious legal penalty and political retribution. These constraints were the reason Ivens had neither the usual liberty to exercise his artistic skills to make *Indonesia Calling*, nor access to the resources and equipment available in his office. He relied on the work of Michelle, who shot most of the scenes, and the whole team was at the mercy of many volunteers and small donors to complete the unequivocally subversive film.¹²

When nearly all shots were completed, Ivens called a press conference on 21 November 1945, announcing his resignation from his official position as Film Commissioner of the NEI, as well as declaring his support for the Indonesian Republic. In the following days, all of the members of Ivens's Film Unit followed his lead.

As expected, controversy and diplomatic tensions followed immediately after the premiere of *Indonesia Calling* on 6 August 1946 in the Newsreel Theatre in Kings Cross, Sydney. The Netherlands felt betrayed by Ivens and Australia, a war ally (for details, see George, 1980; Lockwood, 1982). The Australian government decided to show sympathy

for both Ivens and Indonesia, by refraining from suppressing *Indonesia Calling*. Such a critical decision was possible because the Labor Party, under the progressive leadership of Ben Chifley, won the election in the following month (September 1946). In support of *Indonesia Calling*, Chifley even organised a special screening session of the film for his cabinet members. His government was “visibly more radical than any other Western country” (Fetling, 2013, p. 520), and this was “one of the boldest and most successful initiatives in the history of Australia’s engagement with Asia” (Lee, 2001, in Fetling, 2013, p. 520).¹³ Almost weekly thereafter, the Labor government’s stance on *Indonesia Calling* came under attack from both the Netherlands and the Australian opposition party in the parliament, the Liberal Party. The latter accused the documentary of being communist propaganda and claimed the Indonesian revolution was a communist insurgency (Lingard, 2008, pp. 258–259).

Seen from the early decades of the twenty-first century, these events contain ironies. The peoples of Australia, Indonesia and the Netherlands were brought to an accidental intimacy.¹⁴ This intimacy did not last, of course, and decades later, when Australia and Indonesia made both rhetorical and serious attempts to improve the friendship between the two neighbours, they failed to achieve anything close to the fraternity they had by accident in the 1940s. Here is another irony. World Wars deployed existing knowledge and technology, but also contributed to innovations in these fields. Asian studies as we know it today is a product of World War II. Thanks to the war, the arrival of approximately 5,000 Indonesians on Australian soil during the period of the White Australia policy gave many Australians their first personal contact with people from an Asian country on a massive scale. Thanks to the same events, for the first time many Australians had some knowledge and concept of the geography of the Asia-Pacific region (Lingard, 2008, p. 7). The wars took many lives, but also generated new understanding and solidarity.¹⁵

Things changed quickly with the defeat of Japan in 1945 and the Indonesian proclamation of independence. Soon after, the newly independent Republic was the site of reckless mass violence inflicted by youth groups and militias on Dutch, as well as Chinese and Ambonese ethnic communities. The Netherlands launched two military attacks (officially called “police actions”) against the Indonesian Republic between 1947 and 1949, breaching more than one peace treaty. This aggression alienated the Netherlands even further from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom (Lingard, 2008, p. 267). At one stage, Australian PM Chifley even threatened to suspend diplomatic relations with the Netherlands (Fetling, 2013, p. 527).

Public discussion on Australia-Indonesia relations has too often been reduced to diplomatic and economic relations among the elite. As we have seen above, at the forefront of the trans-national friendship and solidarity in the 1940s were the maritime workers. The support of Australian workers for Indonesia’s independence was gratefully recognised in the very popular Jakarta-based magazine *Star Weekly* (1946), even when the Indonesian public was not entirely sure of the position of the Australian government (Yeuh, 1946, p. 5). Reports on the Black Armada boycott appeared several times in Surabaya-based periodicals (SM, 1945a; 1945b; *Siaran Kilat*, 1945a; 1945b).

Indonesia Calling is historically significant for documenting those moments of trans-national and down-to-earth intimacy. So inspiring and empowering was the

success of *Indonesia Calling* that in the 1950s the Waterside Workers' Federation in Australia passionately produced several films for its union members (Hughes, 2009, p. 3), but these extraordinary moments of fraternity and comradeship dissipated fairly quickly. For nearly half a century, and until the second decade of the next century, the horrific violence during that period, the heroic response of the unionised workers, and the propaganda film that recorded it, largely disappeared from public memory in contemporary Australia and Indonesia alike, save for a few circles of professional researchers and several senior diplomats. According to one Australian leftist activist “[t]his domestication of the memory of those events is based on the erasure of memory of the working class, grass-roots fundamentals of that experience” (Lane, 2009).

The case of *Indonesia Calling* is well documented in Australian libraries and some museums. The older generation of Australians have some memory of the incident. Australian students of history should have heard of the case, and from time to time selected diplomats make a mention of that past history, if only in passing. It is nevertheless remarkable to see how little, if at all, that past history has entered into public discussion in contemporary Australia and Indonesia alike. It is missing from most political analyses of contemporary Indonesia outside Australia. When diplomats make reference to the event, they stop short of emphasising and elaborating on the critical contribution of the leftist mass movement and its relevance to the contemporary debates on Indonesia.

Of late, public interest in the boycott of the 1940s as well as in *Indonesia Calling* has grown in both Australia and Indonesia. Notwithstanding this increased attention, in both countries the general public's knowledge and memory of the brief but intense intimacy of Australia and Indonesia in the 1940s remain limited. No reference to that history is usually heard, and its limited evocation pales into insignificance when the two countries are embroiled in the periodic tensions over various cases such as the East Timor decolonisation from Indonesia, the Bali bombings, Australians convicted of drug crimes, and responses to the inflows of refugees. Surely, the familiar reference to “beef, boats and Bali” has been much more salient in contemporary public consciousness than the 1940s event. The following section will examine how the Cold War contributed to this collective forgetting.

The Left Erased

Under international pressure, especially from the US, Australia and India, the Netherlands finally agreed to transfer sovereignty of the territory to the Republic of Indonesia in The Hague in December 1949. In the decades that followed, the Cold War divided the world into two extreme blocs, leaving little space in between. In many parts of Asia, including Indonesia, the Cold War was anything but “Cold” – fatally splitting nations in half from the top political elite down to the level of neighbourhoods and family members.

In the Western Bloc, including Australia, the impact of the Cold War weakened the political left. From 1965 in Indonesia, leftist materials and organisations were brutally destroyed in an ambitious state-sponsored campaign with the blessing of the West. During this period Indonesia was also the site of one of the worst human massacres in modern history.¹⁶ Subsequently, the Australia-Indonesia honeymoon period in the

1940s, and *Indonesia Calling*, easily slipped from public memory into oblivion during these bloody years and for several subsequent decades.

Of course the ideological divide of the Cold War had begun much earlier, and raged during much of the period in which Ivens grew up. Born on 18 November 1898 as George Henri Anton Ivens, “Joris” was raised in a conservative, Christian and well-to-do family in Nijmegen. At the centre of this family life was a semi-authoritarian and demanding father, who had determined what Ivens should do for a living from the time he was a child. It was a time when the world was in great political and ideological turmoil, and avant-garde artistic and philosophical innovations thrived. The appeal of revolutionary Marxism and socialism swept across Europe and Asia, especially among young people.

Ivens was not exposed to all of these revolutionary ideas until he was 23, when he moved to Berlin in 1921 to study photography. Life in Berlin radically transformed him. Heavy alcohol consumption, drugs, a liberal sex life and Marxist-derived radical thoughts were all part of his new social environment (for details, see Schoots, 2000, p. 21). During this time Ivens developed a strong sympathy for the ideals of communism, and he made documentaries in support of revolutionaries in more than one country where communism was the official state ideology. Although he was close to many Marxist and communist activists and artists, Hans Schoots (his biographer) doubts the validity of the FBI’s allegations that Ivens had joined a communist party, or worked as a Soviet agent (Schoots, 2000, p. 189).

Soon after he arrived in Australia in 1945, Ivens found himself among ideologically left-leaning individuals and groups. Most important among them was Catherine Duncan, a radio star on the ABC. Based in Melbourne, Duncan had previously had a reputation as a radical theatre actress, playwright, director and film scriptwriter (William, 2004). Through Duncan, Ivens was able to meet a number of Indonesian intelligentsia working for the NEI and leftist Indonesians who had formerly been brought to Australia by the NEI as political prisoners. Impressed by their talent and political commitment, Ivens recruited some of them into his Film Unit (Schoots, 2000, p. 198).

The prominence of the maritime workers appearing on screen, and in the making of *Indonesia Calling*, is not purely accidental. More than others, “[t]he maritime workers were a key factor, as the main connections between Australia and Asia at this time were shipping and trade based and their unions were led by Communists and the radical left” (Gapps, 2015b). Throughout the troubled years of the mid-1940s, the Indonesian labour movement played a significant role in demanding “full independence” from colonialism, and in shaping the new Republic, as can be gauged from a series of reports in local media during the period (e.g. *Soeara Rakjat*, 1945a; 1945j; 1945l; 1945m).

Many analysts acknowledge that the 1940s boycotts were “a high point in Australian unionism” (Goodall, 2008, p. 64), thanks to their unprecedented scale and transnational character, which cut across gender, skin colour and language differences. Goodall nevertheless contends that the boycotts also exemplified the failure of many white Australians to understand and appreciate the concerns of fellow workers from outside Australia about issues beyond industrial disputes, such as decolonisation and national independence (Goodall, 2008, p. 64).

Soon after the release of *Indonesia Calling*, a series of attacks was launched by the Opposition against the Labor Party-led government under PM Chifley, for not banning it. The Opposition alleged that “the film ‘had the hammer and sickle on it’ and was ‘detrimental to Australia’” (Lingard, 2008, p. 229). In 1949, the Labor government in Australia was defeated by the conservative Liberal Party. From then on the Australian government made life difficult for those who had had any involvement in the production of *Indonesia Calling*. For the next 17 years, the Menzies government “reversed the momentary autonomy Australian foreign policy achieved in the war and immediate post-war years in favour of policy development mediated through the old metropolitan powers” (Hughes, 2009). For these reasons, Australia was hostile to Indonesia under left-leaning President Sukarno.

In 1966 a military dictatorship assumed power in Indonesia, after placing President Sukarno under house arrest that lasted until his death in 1970. The military ruled for the next 32 years, following its sponsorship of the killings of nearly one million citizens for being communist, or for being suspected sympathisers of the leftist government of Sukarno. There are suggestions (Goodall, 2008, p. 63; Hughes, 2009) that some of the Indonesian leftist activists who returned from Australia were detained or killed in the political turmoils in 1948 and 1965, but no detail or evidence has yet been made available. In 1975, in an attempt to contain the potential spread of communism in East Timor, the Indonesian militarist regime invaded the former Portuguese colony, killing five Australian journalists in the process. Indonesia occupied the territory for the next quarter of a century. The US and Australia endorsed the invasion, despite objections from the United Nations. Until recently, questions arising from the political violence outlined above were contained, avoided or repressed.

World War II took many lives and inflicted long-term pain and trauma on the survivors. It also brought together and united some of the strong-minded, the progressive and the committed individuals of the time. After the War was over, Catherine Duncan reflected eloquently, and is worth citing at length:

With the end of World War II, an extraordinary displacement of artists and intellectuals began all over the world. Many Europeans who had found refuge from Hitler in Allied countries returned home, hopes high for a new beginning. In such countries as the United States and Australia, where the stimulus of revolutionary ideas has been particularly fecund, artists – and I was one of them – were acutely aware of the reflux. Once the exiles departed, the intellectual and artistic horizons they had opened for us threatened to shrink back to prewar insularity. The exiles were returning to the mythic countries of their origins, to the building sites of a new world, leaving us to a more lonely exile in the tightening grip of the cold war (cited in William, 2004).

21st Century: What’s Left, What’s New?

Before the turn of the century, a series of changes appeared on the horizon. Ivens died in Paris on 28 June 1989 at the age of 90. Less than six months prior to his passing, at the Rotterdam Film Festival, Queen Beatrix named him Knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion. This highly prestigious award marks the beginning of a new era, and not only in the Netherlands. Five months after Ivens’s death, the Berlin Wall was torn down.

In 2009, Australia released two politico-historical films that referenced Indonesia. The first was John Hughes's *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia*, an extended revisit of Ivens's *Indonesia Calling*. It traces the making of the film, video archives of Ivens's life, his professional legacies and impacts, and contains interviews with those who participated directly in the production of *Indonesia Calling*. The second was Robert Connolly's *Balibo*, which focuses on the killing of the Australian journalists during Indonesia's invasion of East Timor, highlighting the premeditated nature of the murders to cover up the invasion.

Then, in 2012, Joshua Oppenheimer released *The Act of Killing*, political dynamite for the public discourse on the 1965 killings – the single most sensitive issue in public, with far-reaching implications. Most confronting in this film is not only the display of the impunity enjoyed by the killers for their past crimes but also their present liberty to celebrate these crimes and to continue humiliating their victims and their surviving families. With the release of the film, the study of contemporary Indonesia in general and the thorny questions over the 1965 killings in particular has “never [been] the same again” (Heryanto, 2012). Public debate became more animated, and sharp disagreements among the top political elite on the issue made regular headlines.

Why did a sudden interest in this ugly past with its unresolved questions flourish in this period? In the previous section, I suggested that the past century was host to a series of bloody contests over grand ideologies. These contests generated passionate zealots in opposing camps, producing World Wars as well as expressions of global solidarity. *Indonesia Calling*, the Cold War killings of Indonesia in 1965–66 and the annexation of East Timor were products of this period.

With the end of the Cold War, some greater space and tolerance for a critical re-examination of the past violence has been possible. In Indonesia, anti-communist sentiment outlived the Cold War and the military rule of the New Order (1966–98), but demands for an end to the taboo on public discussion of the 1965 massacres have persisted and made consistent, if limited, progress. The debates have been well documented, so I will not repeat them here.¹⁷ The change in the political climate is attested to by two historic events. The first is the International People's Tribunals at The Hague in 2015, which ruled that Indonesia committed crimes against humanity, while Australia, the UK and the US were complicit in the 1965 massacres. The second is a national symposium in Jakarta on the 1965 killings, hosted by the Indonesian central government to examine the same dark past and seek recommendations for possible solutions. Remarkably, the symposium brought together some of the strongest anti-communist advocates and supporters of the New Order regime on one side, and survivors of the anti-communist witch-hunts from the 1960s and human rights activists on the other.

Post-1998 Indonesia has been both liberating and disorientating for many citizens and foreign analysts. An unprecedented level of Islamisation, ambitious efforts to resolve past human rights abuses, and new and unrealistic hopes for democratisation and political accountability resulted in contradictory trends, general disillusionment and frustration. The new liberty that came with disillusionment is reminiscent of the first few years of the nation's independence (Heryanto, 2014, p. 3). Yet, the mass violence of the late 1940s has not gained the public attention it deserves in the contemporary soul-searching re-examination of the nation's identity and future

trajectory. In fact, it has been almost completely absent. And so has the real or potential contribution of the foreign, the so-called non-native citizens, or the left to the nation-state.

Back to the Future

To conclude, I wish to return to the opening points in this article. What does it mean to look back at the 1940s, and *Indonesia Calling*, for Indonesia, for the study of Indonesia, and for Australia-Indonesia relations in the present? The end of the Cold War does not mark a total break and a whole new beginning. It means more than simply a relief from old restrictions and new opportunities to express ideas, visions, aspirations or the frustrations of the past century. New ideas, visions and apprehensions have come, and so have a new generation with new life challenges and aspirations.

In Indonesia, the recent debates on the 1965 killings have acquired new dimensions along with the sizeable participation of a third generation of Indonesians since the 1960s. These Indonesian citizens have no direct experience of the Cold War, New Order state terrorism or the anti-communist witch-hunts. Unlike activists and survivors of previous generations, these youths do not seem to be primarily or exclusively concerned with the human rights issues of the past. Relying on second- or third-hand sources of information about the nation's violent past, their interest is more future-oriented.

Based on a series of recorded interviews as well as private conversations with several youths during my fieldwork in Indonesia, and reading their discussion on social media, I sense that a good majority of them are engaging in a broad and collective self-interrogation about what being a modern, decent and responsible Indonesian citizen in the world can or should mean. The issue of 1965 is simply one item on a long list of concerns. In contrast to human rights activists and survivors of previous generations, many of these young people do not privilege the issue of Indonesia's decolonisation, or the 1965 killings, over other and seemingly unrelated issues such as a sustainable environment, civil rights for LGBT communities, or the politics of religion. For this new generation, the latter issues are no less confronting, as Indonesia's state and non-state bodies have been increasingly intolerant of sexual and religious minorities.

When *Balibo* was banned from being screened at the Jakarta International Film Festival in December 2009, private screenings were held without formal permits (Temby, 2009). Similar underground screenings were held of *The Act of Killing*.¹⁸ On a much smaller scale, non-commercial screenings of *Indonesia Calling* took place in a few cities recently.¹⁹ In 2016, an exhibition dedicated to the Black Armada (the maritime boycott) and a screening of *Indonesia Calling* were held in Yogyakarta (August–November 2016) and Ubud (October–November 2016) with sponsorship from the Australian National Maritime Museum.

Recent debates, biographies, novels and films on 1965 have helped the general public to question the New Order anti-communist propaganda. These debates are welcome, even if they have not resolved the war of identity politics, and how they might help enhance efforts towards building a better future for the country. Analyses of the 1965 violence remain isolated from the political dynamics of the 1940s. The voluminous discussions, scholarly or otherwise, on *The Act of Killing* took into account a wide variety of relevant events or films, apart from its links to *Indonesia Calling*.

Unsurprisingly, the recent exhibitions on the Black Armada and screenings of *Indonesia Calling* appear to have made no significant impacts upon public consciousness and the old perspective of the nation's identity.

With the end of the Cold War and the downfall of the New Order government, Indonesia has gained new momentum in the quest to build the nation-state. Yet it seriously risks failing again, with the threat of a low-level series of civil wars imminent, as long as it continues to be preoccupied with the pursuit of pure or authentic national identity. Indonesia will continue to be stuck in a colonial and anti-colonial mentality as long as it refuses to look critically and honestly at its violent past, to acknowledge the hybrid elements that constitute the nation, and to give due credit to the trans-national solidarity that helped give birth to the Republic in the 1940s. The rediscovery and screening of *Indonesian Calling*, plus scholarly historical studies of the period, will not have their full impact until they succeed in intervening and altering public discourses in Australia and Indonesia that have not gone very far from the issues of "beef, boats and Bali" and the like. The events that led to the making of *Indonesia Calling* are but one significant product of and testament to a time and the potential of what was possible for progressive, cosmopolitan and modern Indonesia.

Notes

1. This was the first of two documentary films to have the most unsettling impact on Indonesian politics of all time, the other being *The Act of Killing* (2012, Oppenheimer).
2. Curiously, similar sentiments of an insular mentality, isolationist protectionism and exclusionary discrimination have informed, at least partly, immigration policies and public debates in Australia, the US and Europe alike in the early decades of the century, in the face of "new wars" (see Kaldor, 1999; McDonald, 2013) and the influx of boats of asylum seekers and illegal migrants.
3. In Indonesia's presidential election in 2014, in a bid to impress voters, rival candidates attempted to outdo each other with displays of animosity towards vaguely defined "foreign forces" in defence of the national interest. The same rhetoric also dominated public discussion about the 2017 elections for Jakarta Governor, with the incumbent's (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama aka Ahok) Indonesian-ness being publicly questioned due to his double minority status – Chinese descent and Christian faith.
4. Popular women's dress in Java, especially in urban areas.
5. The phrase refers to recent controversies that strained Australia-Indonesia diplomatic and business relations in the early decades of the century, involving bans on Australian exports of beef to Indonesia, following reports of animal cruelty in an Indonesian abattoir; Australia's policy of turning boats of allegedly illegal asylum seekers back to Indonesian waters; and Australian nationals being prosecuted for drug-related crimes in Bali.
6. Unless otherwise indicated, the first few paragraphs in this section are heavily indebted to the richly instructive work of Jan Lingard (2008) and Rupert Lockwood (1982).
7. In some cases, the weapons found by the Indian workers on the Dutch ships were loaded by Australian and Dutch labour (Goodall, 2008, p. 56).
8. Ivens's biography by Hans Schoots (2000) is the most comprehensive and authoritative source, to which the following account is indebted. The author also gratefully acknowledges the series of instructive conversations in 2016 about Ivens and his work with André Stufkens, Director of the European Foundation Joris Ivens in the Netherlands.
9. This was not the first case of a Dutch commissioned project to produce documentary films about life in the Indies. In 1911, the Amsterdam-based Colonial Institute commissioned Johann Christian Lamster (1872–1954) to produce more than a dozen documentaries on

everyday life in the archipelago for the purpose of informing, attracting and recruiting middle-ranking professionals in the Netherlands to work and improve the standard of living in the colony (see Taylor, 2015).

10. Things appear to be much more complex than simply an agitated mob attacking others recklessly. Both Tjamboek Berdoeri (1947) and someone, presumably a Chinese Indonesian, using the pseudonym Satoe Tawanani (1947), published a more complex picture of the situation. William also notes that victims among “Indonesians” have not been duly accounted for (1995, p. 55).
11. For a recent study on the violence, see Rosalind Hewett (2016). For analysis of the life of Eurasians residing in Australia after the War, see Joost Coté (2010).
12. Lockwood made the incorrect allegation that “Ivens breached his contract with the NEI Government [and], illegally using its equipment” (1982, p. 287).
13. The young Republic of Indonesia did not take Australia’s support for granted. In a radio broadcast in November 1945, Indonesia’s first Prime Minister, Sutan Sjahrir, thanked Australia, especially its labour unions, for boycotting the Dutch ships. In 1949, Indonesia requested that Australia represent the young Republic in the UN-sponsored meeting in The Hague to seek a final resolution to the protracted war with the Netherlands. The meeting resulted in the transfer of sovereignty over the Dutch colony to the Republic of Indonesia.
14. It is important, however, to put this point in its immediate context, and not to overstate the Australian-Indonesian friendship. Despite all of the wonderful links, Lingard reminds us that “the vast majority of the Australian public was uninterested or disinterested in the conflict to the north, even though the newspapers were full of it” (2008, p. 259).
15. This was also the period when “16-year-old Herb Feith and his fellow representatives in the United Nations Inter-school Committee” became acquainted with the young Republic and pursued an interest in supporting Indonesia (Purdey, 2011, p. 58). Twenty years later, Feith would be one of the founding fathers of Indonesian Studies in Australia.
16. *The Act of Killing* (see footnote 1) and its sequel *The Look of Silence* (2014, Oppenheimer) recorded some of the most devastating testimonies and nightmares of perpetrators and survivors of the 1965 violence.
17. For samples of accounts in English, see Pohlman (2013), Roosa (2016) and Stroud (2015, pp. 78–79). For an account in Indonesian see Heryanto (2016b).
18. In the first few months of its release alone, more than 50 sessions of free by-invitation screenings of the Indonesian version of *The Act of Killing* took place in 40 towns and cities across the archipelago (Heryanto, 2014, p. 126).
19. Examples include a screening in Bandung (August 2010) sponsored by the Australian Embassy.

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