COMMENTS
POLITICS, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

Comments delivered during Anu Lounela's public defense of her Ph.D. Dissertation, 'Contesting Forests and Power: Dispute, Violence, and Negotiations in Central Java', September 26, 2009

· ANNA TSING ·

Central Java is an extraordinary place—both in Indonesian history and in social science scholarship. The villagers of Wanasana have a great round rock on top of their mountain, which they call the navel of the world. This is a matter of traditional cosmology, but we do well to consider it seriously, at least in the vast world of Indonesia. Central Java was once a place of kingdoms whose power was understood spatially, that is, concentrated in central places of great potency. When the Dutch made a colony of the Indies, central Java was the key place in which they worked out programs of governance for peasants across the Indies. The Dutch determined what they thought peasants *were* in central Java, and how peasants everywhere should interact with the state. They established state forests there, and forest policy was first negotiated—as state governance and peasant resistance—in central Java. Indonesian nationalism built from central Javanese resistance to colonial authority, and the postcolonial Indonesian nation state has imagined itself in continuity with both governance and rebellion in central Java more, perhaps, than any other of the vast territories of Indonesia. I have done most of my own research in the forests of Kalimantan, where the term 'Indonesia' still often refers to a foreign place—somewhere else. But in central Java, even in the mountains and forests, Indonesia is at home. This means that research in central Java takes up issues at the *heart* of the past and future of Indonesia.

The importance of this region means, too, that there are vast writings about it, including both archival records and contemporary scholarship. Two kinds of scholarship—simultaneously about Indonesia as a whole and central Java in particular—are particularly relevant to Ms. Lounela's dissertation. First, Indonesia has been privileged by a rich conversation between political scientists and cultural anthropologists in which the contours of power have been analyzed not as universally fixed but rather as always cultural, that is, created within systems of meaning. Rather than bringing our presuppositions about power to our studies, we must ask local people what power is about—and allow ourselves to be surprised. Second, a conversation between environmental studies, rural sociology, and geography has found an important home in this region. 'Political ecology' studies environmental management in the light of social justice issues. Rather than considering the environment from the perspective of state planners and corporate resource users, political ecology asks about the perspectives of the rural residents who live with the resources which states and corporations want to use.

These are both rich and exciting literatures, and they are equally necessary to frame any study of forest management in central Java. But they have some contradictory features. Political ecology offers its punch by bringing in power—but it rarely asks what local people *mean* by power and politics. Cultural studies of politics, in turn, rarely ask about natural resource management or other issues of practical livelihood.

Ms. Lounela creatively addresses this contradiction by bringing in—and transforming—two further concepts: plural law and dispute settlement. Plural law studies in the region draw from the Dutch colonial interest in conflicts between customary law and European-based law. Ms. Lounela stretches such studies by moving beyond law itself to consider the much messier cluster of negotiations and conflicts through which people establish authority and settle disputes. Her analysis also goes beyond what is normally described as dispute settlement, which offers processes in which the dispute, the disputing parties, and the forum and means for dispute are already decided. *None* of this has been determined in Ms. Lounela's field site. The state forests have been denuded: But who did it, why, and what should be done? There are many claims, many parties, and no settled forum for negotiation. Will this multipally overlapping set of conflicts and disagreements become settled enough to be legible as a dispute at all? This is part of the research question, and to ask it requires creatively enlarging dispute settlement approaches.

Ms. Lounela's dissertation uses the concepts of plural law and dispute settlement in an original and insightful way to highlight the enormous amount of political flux and play in the situation in which she found herself. By recognizing that flux and play are at the center of her story, she is able to combine attention to the culture of politics, on the one hand, and the politics of resource management, on the other. The power inequalities of resource management are not pre-given, in her analysis, but rather worked out in the flux and play of formulating something that might count as a dispute. Such negotiations require drawing on plural sources of authority and law, including surprising ideas about power. By bringing together approaches that in the past have been incompatible, Ms. Lounela neatly solves a significant scholarly dilemma.

Ms. Lounela's fieldwork took place at an important, path-changing moment in Indonesian history, and this placement in time also shapes what we can learn from the dissertation. For more than thirty years, between 1966 and 1998, Indonesia was in the grip of a repressive regime, which called itself the New Order. During the New Order, politics and culture appeared to stand still; the New Order seemed to hold the very cosmos in place. Many anthropologists naturalized New Order conditions and offered what in hindsight seem too-static analyses of state and society. I include my own early work with some embarrassment, but it wasn't just me, it was the very best of what our discipline could offer. We thought the New Order *was* the world. We didn't see what might happen when the New Order finally crumbled, and the blocks came out from under the cultural configurations we described. Suddenly nothing seemed sure; everything seemed possible. I remember Indonesian taxi drivers speculating ten years ago, after the change, that any one could be president; after years of censorship, Marxist tracts filled the central tables of bookstores. Islamicists were bombing; indigenous people were mobilizing. Who knew where Indonesia was going?

This was a time when flux and play made a significant difference. Casual alliances made for the moment might turn into firm new structures of the coming society. Who knew? Vicente Raphael has written about the People Power Revolution of 1986 in the Philippines: for a short moment, politics seemed about to change utterly and completely. Indonesia had that sense of open possibility in the early years of this decade, just as my own country, the United States, was closing behind militarized barricades. One of the great struggles that was changing the Indonesian landscape at this time involved people and forests. The

New Order used forests to create its power and position in the world. By enforcing state control over natural resources, and making them available to foreign investors, Indonesia gained support in the world of nation states. If local forest residents suffered, too bad for them. The army was there to keep order—that is, to keep people out of the forests. Furthermore, there were gangsters, night-raiding ninjas, and other frightening New Order spooks. The line between legal and illegal forms of force was often confused, and whether forests went to legitimate or illegitimate users could scarcely be determined.

When the New Order fell, it seemed that things might change. All across the nation, people demanded access to the forests in which they lived. In the Outer Islands, this meant demonstrations and confrontations with the timber companies that were tearing down forests. In Java, the trees were cut down by some elusive combination of state forest officials, legal or illegal loggers, villagers, and gangsters. Ms. Lounela entered the scene as villagers demanded access to the forest lands cleared in these actions. A new politics seemed possible. How would it develop? What alliances would prove fruitful, and which moves would become dead ends? This was a moment when the future seemed vibrantly at stake.

The dissertation traces the process in which this vibrantly open moment—when so many parties were negotiating and so many kinds of politics were at play—changed into something that one might call a dispute. By the end, the sense of openness and free-for-all had begun to ebb. Farmers had representatives and could no longer be heard directly in the political process. Political meetings became more and more closed, with elites rather than unruly and heterogeneous participants. Much was still at play, but the stakes were no longer so high. The direction of the future had come into view. Ms. Lounela tells us that the multi-stakeholder process had become a technique of governance rather than a forum for empowerment. But this was not always evident; it was the conclusion of the process not the opening with which participants had entered. This is the story the dissertation tells.

The story is significant for understanding the history of Indonesia. As anthropologists, we can trace both continuities and discontinuities—not just with the New Order, but with earlier periods, whether pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial. The dissertation helps us see how archaeological layers of political meaning come into play in contemporary situations. When power is suddenly unclear, many kinds of powers, recalling many different eras and forms of action, can be called into relevance. Historical legacies become alternative action agendas.

There is a larger moral, beyond Indonesia history. Historical trajectories are commonly set in these moments of wild contestation. Like a river, histories may stay within well-known banks for many years. But a big storm comes up, and the river changes its course completely. Only by studying the contingent encounters of the storm—which bank crumbled, which channels opened up—can we trace the process of making the new river. Cultural and political histories have these same riparian features. There are slow moments and fast ones. Ms. Lounela has described the negotiation of forest management and the parameters of power in one of the fast moments, when many things seemed possible. Her attention to the negotiation process and the indeterminacy of forms of authority shows us how to study these fast moments, when much is at stake and contingent encounters matter. This is more than a history, then, of one important moment in central Java, and Indonesia. It gives us a sense of how power looks at those rare moments when big changes seem possible.

These are only a few of the contributions of Ms. Lounela's dissertation. I've purposely skipped over the obvious ones: her work addresses forest management, conflict, law, and many contemporary anthropological themes such as territorialization, governmentality, violence and sovereignty. My goal has been, however, to draw the dissertation out from its most immediate context to show you how it *also* offers important contributions to wider questions of politics, culture, and history.

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