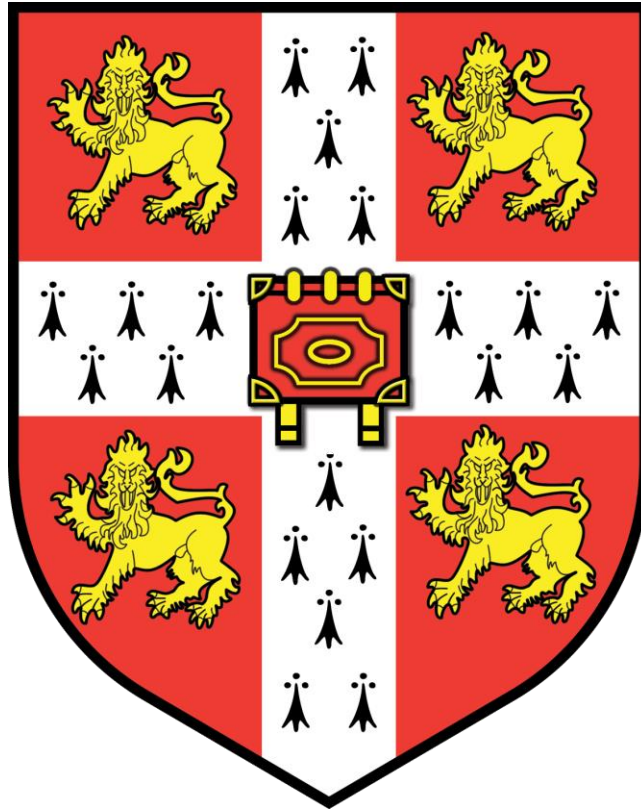


The Political Thought of Tan Malaka



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‘The Political Thought of Tan Malaka’

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Abstract

In the course of a fairly brief lifetime, lasting only a little over fifty years (1897-1949), Tan Malaka was variously a schoolteacher, the chair of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), a Comintern agent, a political exile, and a revolutionary leader. He travelled the world, living for spells in the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, China, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Tan Malaka’s colourful life and political career have attracted comment from historians, but there has not yet been an in-depth treatment of his ideas, even though he produced a large corpus of writings and was acknowledged to be among the foremost political intellectuals of his generation in Indonesia. This thesis is an analysis and contextualization of Tan Malaka’s political thought. It places his writings within a series of contemporary debates: on the nature of the Indonesian past and the country’s potential for revolution; on imperialism and the post-colonial future of Asia; on the relationship between Islam, capitalism, and Communism; on the reformation of Indonesian thinking; and on the appropriate strategy and goals for the Indonesian revolution. These debates, and Tan Malaka’s interventions within them, reveal that Indonesia during the ‘national awakening’ period (1900-50) was the scene of great intellectual innovation, where foreign and indigenous concepts were fused, adapted and reworked. Tan Malaka’s writings provide a particularly vivid example of this, combining as they do the concepts and language of Marxism, Islamic morality, and Minangkabau custom, sometimes in tension, in other places flowing together without apparent strain. Tan Malaka was not unique in this respect, as the thesis shows, which suggests that late-colonial Indonesia provides promising terrain for the ‘global turn’ in intellectual history, that seeks to understand the circulation, interaction and transformation of ideas across national and cultural boundaries, especially in the non-Western world.

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Preface

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit of 80,000 words.

Acknowledgements

While researching and writing this thesis, I have built up many debts and obligations to those who have been kind enough to help me along the way. My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Tim Harper, who encouraged me to undertake this project and whose patient advice and guidance helped me to negotiate the terrain of Southeast Asian history. Our conversations about Tan Malaka and his contemporaries really made the past come to life. While in Cambridge, Massachusetts I benefitted from illuminating discussions with Sunil Amrith and Kirsty Walker. The suggestions of Marieke Bloembergen and Carolien Stolte, made at various conferences, have also been extremely useful. I am also grateful to those friends who have been with me throughout the course of my PhD. Shijing and Jasmine have been there for me since my first weeks in Trinity. Their support over the years has been invaluable and I'm proud to have written my thesis alongside them. Moses, Ben, Joey, Cal and Bardia were all excellent companions and always willing to discuss Indonesian history, which for them must have seemed a pretty esoteric subject. Joe has been a constant source of warmth and motivation since we were both undergraduates. His encouragement has helped me more than he realizes. Melisa's clarity of thought has been very valuable and Nurul's enthusiasm for ideas was infectious – both helped me think through my own arguments at several stages. Aditya, Michael, and Sophie were all first-rate colleagues at the history faculty. I can only hope my ideas have been as useful to them as theirs have been to me. Finally, I owe thanks to my family – mum, dad, Joe, Rosa, and Sophie – whose unfailing love and support has seen me through. I dedicate this thesis to them.

Note on Spelling and Translations

The Indonesian system of spelling was reformed in 1972. Among other changes, ‘oe’ was replaced with ‘u’, ‘tj’ with ‘c’, and ‘sj’ with ‘sy’. As a result, the names of historical figures were also changed: Soekarno became Sukarno, Tjokroaminoto became Cokroaminoto, and Soetan Sjahrir became Sutan Syahrir. There is, however, no consistency with which historians have followed these changes. I have kept to the most common usage throughout (e.g. Sukarno, Tjokroaminoto, Sjahrir) to align with the rest of the secondary literature. Names of texts have been kept in their original form (e.g. *Moeslihat* rather than *Muslihat*).

All translations from texts in Indonesian and Malay are my own. Two of Tan Malaka’s books have been translated into English: *From Jail to Jail* (1948), translated by Helen Jarvis in 1991, and *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia’* (1925), translated by Geoffrey Gunn in 1996. Where these translations are used, it is marked in the footnotes.

I

Introduction: Islam, Marxism, and Minangkabau

In 1947, when he began composing his memoirs, Tan Malaka reflected that his life had been ‘full of *up and down* and containing much more *down* than *up*.’¹ At the time, he was imprisoned in Ponorogo jail in East Java, and was being held, without charge or trial, by the authorities of the newly-formed Indonesian Republic. Only a year earlier, in 1946, he had seemed on the cusp of power, leading a coalition of opposition parties and riding a wave of popular support. Now, from his cell, he had time to contemplate the course of his life. His thoughts turned to the other prisons he had occupied, in the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, and China. He took it as a badge of honour that so many authorities had tried to thwart him. It proved that ‘international imperialism regarded the struggles of the Indonesian people as significant.’² He titled his memoir *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, ‘From Jail to Jail’. But who was Tan Malaka, and why were so many governments determined to stop him? The handful of surviving photographs show a thoughtful, alert and, in later years, somewhat melancholic man. Though his life was not easy, it was extremely

¹ Characteristically, he used the original English phrase ‘up and down’ in the text (all untranslated English words are marked in italics). Throughout his life he sprinkled his Malay prose with foreign words and expressions, mainly from Dutch and English. Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail* [1948], ed. and trans. Helen Jarvis (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 3.

² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 4.

full. In the course of a fairly brief lifetime, lasting only a little over fifty years (1897-1949), he was variously a schoolteacher, the chair of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), a Comintern agent, a political exile, and a revolutionary leader. He travelled the world, living for spells in the Netherlands, Weimar Germany, Soviet Russia, Republican China, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

Interpretations of Tan Malaka have been as wide ranging as his own journeys. Some have cast him as a political visionary: his dream of unifying the vast Indonesian archipelago into a single self-governing state, recorded in his 1925 work *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'* ('Towards the "Indonesian Republic"'), led the poet and politician Muhammad Yamin to describe him as the 'bapak Republik Indonesia' ('father of the Indonesian Republic').³ Others have seen him as a romantic figure and a tragic hero: reflecting on his long years spent in prisons and in exile, the historian Ibrahim Alfian labelled Tan Malaka a 'revolusioner yang kesepian' ('lonely revolutionary').⁴ During his own lifetime, his ability to elude colonial police earned him the title 'patjar merah Indonesia' ('the scarlet pimperl of Indonesia').⁵

He is less commonly celebrated for his writings, even though he was an author of rare power and sophistication, who produced several important texts on Indonesian politics. He was among the first and most intelligent interpreters of Marxism in Indonesia and was a central theorist within the PKI during the 1920s, when the party was at the forefront of the anti-colonial movement. He was also a leading figure and polemicist in the Indonesian revolution, who campaigned for a policy of 'perjuangan' ('struggle') against the Dutch and fought for the cause of social revolution in the years after Sukarno's proclamation of independence in 1945. Although he eventually lost out to his political rivals, who had him first imprisoned then killed during the revolution, he was unquestionably one of the outstanding political intellects of his generation.

³ See Muhammad Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia* (Moerba Berdjoeang: Djawa Timur, 1946). This pamphlet was based on a series of newspaper articles written by Yamin on Tan Malaka in late 1945.

⁴ Alfian, 'Tan Malaka pejuang revolusioner yang kesepian', *Prisma* 6-8 (Agustus, 1977), pp. 57-76.

⁵ See Taufik Abdullah, *Indonesia: Towards Democracy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p. 521.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand Tan Malaka's writings by placing them within a series of intellectual contexts. In order to grasp what Tan Malaka was trying to argue, we need first of all to comprehend the settings within which he operated, otherwise the full implications of his arguments will be lost.⁶ The primary context in which he is to be understood is the Indonesia of the first half of the twentieth century. This was a time of critical importance in Indonesian history, known as the 'kebangkitan nasional' ('national awakening'), when Indonesia itself began to be imagined as a single nation and Indonesians started to resist colonial rule on a national scale, ultimately securing their independence in 1949. The early 1900s, the time of Tan Malaka's youth, was a period of intellectual ferment in the country, fueled by the reception of ideas from around the world. Discussion of ideologies as diverse as European Marxism, Egyptian Islamic reformism, and Indian nationalism abounded. A host of political parties committed to propagating new doctrines came into being.⁷ Running parallel to this engagement with foreign ideas was a growing sense of the need to reassess the nature and utility of Indonesian culture, a need that was felt particularly acutely by those Indonesians educated in the colonial school system. Benedict Anderson has characterized this as a search for a new identity among Indonesians with Western-style educations, a process of building connections between Western learning and 'traditional modes of thinking' that entailed an 'immense act of social and national creativity'.⁸ Tan Malaka provides an excellent example of this creativity in action, since he mediated multiple, very different, intellectual cultures. Born and raised in the highly Islamic milieu of West Sumatra, which was distinguished by its specific Minangkabau culture, he was educated in Dutch and read deeply in Western history, politics, and philosophy, engaging extensively with the thought of Karl Marx.

⁶ On the general methodological point of the importance of historical context for understanding the intentions and meaning of a text, see Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', in *Visions of Politics*, Vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 57-89, at p. 87.

⁷ The first nationalist organization in Indonesia was Budi Utomo (established 1908), a Javanese society that campaigned for greater provision of welfare and self-government. Sarekat Islam ('Islamic Union'), whose leading members were highly influenced by Islamic reformism, was established in Surakarta in 1912. The socialist Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging ('Indies Social-Democratic Association') was founded in Surabaya in 1914, and re-founded as a Marxist Communist Party, the Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia ('Communist Association of the Indies'), in 1920, making it the oldest Communist party in Asia. The first party to explicitly declare its fidelity to 'nationalism' was the Partai Nasionalis Indonesia ('Indonesian Nationalist Party'), formed in Bandung in 1927.

⁸ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 126.

Much of the scholarship on Tan Malaka, which will be discussed below, has sought to classify him disjunctively as either a Minangkabau or Marxist thinker. It is the claim of this thesis that such classifications are reductive and fail to capture the complex interaction of indigenous, Western, and Islamic ideas that characterized his thought, and typified much Indonesian political writing during the 'national awakening' period. Tan Malaka's conversion to Marxism during the First World War made him see Indonesia through fresh eyes. After he accepted Marx's notion that societies evolved along a developmental axis, much of Indonesian society came to seem 'backward' to him, especially when compared to the industrial modernity and scientific learning of the West. To borrow Anderson's phrase, itself adapted from the Philippine revolutionary Jose Rizal, he became haunted by the 'spectre of comparisons'.⁹ Next to the West, Indonesia appeared to offer an example only of endless and primitive 'feudalism'. At the same time, however, Marxism provided him with a vocabulary through which he could criticize aspects of the 'capitalist' West and praise those elements of indigenous society that could be seen as 'proto-socialist'. Even though the 'feudal' and 'proto-socialist' parts of Indonesian culture were closely connected, his encounter with Marxism led him to fracture them, and made him value only those fragments that could be judged worthwhile under a Marxist rubric of social analysis. A similar process operated in the way he viewed Islam. He upheld certain Islamic teachings which he thought could be made continuous with Communism, such as the condemnation of greed and the advocacy of righteous rebellion. Doctrines which ran counter to the promotion of Communism, however, such as the elevation of religious authority, which he believed bred fatalism and superstition, needed to be cast aside.

While Tan Malaka used Marxism as a yardstick against which to judge Indonesian and Islamic political thought, he also infused his own Marxism with indigenous and Islamic ideas. As we shall see, he frequently slipped from the Marxist language of class to a specifically Indonesian social terminology, which had important implications for his arguments. His vision of Communist revolution and the coming of socialist society had more than a touch of Islamic millenarianism. His conception of political revolutionaries, meanwhile, cast them as inheritors of the religious

⁹ Anderson writes that after Jose Rizal's time in Europe he encountered the 'spectre of comparisons', which meant 'a new, restless double-consciousness which made it impossible ever after to experience Berlin without at once thinking of Manila, or Manila without thinking of Berlin.' Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 229.

prophets. Tan Malaka was an ‘intermediary’ of the kind described by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori in *Global Intellectual History* (2013), who ‘learned how to make intellectual cultures mutually intelligible.’¹⁰ Through the mediation of diverse ideologies he produced a distinctive vision of politics, that combined elements from Islamic, Minangkabau and Marxist thought, a vision that resonated with substantial numbers of politically engaged Indonesians, both in the 1920s and the 1940s, crucial moments in the anti-colonial national movement, when Indonesians decisively confronted Dutch imperial power.

A second, less familiar context in which to see Tan Malaka is as one of many internationally minded and cosmopolitan anti-colonial activists, a type of political figure that arose in the first decades of the twentieth century. Tan Malaka thought about politics in an ‘internationalist’ manner, in that he believed it could not be understood purely at a national level. To employ the definition of Perry Anderson, his was an ‘outlook’ that ‘transcended the nation towards a wider community, of which nations continue to form the principal units’.¹¹ Unlike earlier generations of Indonesians, who tended to focus on their locality,¹² or the larger Islamic world,¹³ he viewed Indonesia as a component within an integrated world economy, whose fate was ultimately driven by forces that operated deep within the structure of that economy.¹⁴ Like other well-travelled and highly educated Indonesians, such as Mohammad Hatta and Sutan Sjahrir, he observed political and economic developments in other countries closely and considered these relevant to Indonesian politics, which he believed could not be comprehended in isolation. Like Sjarir and Hatta, he argued that economic globalization and the international reach of empires

¹⁰ Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, ‘Approaches to Global Intellectual History’, in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 3-32, at p. 9.

¹¹ Perry Anderson, ‘Internationalism: A Breviary’, *New Left Review* 14 (2002), pp. 5-25, at p. 6.

¹² The Minangkabau journalist and activist Datuk Sutan Maharadja (1860-1921), for example, was concerned primarily to stamp out the ‘Acehnese’ influence on Minangkabau culture, which he believed was an alien intrusion that created unjust hierarchies among the people. See Taufik Abdullah, *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra* (1927-1933) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 12-13.

¹³ While the Acehnese opponents of Dutch rule in the late 19th century had looked for assistance to the Ottoman Empire, the political centre of the Islamic *ummah*, Tan Malaka travelled to Moscow in 1922 to gain support for Indonesian independence, which he considered to be part of an international class struggle against capitalism and imperialism. On the Acehnese resistance and the Ottomans, see Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia, The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 161.

¹⁴ Tan Malaka used the word ‘international’ (‘internasional’) to describe the nature of the modern world economy, see Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet* [1922] (Jakarta: Yayasan Massa, 1987), p. 166.

rendered parochial Indonesian perspectives inadequate and called for political analyses with an international perspective.¹⁵ His mastery of languages allowed him to read English, Dutch and Malay newspapers, which deepened his engagement with world affairs and informed his ‘internationalist’ style.¹⁶

Tan Malaka was a ‘cosmopolitan’ in that he retained a ‘fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole’ throughout his writings.¹⁷ Influenced by Marx’s conception of history as an extended class struggle, he saw himself not as a solely Indonesian political figure, but rather as the inheritor of long and varied international revolutionary tradition, stretching back to Oliver Cromwell, and encompassing figures as diverse as Jose Rizal, Sun Yat-Sen, and Lenin. He believed that the Indonesian revolution was a part of the emerging ‘world revolution’, and that nation-states would eventually give way to regional federations as this global revolution progressed, liberating all the oppressed classes and peoples of the earth. In this regard he resembles Ho Chi Minh and M.N. Roy, both of whom he met through the Communist International, who shared his commitment to ‘world revolution’ and, like Tan Malaka, led highly peripatetic lives.¹⁸

Despite his cosmopolitanism, Tan Malaka was not a figure who shed his national identity, becoming a ‘rootless’ citizen of the world as he campaigned for global proletarian uprisings, even if this is sometimes how he was seen in Indonesia.¹⁹ He kept a strong, if expansive, sense of

¹⁵ For examples of Hatta and Sjahrir writing with an international perspective, see Mohammad Hatta, ‘The Economic World Structure and the Conflict of Power’ (1926) in Deliar Noer (ed.), *Mohammad Hatta, Portrait of a Patriot: Selected Writings* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 36-57, and Sutan Sjahrir, *Our Struggle*, trans. Benedict R. O’G. Anderson [1945] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

¹⁶ In *Massa Actie*, he referenced articles he had read in *The Manila Tribune*, *The International Ocean*, and the *Indische Courant*. On the importance of newspapers for the creation of a international imagination, see Rudolf G. Wagner (ed.), *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870-1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

¹⁷ This definition is discussed in Bruce Robbins, ‘Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism’, in Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (eds.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 1.

¹⁸ In 1960 Ho Chi Minh wrote that he was attracted to Communist politics as a way to ‘liberate the oppressed nations and working people throughout the world from slavery.’ Ho Chi Minh, *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), pp. 6-7. For details of his travels, see William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000). On the cosmopolitanism of M.N. Roy, see Kris Manjapra, *M.N. Roy, Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁹ An article in *Hindia Baroe* from 10 January 1925 titled ‘Tan Malaka dan Partijnja’ described Tan Malaka as ‘an internationalist (one that does not attach his heart to his country and nation)’.

Indonesian identity throughout his works and ultimately came to argue that all political organization ought to be based on a combination of national, cultural and racial self-determination. From 1926 onwards, he claimed that the end-point of Indonesia's anti-colonial struggle should be a union with the other states of Southeast Asia, to be called 'Aslia', a portmanteau of Asia and Australia, but also a play on the word 'asli' ('original'), since he believed Aslia would constitute a restoration of the ancient unity of the region. His preoccupation with Aslia reflects the fact that his journeys beyond Indonesia only sharpened his sense of the importance of nation and culture, because he was ultimately determined to align these with political borders. Understanding the connections, and tensions, between his cosmopolitanism and his conception of the Indonesian nation is one of the running themes of this thesis.

Tan Malaka and Global Intellectual History

Because his works bridge Indonesian, Islamic, and Western political thought, the study of Tan Malaka's writings may be viewed as an exercise in 'global intellectual history'. This term, which has only come into wide usage since 2007, describes a new field which seeks to understand the circulation, interaction and transformation of ideas across national and cultural boundaries.²⁰ This is, in part, an effort to extend the frontiers of intellectual history beyond its traditional focus on the West. Even the most distinguished political thinkers from the non-Western world, like Gandhi and Mao, have not received the same depth of scholarly attention as the central figures within the Western canon, such as Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. As Shruti Kapila has written, enlarging the geographical bounds of intellectual history generates awareness of 'a wider range of methods, texts and actors than any established canon of Western political thought would permit'.²¹ Bringing the non-Western world into intellectual history is especially apposite when considering the history of political ideas which had a major reception outside of the West, such as liberalism and Marxism. In recent years, efforts have been made to trace the reception of liberalism in India, most notably in Chris Bayly's *Recovering Liberties* (2012) and Andrew Sartori's *Liberalism in*

²⁰ See *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 1 (2007), a special issue which focused on global intellectual history.

²¹ Shruti Kapila, 'Preface', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 1 (2007), pp. 3–6, at p. 5.

Empire (2014). There are also numerous ‘global’ histories of Marxism, which explore its reception in various regions of the world, the literature on Chinese Marxism being particularly substantial.²²

Documenting the reception of Western ideas in the non-Western world allows historians to see in what respects these ideas changed - and did not change - in new settings. As Edward Said has put it, we need to ‘ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation.’²³ An ideology like Marxism had universal pretensions, in that it purported to offer a ‘universal’ vocabulary of classes, historical eras, and economic systems which could seemingly be applied across time and space without modification. As Sudipta Kaviraj has written, Marxist terminology ‘acquired a strangely untroubled currency as means of depicting the political institutions, movements and aspirations of people in vastly different cultures.’²⁴ It was because Marxism offered a universal key to understanding all the societies of the world that it appealed to scholars with international outlooks like Tan Malaka.

Despite its claims to universality, however, Marxist ideas were inevitably altered in new contexts. In the first place, they interacted with existing ‘patterns of religion and culture’, and had to be reshaped to accommodate aspects of these.²⁵ There were also certain realities on the ground, in Indonesia as in other parts of the non-Western world, which were unaccounted for in Marx’s original formulations, and so required new explanations.²⁶ What Bayly has written of Indian liberalism applies equally to Indonesian Marxism: ‘Indians did not simply copy Western ideas

²² See, for example, Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). On Mao’s political thought, see Stuart R. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Praeger, 1963), Arthur A. Cohen, *The Communism of Mao Tse-Tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) and Nick Knight, *Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedong’s Thought* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007).

²³ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 226.

²⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘Marxism in translation; critical reflections on Indian radical thought’, in Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (eds.), *Political Judgement* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009), p. 173.

²⁵ Christopher Bayly, ‘History and World History’ in Ulinka Rublack (ed.), *A Concise Companion to History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-26, at p. 20.

²⁶ On this theme see David McLellan, ‘Asian Communism’, in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 267-281.

from the texts they received through metropolitan sources. Instead, they cannibalised, reconstructed and re-authored those ideas'.²⁷ Tan Malaka believed, in this fashion, that certain Marxist doctrines needed to be reworked to make them applicable to Indonesia. He also supplemented 'universal' Marxist terms with specific, vernacular ones. The two did not always sit easily side by side. In fact, as he applied Marxist ideas to Indonesia he necessarily found himself having to re-author them, not least in his attempts to render them legible in a new language, Malay. In Said's terms, he 'transformed' Marxism through 'new uses'.²⁸

It would be wrong, however, to see Tan Malaka as simply adding an exotic Indonesian gloss to Marxism. To do so would be to reproduce the historiographical tendency, identified by Sartori, of casting the West as the 'vehicle of modern universality' while seeing the non-West as providing only 'particularisms'.²⁹ First, when formulating his politics, Tan Malaka drew not only on Marxism but also on Islam, a non-Western source of 'universal' ideas. How to reconcile these two universal ideologies was a question that he, in common with other Indonesian Communists raised in the Muslim faith, like Semaun and Darsono, grappled with. He was also concerned with more than simply applying Marxism to Indonesia. Like Marx himself, Tan Malaka sought to use Marxist ideas to understand a wide range of societies, and the world in general. He wrote extensively on European history, the society and history of India, and on the history of Malaya, China and the Philippines. He turned Marxist analysis outward into the world, as well as inward on Indonesia.

Tan Malaka was, of course, not the only Indonesian to engage with foreign ideas during his lifetime. The colonial government's 'Ethical Policy', initiated at the start of the twentieth century, which aimed at improving the welfare of 'natives', entailed a growth in Western-style

²⁷ C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 3.

²⁸ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 227

²⁹ Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 9

education, an expansion of press freedoms, and a widening of freedom of association.³⁰ As a result of these reforms, a new generation of Indonesians educated in the Dutch style was brought forth, fluent in the mother country's language and keen to engage with Western learning.³¹ Rudolf Mrázek has described this cohort as 'a colorful, and often dazzling, fast-moving crowd that enjoyed being seen as connoisseurs of Greek philosophy and the French Revolution as much as of *wayang*, the Javanese shadow puppet theatre (if they happened to be Javanese), or, and this very much so, of Hollywood.'³² These figures were often highly conscious of their status on the fringes of both indigenous Indonesian life and Dutch colonial society. Their Western educations distanced them from their original culture, yet they found that they could never be entirely assimilated into European circles in Indonesia, due to the racial hierarchies ingrained into colonial life. In his article 'The Languages of Indonesian Politics' (1966), Anderson relates how this group came to reject Dutch as the medium of political expression, being too tied to the colonial elite, and instead adopted Malay, the lingua franca of the Indies, as their chosen language. Malay was removed from local vernaculars, like Javanese or Batak, and so could be employed as a means of speaking across linguistic groups, making it an ideal instrument for communicating foreign ideas to an emerging 'Indonesian' public. Tan Malaka, who encountered Marxism through his knowledge of Dutch, was part of this process, writing primarily in Malay to publicize Marxist ideas across Indonesia, rather than using a local vernacular or the colonial language of Dutch as a vehicle for his thought.

While Tan Malaka saw Marxism as a product of a specifically Western tradition of scientific analysis and materialist philosophy, he employed Malay and Islamic terminology when expressing his own Marxist arguments, in the hope of making them comprehensible and appealing to Indonesians unfamiliar with Western political thought. His was a synthetic political language, which spanned a number of different idioms. As such, he exemplified within himself a kind of

³⁰ A freedom of the press ordinance was passed in 1906, while the colonial government's ban on political parties was lifted in 1915. On the expansion of 'ethical' schools in West Sumatra, see Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 18, n. 73.

³¹ The Javanese noblewoman Kartini, who shared much of the ethos of the 'Ethical Policy' and advocated expanding Western-style education to girls, wrote in an 1899 letter to a friend 'If I could learn the Dutch language thoroughly, my future would be assured. A rich field of labour would then lie open to me, and I should be a true child of humanity.' Raden Adjeng Kartini, *Letters to a Javanese Princess* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1921), p. 18.

³² Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 148.

globalization of political ideas that was characteristic of Indonesia during the ‘national awakening’. Edward Said has labelled this phenomenon ‘Traveling theory’, the movement of ideas. On his account, however, ideas seem to move independently, as if they possessed a self-propelling quality. In Said’s view, ‘the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence.’³³ As Lydia Liu has pointed out, in her critique of Said, historians need to ask, ‘who does the traveling?’³⁴ Tan Malaka was one of the many ‘vehicles of translation’ that powered the movement of ideas, not as a passive receptor but as an active agent, who transformed ideas and spread them to new audiences.

When writing of the reception of Indian culture in Southeast Asia, Oliver Wolters described this phenomenon as ‘localization’. Wolters was reacting against the concept of ‘Indianization’, which implied that Southeast Asians simply adopted and conformed to existing Indian practices. The term ‘localization’, in contrast, restored ‘the initiative of the local elements responsible for the process and the end product.’³⁵ By the same token, Tan Malaka’s writings should not be seen as an exercise in ‘Westernization’, that is as the submission of an Indonesian thinker to Western Marxist norms and concepts. Rather, we should see Tan Malaka as taking Western theories and reworking them, infusing them with new ideas and vocabularies. Wolters believed that the end-point of localization was the destruction of the original ‘Indian’ form: ‘Indian materials tended to be fractured and restated and therefore drained of their original significance’.³⁶ I shall argue, in contrast, that Tan Malaka’s political thought represents not an absolute absorption of Marxist ideas to a purely Indonesian and Islamic idiom, but the synthesis of these bodies of thought into a novel vision of politics. It is this process of synthesis and invention that makes him a worthy object of study, because through his works we can better understand the global life of ideas, via an examination of the life and writings of one individual.

³³ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 227.

³⁴ Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity - China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 21.

³⁵ O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 56.

³⁶ Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, p. 55.

Tan Malaka's Life

Tan Malaka was born in the Minangkabau lands of West Sumatra in 1897 to a titled family, in the village of Suliki. Although given the birth name of Ibrahim, he inherited the title Tan Malaka in his teenage years. After a rudimentary education in his village, supplemented by Islamic schooling in the local *surau* (a centre of Muslim learning), he enrolled in the 'Kweekschool' (teacher training college) in Fort De Kock, better known as the 'Sekolah Radja' ('School of Kings') due to its high prestige in the region, where he began studying a secular Dutch curriculum. After impressing his teachers, funds were raised, in part by his village, for him to continue his education in the Netherlands. In 1913 he began a more advanced course of teacher training at the 'Rijkskweekschool' in Haarlem. He was intended to be a model of what the Dutch colonial government called 'Association', a method of education which placed Indonesians side by side with Europeans in the hope that they might absorb Western styles of thought and behaviour and so contribute to the development of the East Indies.³⁷ In the early phase of his life, 'Association' appeared to be working: he played the cello, socialized with Europeans, and mastered the Dutch curriculum to an extent that amazed his teachers.³⁸ This smooth progress was halted in 1917, however, when a combination of serious illness and the unfolding Bolshevik Revolution triggered a political awakening in Tan Malaka. He read all the political literature he could find, devouring Nietzsche and Carlyle, before discovering the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Kautsky, and committing himself to Communism.

When he returned to Sumatra in 1919 he was a changed man. Openly expressing his Bolshevik sympathies, he took a job not in a government school, but teaching the children of 'proletarian' coolies on the plantations, which were then undergoing a sustained boom as capital poured into the region from across the world. After seeing through his contract, he travelled to Semarang in Java where he joined the newly-formed Communist Party of the Indies in 1921. His

³⁷ For a summary of 'Association' see Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 22. While in the Netherlands, Tan Malaka was introduced to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, a Dutch scholar and expert on Islam who had been one of the proponents of the Ethical Policy while working as an adviser to Joannes van Heutsz, governor of the East Indies from 1904 to 1909. Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 24.

³⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 23.

first job was to establish a school to teach local children, but the party, which had grown out of a largely Dutch Social Democratic Association, badly needed capable Indonesian leaders, and Tan Malaka was rapidly promoted, being elected party chairman in 1922. The party was still at that time working with the popular Muslim movement, the Sarekat Islam (Islamic Association), a much larger party. The alliance between the parties was increasingly coming under pressure, however, as Sarekat Islam branches divided along pro-Communist ('Red') and anti-Communist ('White' or 'Green') lines. Tan Malaka attempted to heal this schism, but his prominence as leader of the PKI soon brought the attention of the Governor General, who had him jailed then exiled in 1922 for his role in supporting a major strike.

At first, he travelled back along the familiar imperial axis to the Netherlands, where he ran unsuccessfully as a Communist Party candidate in the 1922 elections. He was soon pulled eastwards, however, towards the emerging centres of radical left politics. He journeyed first to Berlin in mid-1922, then on to Moscow, to speak at the Fourth Congress of the Third International, held in December of that year, an event also attended by the Indian Marxist M.N. Roy and the Vietnamese Communist Nguyen Ai Quoc (better known by the name he later adopted, Ho Chi Minh). In Moscow he was much in demand by Comintern as a link to the fast-growing Indonesian Communist Party, whose contact with the organization was patchy and irregular, despite the recent visits of the PKI leaders Semaun and Henk Sneevliet.³⁹ Comintern was then caught up in debates over the potential for socialist revolution in the colonial world (the so-called 'colonial question'), which entailed further questions on whether Communists in Asia should ally with Pan-Islamists and nationalists in their countries for the purpose of overthrowing foreign rule. Tan Malaka weighed in on this debate while in Moscow, engaging with the arguments of both Lenin and M.N. Roy. In 1923 he was made Comintern agent for the Southeast Asia region and dispatched to a new base in Canton.

For the next twenty years he moved through a new network, making his own connections and frequently straying from the prescribed Comintern path. Always alert to the possibility of

³⁹ Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. xii.

arrest and deportation by imperial police forces, he travelled between the port cities of Asia, the 'interstices' of empire, where various Asian radicals assembled between the wars.⁴⁰ Until 1926 he had sustained contact with the Indonesian Communist Party, composing books on Indonesian politics from Singapore, Manila and Canton, which were smuggled back into his home country.⁴¹ He fell out with the party leadership that year, however, over their planned revolt against Dutch rule, which, when it did take place in December, failed spectacularly and resulted in the arrest and exile of thousands associated with the party, effectively wiping it out for the remainder of the colonial period. After 1927, as imperial police agencies intensified their operations, he was driven underground, living under a series of false names and identities in Shanghai, Amoy, Hong Kong and Singapore. Sources on his movements and activities in these years are almost non-existent, being limited to his own autobiography. While in China he worked as a language teacher, posing as a Chinese man, writing nothing and living in constant fear of arrest and imprisonment. In 1942 he left Singapore, ahead of the arrival of the Japanese, and made his way, in secret, back to Indonesia.

Between 1913 and 1942, Tan Malaka was thus overseas for all but three years. He burst onto the Indonesian political scene in 1921, then vanished into exile. As he was forced underground and ceased publishing it became impossible to discern what his activities were. He retained a shadowy presence in Indonesia during his long exile, however, through a series of popular novels that were written about a thinly-veiled version of him in Sumatra under the title 'Patjar Merah' (or 'Scarlet Pimpernel'). The fictional Tan Malaka, in fact, was just as cosmopolitan as the real one, appearing across Asia, often in disguise, and possessing an apparently supernatural ability to avoid detection.⁴²

⁴⁰ See Tim Harper, 'Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, 6 (2013), pp. 1782-1811.

⁴¹ Tan Malaka's 1926 text *Semangat Muda* was smuggled to Indonesia via Bangkok, wrapped in the *North China Daily News*, by the PKI exile Subakat. Helen Jarvis, *Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI): was it "the sole golden bridge to the Republic of Indonesia?"* (Townsville, Queensland: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1981), p. 13.

⁴² For an account of the 'patjar merah' stories see Noriaki Oshikawa, "'Patjar Merah Indonesia'" and Tan Malaka, A Popular Novel and a Revolutionary Legend', in Takashi Shiraishi (ed.), *Reading Southeast Asia: Translation of Contemporary Japanese Scholarship on Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 9-39.

The popularity of his fictional incarnations may account for the instant impact of Tan Malaka's return to public politics in January 1946, five months after Sukarno's proclamation of independence. He immediately began working to organize the diffuse parties and militias which had arisen at the close of the war into a coalition, the Persatuan Perjuangan ('Union of Resistance'), committed to fighting for a more radical independence settlement than the one being proposed by the mainstream nationalist leadership, which would include the nationalization of all Dutch assets and the redistribution of plantation land. His slogans were '100% merdeka' ('100% independence') and 'perjuangan' ('struggle'), set against Sukarno and Hatta's policy of 'diplomasi' ('diplomacy'). Though his coalition initially attracted a large following, especially among the youth or 'pemuda', he was soon arrested, without charge, by Sukarno's republican army in March 1946, as a rival, and imprisoned. After spending over two years in jail, without facing trial, he was released in 1948 following an attempted Communist coup in Madiun in East Java in the hope that he might divide the opposition. He was soon captured again by Republican soldiers, however, and in 1949 was killed in circumstances that are still unclear.

Interpretations of Tan Malaka

Tan Malaka's memorialization had begun before his own death. In the 1946 pamphlet, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia* ('Tan Malaka: Father of the Indonesian Republic'), Muhammad Yamin depicted him as a living legend, a figure of enormous talents who nonetheless remained shrouded in mystery. At the opening of the text he asked, 'Who is Tan Malaka, the author, expert in philosophy and political leader, who for over a quarter of a century has been an enigma to all parquet, gestapo ... kempeitai and police?'⁴³ According to Yamin, Tan Malaka was first and foremost the progenitor of the Indonesian revolution. In his view, Tan Malaka's 1925 work *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'* ('Towards to "Republic of Indonesia"'), written in Singapore, was the first political manifesto to imagine an Indonesian Republic, two decades before Sukarno's proclamation of independence on 17 August 1945.⁴⁴ Yamin placed Tan Malaka alongside Jose

⁴³ Muhammad Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, p. 3.

Rizal and George Washington as the instigator of a revolution and the founder of a state.⁴⁵ In 1963 Sukarno himself, despite being a political opponent of Tan Malaka's, honoured his contribution to the struggle for independence by making him a 'pahlawan nasional' ('national hero') of the Indonesian Republic.

One interpretation of Tan Malaka has thus been to see him primarily as a nationalist political activist, whose life was dedicated to the goal of overthrowing colonial rule in Indonesia. At the beginning of his 1976 work *Tan Malaka: strijder voor Indonesië's vrijheid* ('Tan Malaka: Fighter for Indonesian Freedom'), Harry Poeze wrote that Tan Malaka's importance lay in the fact that he 'played a major role in the Indonesian independence struggle of the first half of this century.'⁴⁶ The 2008 volume, edited by Yos Rizal Suriaji, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Yang Dilupakan* ('Tan Malaka: The Forgotten Father of the Republic') echoed Yamin by calling Tan Malaka the man who 'founded' the Indonesian Republic.⁴⁷

This characterization, however, tends to obscure two important facts about Tan Malaka. First, that he was a Communist with a lifelong commitment to the creation of a socialist society in Indonesia, and second, that he was a Marxist theorist, who wrote extensively on questions of history, political organization, religion and philosophy. Tan Malaka was as much an intellectual as a political activist, and was seen as such by his peers. Sukarno praised him as an 'expert' on the subject of political revolution.⁴⁸ Mohammad Hatta, who was himself well-versed in Marxist theory, respected his 'sound understanding of Marxism'.⁴⁹ Yamin even likened him to Plato in his philosophical sophistication.⁵⁰ This contemporary depiction of Tan Malaka as a skilled Marxist theorist has found some echo in the secondary literature. Robert van Niel, in *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (1960), described Tan Malaka as 'one of the most brilliant Indonesian

⁴⁵ Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Harry A. Poeze, *Tan Malaka: strijder voor Indonesië's vrijheid levensloop van 1897 tot 1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), p. v.

⁴⁷ Yos Rizal Suriaji (ed.), *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Yang Dilupakan* (Jakarta: Tempo, 2010), p. 2.

⁴⁸ Rizal Suriaji (ed.), *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Yang Dilupakan*, p. 2.

⁴⁹ George McT. Kahin, 'In Memoriam: Mohammad Hatta, (1902-1980)', *Indonesia*, No. 30 (October 1980), pp. 112-119, at p. 118.

⁵⁰ Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, p. 9.

exponents of Communist doctrine.⁵¹ Helen Jarvis, in the introduction to her 1991 translation of Tan Malaka's autobiography *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* (1948), states that Tan Malaka was 'the first Indonesian to articulate the Marxist analysis and to develop and popularize it in mass appeal during the independence struggle.'⁵²

The historiography of modern Indonesia, however, has tended to prioritize Tan Malaka's political career over his ideas. Ruth McVey's classic work *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (1965) closely documents Tan Malaka's involvement with the PKI from 1922 to 1926, while his role in the Indonesian revolution has been analyzed by George Kahin in his landmark study *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (1952) and by Benedict Anderson in his groundbreaking work *Java in a Time of Revolution* (1972). Anthony Reid's *The Indonesian National Revolution* (1974) also contains extended discussions of Tan Malaka's part in the revolution, while Harry Poeze's three volume work *Verguisd en vergeten. Tan Malaka, de linkse beweging en de Indonesische revolutie, 1945-1949* (2007) ('Reviled and Forgotten: Tan Malaka, the Left Movement and the Indonesian Revolution 1945-1949') catalogues Tan Malaka's actions from 1945 to 1949 in minute detail.⁵³ These histories place Tan Malaka within specific political contexts and, by doing so, seek to determine the nature of the role he played in the high political struggles of both the 1920s and the revolution. McVey shows Tan Malaka as the leading voice for caution in the run-up to the PKI's disastrous bid for power in 1926-7. Both Anderson and Reid see his campaign for 'perjuangan' during the revolution as the style of politics that best articulated the desire of the 'pemuda' for a radical transformation of Indonesian society. As a result, they argue, Tan Malaka was able to channel the frustration with the Sjahrir government's policy of 'diplomasi' in 1946.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Robert van Niel, *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (The Hague: N.V. Uitgeverij W. van Hoeve, 1960), p. 198

⁵² Helen Jarvis, 'Introduction', in Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. cx.

⁵³ See Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution, Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 269-96; Anthony Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution 1945-1950* (Hawthorn: Longman, 1974), pp. 88-92, 155-7; George McT. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952), pp. 161-177.

⁵⁴ Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution*, p. 87. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, p. 312.

Kahin and Anderson have disputed Tan Malaka's importance to the revolution and the exact nature of his actions, especially with regard to the '3 July affair' of 1946, when Tan Malaka's supporters kidnapped the prime minister Sutan Sjahrir and allegedly attempted to install Tan Malaka as president.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, they share a common focus on his day-to-day activities at a high political level. For both historians, documenting the many shifts and turns in the political scene during the revolution takes priority over any extended analysis of Tan Malaka's writings. Reid and Anderson discuss only one of Tan Malaka's texts, *Muslihat* (1945), despite the fact that he produced half a dozen works during the revolution. Moreover, because these histories of the revolution are chronologically focused on the years 1945-50, they cannot give any serious account of Tan Malaka's early career and texts from the 1920s, or his pre-revolutionary magnum opus, *Madilog* (1943). As a result, they capture only one side of Tan Malaka, the 'political leader' but not 'the expert in philosophy'.

Tan Malaka and Indonesian Intellectual History

Compared to the rich literature on Indonesian political history, the study of Indonesian political thought has been fairly sparse. Some have denied that any worthwhile body of Indonesian political thought exists at all. In 1968 Gunnar Myrdal, speaking of Indonesian socialism, complained that it was poorly theorized, being 'expressed in very vague and confused terms', which he put down to 'the relative scarcity of intellectuals capable of articulating and developing socialist ideology, and ... efforts made to incorporate religious beliefs.'⁵⁶

Herbert Feith and Lance Castles's 1970 collection of Indonesian writings on politics, titled *Indonesian Political Thinking 1945-1965*, serves as a rebuke to Myrdal's criticism. Feith and Castles argue that there is a corpus of 'modern Indonesian political thinking', comprised of three main strands: nationalism, Islam, and Marxism.⁵⁷ All three of these strands, they claim, can be

⁵⁵ Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*, pp. 188-93.

⁵⁶ Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 373.

⁵⁷ Herbert Feith and Lance Castles, *Indonesian Political Thinking 1945-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 13.

described as ‘modern’ because they all call for some kind of reform or ‘regeneration’ of Indonesian society in the face of the ‘challenge’ of modernity.⁵⁸ In her 1970 paper ‘The Social Roots of Indonesian Communism’, Ruth McVey likewise states that Indonesian Communism emerged out of ‘the crisis of confrontation between modern and traditional worlds which Indonesia has been undergoing in the past century.’⁵⁹ The thesis shared by these historians is that under the pressure of Western influence, Indonesians became conscious of the ‘backwardness’ or unsuitability of their ‘traditional’ culture for the modern world and so developed new political languages, some of which were themselves borrowed from the West, in order to improve their situation.⁶⁰

Modern Indonesian political thought can, on these terms, be seen as a series of engagements with non-Indonesian bodies of ideas, whether Marxist, Islamic, or nationalist, for the purpose of reforming or renewing Indonesian society. For Feith and Castles, the Marxists were the most influenced by Western thought, the Islamic parties the least, with the nationalists somewhere in between, combining indigenous and Western political ideas.⁶¹ The few existing studies of Indonesian political thought have tended to look for the indigenous, particularly Javanese, ideas that lie behind the official rhetoric of Indonesian nationalism. Kenji Tsuchiya’s *Democracy and Leadership: The Rise of the Taman Siswa* (1987), which focuses on the politics of the Taman Siswa, a Javanese school movement begun in 1922 by the anti-colonial activist Ki Hadjar Dewantara (1899-1959), claims that Javanese notions of hierarchy and benevolent leadership were highly influential among Indonesian nationalists. Both David Reeve, in *Golkar of Indonesia: An Alternative to the Party System* (1985), and David Bourchier, in *Illiberal Democracy in Indonesia: The Ideology of the Family State* (2015), argue that the authoritarian philosophy of Suharto’s New Order that crystallized in the 1940s was a synthesis of Western corporatist ideas and Javanese concepts of familial obedience.⁶²

⁵⁸ Feith and Castles, *Indonesian Political Thinking 1945-1965*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Ruth McVey, *The Social Roots of Indonesian Communism* (Brussels: Centre d’étude du Sud-Est asiatique et de l’Extrême-Orient, 1970), p. 2.

⁶⁰ For an example of this style of argument, see Taufik Abdullah, ‘Modernization in the Minangkabau World: West Sumatra in the Early Decades of the Twentieth Century’, in Claire Holt, Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and James Siegel (eds.), *Culture and Power in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 179-245.

⁶¹ Feith and Castles, *Indonesian Political Thinking*, p. 14.

⁶² The unpublished PhD thesis of Farabi Fakihi, *The Rise of The Managerial State in Indonesia*, argues, in contrast, that the emergence of an Americanized managerial elite in the 1950s was vital to Indonesia’s shift away from

There are fewer studies on the fusion of Western and non-Western ideas within Indonesian Communism. An understandable focus on the politics of Indonesian nationalists, who emerged victorious from the revolution of 1945-9, has obscured the writings of Indonesian Communists. As we have seen, Feith and Castles believed that Indonesian Marxism was straightforwardly derivative of Western thought. McVey, in contrast, has argued that even among the officially Marxist PKI, indigenous and Islamic ideas remained highly influential: 'The PKI's concept of Communism', she says, was 'very broadly conceived: on the top and among a few leaders there was the proletarian scientism that one finds in Western Marxism; among provincial cadres very often it emerged as a sort of messianic populism, quite often not too different from the Sukarnoism of the Guided Democracy period; and among the mass of the rural adherents very often there were very heterodox versions of the faith - particularly in the 1920s, when strong Islamic Communist groups existed.'⁶³ For McVey, Marxism, Islam and nationalism did not constitute separate strands of Indonesian political thinking, but were in fact all bound up together.⁶⁴

In his 1972 article, 'Tan Malaka: A Political Personality's Structure of Experience', Rudolf Mrázek argues that Tan Malaka belongs less in the camp of 'proletarian scientism' and more in the realm of indigenous, specifically Minangkabau, ideas. Mrázek provocatively claims that by contextualizing Tan Malaka within the intellectual world of turn of the century West Sumatra, one can unearth a number of Minangkabau concepts that lie behind his outwardly Marxist political writings. Tan Malaka's concern with pedagogy and the reformation of Indonesian methods of thought, manifested most of all in his didactic text *Madilog* (1943), is seen by Mrázek as an extension of the Minangkabau notion that a *perantau* (traveller) ought to use the knowledge

democracy after independence. This places the emphasis on the transfer of foreign ideas and expertise, rather than on the persistence of indigenous political norms in explaining the emergence of Indonesian authoritarianism after independence. Farabi Fakihi, *The Rise of The Managerial State in Indonesia: Institutional Transition During the Early Independence Period. 1950-1965*, PhD thesis, Leiden University (2014), pp. 6-7.

⁶³ McVey, *The Social Roots of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁴ This line of argument anticipated the thesis of Shiraishi in *An Age in Motion*, which claimed much the same. See Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java 1912-1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. xi-xvi.

acquired on their journeys to educate others and so enrich their homeland.⁶⁵ Tan Malaka's vision of history, which praised the 'rational' and heroic qualities of 'Indonesia Asli' ('Original Indonesia'), but criticized Hinduism as a religion that inclined people towards superstitious 'mysticism' and servility, is judged by Mrázek to be an implicit criticism of Javanese culture, itself heavily influenced by Hinduism, and a promotion of the Minangkabau virtues of rationality ('akal') and adventurous travel among youths (the 'perantau'), which are projected onto 'Indonesia Asli'.⁶⁶ Tan Malaka's clash with Sukarno during the revolution, according to Mrázek, was a continuation of his critique of 'Hindu-Javanese' culture, which he believed Sukarno embodied.⁶⁷

In his conclusion, Mrázek cautions against overestimating the importance of Western ideas for Tan Malaka, or for Indonesians more generally, and to see the 'traditional' concepts concealed behind the veneer of modern Western terminology: 'a potential danger for a Western scholar lurks. What these political personalities retain of their traditional culture is very often remote from the "modern" mind of the scholar--frequently too remote even to be noted seriously by him. To complicate the problem further, the language used as a rule by these Asian leaders for expressing their views, including their traditional components, is so "modern," so "Western," that it can not be passed over; indeed this is often precisely what is eagerly seized upon and analyzed at length by the Westerner.'⁶⁸ Thus, despite his extensive use of 'Western' Marxist terminology, Tan Malaka was, according to Mrázek, fundamentally a Minangkabau thinker, and is best understood in that context.

Helen Jarvis, in the introduction to her edition of *From Jail to Jail*, argues, contrary to Mrázek's claims, that Tan Malaka was primarily a Marxist, who should be seen 'within the framework of Marxism'.⁶⁹ In her view, it is a 'distortion to dismiss the Marxist-Leninist terminology Tan Malaka chooses to use in interpreting the world around him'. Mrázek's stress on the importance of an essentialized set of Minangkabau concepts to Tan Malaka constitutes a

⁶⁵ Rudolf Mrázek, 'Tan Malaka: A Political Personality's Structure of Experience', *Indonesia*, No. 14 (Oct., 1972), pp. 1-48, at pp. 14-20.

⁶⁶ Mrázek, 'Tan Malaka: A Political Personality's Structure of Experience', pp. 18, 21-4.

⁶⁷ Mrázek, 'Tan Malaka: A Political Personality's Structure of Experience', pp. 39-40.

⁶⁸ Mrázek, 'Tan Malaka: A Political Personality's Structure of Experience', p. 48.

⁶⁹ Jarvis, 'Introduction', *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. lxvi.

‘somewhat Orientalist and patronizing approach’.⁷⁰ In Jarvis’s view, Tan Malaka ought to be taken at his word when he said that he discovered politics in the Netherlands, during the First World War, through the texts of Marx and Engels.⁷¹ She points out that between 1917 and 1923 he moved almost exclusively in Marxist circles, in the Netherlands, as a PKI leader in Java, in Berlin, and as a Comintern delegate in Moscow. It was during this time, according to Jarvis, that Tan Malaka developed the key elements of his political thought. His views on party structure, Indonesian history, and the necessity of social revolution in Indonesia were all shaped in this time and remained basically consistent until the 1940s. In her view, his ‘ideas changed little from the early twenties until his death.’⁷² This consistency, she claims, was due to the fact that after 1923 he had no access to other Marxist thinkers, living in exile and in hiding in the Philippines and China. His ‘political evolution ceased in the early 1920s’ after he became isolated from ‘debate in Marxist circles’.⁷³ For Jarvis, it was not his Minangkabau upbringing that was vital for Tan Malaka’s intellectual formation, but his time in Communist politics, much of which was spent in the West.

By focusing on either the Marxist or Minangkabau elements in Tan Malaka’s politics, Jarvis and Mrázek imply that each of these constituted a coherent and self-contained system of thought, with a rigid border existing between the two. Both claim that by focusing on either Tan Malaka’s Marxism or his West Sumatran philosophy, the historian can reveal the ‘true’ core of his politics. I will argue, in contrast, that it is the *interaction* between different sets of ideas that characterizes Tan Malaka’s writings, and that no single ideology may be privileged to the exclusion of all others in the analysis his thought. As we shall see, aspects of the Minangkabau world informed his Marxism, while his Marxism influenced the manner in which he considered Minangkabau concepts and institutions. There was no hard border between the various aspects of his thought.

⁷⁰ Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. lxxviii.

⁷¹ Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. lxxxii.

⁷² Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. ciii.

⁷³ Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. lii.

Tan Malaka and Islam

Neither Jarvis nor Mrázek discuss the place of Islam within Tan Malaka's thought in any great depth, perhaps because his relationship with Islam would complicate their characterization of him as either a Marxist or specifically Minangkabau thinker. Tan Malaka's involvement with the 'Red' Sarekat Islam in the 1920s is passed over by both historians entirely. There has been some scholarship on the interaction of Islam and Communism in the 1920s, most notably by Ruth McVey in *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* and Takashi Shiraishi in *An Age in Motion, Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926* (1990). Shiraishi's account focuses on Surakarta in Central Java and so is centred on the figure of Hadji Misbach, the Communist 'ulama' (Islamic religious expert), rather than on the PKI leaders based at Semarang, like Tan Malaka.⁷⁴ McVey's book, in contrast, is mainly concerned with the PKI leadership and examines the origin of the PKI-SI alliance and its eventual breakdown in 1921-3. McVey offers a number of reasons why this alliance worked: the two parties' common opposition to the colonial government; the socialist inclinations of certain Sarekat Islam leaders and their hostility to 'sinful capitalism'; the strategic advantages that came from co-operation; and the fact that, after 1919, both parties were led by 'native' Muslims. She also lists the causes of the alliance's collapse, most important of which were the secular politics of the PKI, the atheism and hostility to Pan-Islamism of Comintern (which the PKI joined in 1920), the suspicion among Sarekat Islam leaders that Communism was a basically non-Islamic creed, and the fear of the Central Sarekat Islam that the PKI would take its place as the major force within the anti-colonial 'national movement'.

McVey characterizes the PKI members that operated within Sarekat Islam as being at pains to find points of similarity between Islam and Communism, but at times portrays them as basically 'using' Islam to further their political aims.⁷⁵ Only in rural Java and West Sumatra, in her view, did a real fusion of Islam and Communism come about. In Java this fusion constituted a continuation of earlier messianic religious cults that preached equality and foresaw the coming of

⁷⁴ See Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, pp. 285-98.

⁷⁵ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 116.

the end of the world.⁷⁶ In West Sumatra, it functioned through the equation of Communism with righteous Islamic resistance and the linking of capitalism to the ‘kafir’ (non-Muslim) Dutch.⁷⁷ McVey thus upholds a distinction between a more ‘orthodox’ Marxist Communism, that she argues prevailed in urban centres like Semarang and Surabaya, which included Tan Malaka, and a ‘heterodox’ Islamic Communism, found in rural Java and West Sumatra. Shiraishi also implies this distinction by associating Islamic Communism only with Hadji Misbach, who was based in Central Java and was marginal to the PKI leadership, headquartered in the port city of Semarang. What neither McVey nor Shiraishi explore, however, is how exactly Islamic terms and ideas worked within the writings of more ‘orthodox’ Marxist PKI cadres like Tan Malaka. I will argue in Chapter Four that Tan Malaka, like other PKI leaders, expressed his Communism through a moral vocabulary that was in part Islamic and that he took the idea of ‘sinful capitalism’ seriously in itself, not just as a strategy for winning over Sarekat Islam’s mass support. In Chapter Two the case will be made that Tan Malaka’s Communism had eschatological overtones like those found in the ‘heterodox’ Islamic Communism of rural Java. In this manner, the gap between the orthodox Marxists and the Islamic Communists is narrowed.

Tan Malaka’s discussions of Islam also need to be seen within the context of Islamic reformism in Indonesia. This process has been detailed by Taufik Abdullah in *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra* (1971), as well as by Deliar Noer in *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942* (1973) and more recently by Michael Laffan in *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia* (2003). Tan Malaka, however, does not feature in any of these works, despite the fact that his writings touched on numerous topoi of Islamic modernism. Like the ‘kaum muda’ (literally the ‘young group’, the name given to the Islamic reformists), he attacked traditional Islamic pedagogy and laid stress on the importance of rational interpretation as the key to acquiring knowledge. He too saw certain scientific qualities in Islam and, like the modernists, argued that the earliest incarnations of Islamic practice were models to be imitated. He viewed the early Islamic Caliphate as a kind of proto-socialist society, a conception that was shared by Haji Agus Salim and Tjokrominoto, the leaders of the reformist-inclined

⁷⁶ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 176-81.

⁷⁷ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 174-6.

Sarekat Islam. The modernist scholar Hamka, one of the most prominent ‘ulama’ in twentieth century West Sumatra, saw a sufficiently reformist ethos in Tan Malaka to endorse one of his texts.⁷⁸

Yet Tan Malaka does not fit neatly into the category of Islamic modernist, not least because of the scepticism he expressed regarding basic Islamic tenets and the existence of God in *Madilog*. His commitment to historical materialism also led him to see religion in general as a primitive or ‘feudal’ ideology, which would be shed as humanity progressed into more advanced modes of production. In *Semangat Muda*, he grouped Islam with Hinduism and Christianity as systems of belief that had historically been used to justify oppressive government and make the people passive in the face of exploitation. He had no qualms about praising the Soviet Union, despite its hostility to religion. Unlike some partisans of the ‘kaum muda’, such as Mohammad Natsir, he did not see Indonesia as a nation united by the Islamic religion, that is as a specific Muslim congregation or ‘ummah’, but as a part of much larger Southeast Asian civilization that extended from Burma to equatorial Australia, and which comprised many different religions.⁷⁹ It is, in fact, unclear from his own writings if he was a practicing Muslim at all after his youth. While the spread of Islamic reformism is thus an essential backdrop against which to see Tan Malaka, he cannot be subsumed into that context.

Tan Malaka as a Marxist

If Tan Malaka’s relationship to Islamic modernism is somewhat awkward, can he be characterized less ambiguously as a Marxist? Like Jarvis, I believe that Tan Malaka’s writings need to be understood as part of the reception of Marxism in Asia, within ‘the spectrum of those people who carried forward the ideas of Karl Marx into the twentieth century and into the continent of Asia.’⁸⁰ Tan Malaka saw himself as a Marxist, operating within a Marxist tradition and faithfully applying

⁷⁸ Hamka wrote an approving introduction to *Islam dalam tindjauan Madilog* (1948) that praised Tan Malaka for seeking to reconcile modern sciences with Islam.

⁷⁹ For Mohammad Natsir’s arguments on the importance of Islam for uniting Indonesia, see Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 260-1.

⁸⁰ Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. lxvi.

that tradition's ideas to Indonesia. He viewed Marxism less as a political ideology than a particular, 'scientific' approach to social problems. Marxism, in his eyes, was scientific in two senses. First, in that it laid stress on the importance of empirical observation for 'interpreting, understanding, and constructing theory concerning social *phenomena*'. To understand Indonesian society, for example, one had first of all to detail all the 'factors in present Indonesian society: the technology and the economy, the sociopolitical structure, and the culture and psychology of the Indonesian people.'⁸¹ In Tan Malaka's view, Marxism's emphasis on careful observation of the material world was what made it 'materialist' and distinguished it from 'idealist' doctrines, like Hegelianism, that gave centrality to intangible and unobservable ideas.⁸² He viewed all religions as basically idealist in nature, because they foregrounded God, a non-material phenomenon, in their explanation of the world.⁸³ As a result, he claimed that religious experts were less useful than empirically-minded Marxists for understanding society.

The second sense in which Tan Malaka considered Marxism to be scientific was in its formulation of general laws. Marx's great discovery, in Tan Malaka's eyes, was the realization that societies were dynamic entities governed by certain laws of development. According to Marx, all social change was determined by the expansion of the forces of production. When the productive forces outgrew the existing social structure, a transformation in social relations resulted.⁸⁴ As Tan Malaka put it, the ultimate '*cause* of changes in society from one level to another' was 'a change in the system of production.'⁸⁵ This was Marx's theory of historical materialism, which Tan Malaka considered to be analogous to Darwin's theory of evolution, in that it explained social development with the same exactness with which Darwin had explained the development of biological organisms.⁸⁶ As such, it represented a major milestone in the history of human thought and a great stride forward for human understanding. As he wrote in his memoir:

⁸¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 67-8.

⁸² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 42.

⁸³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog: Materialisme, Dialektika, dan Logika* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Narasi, 2014), p. 57.

⁸⁴ The clearest statement of this view is in Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), pp. 261-5.

⁸⁵ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 32.

⁸⁶ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 89.

‘With Marx and Engels’ identification of the *cause* or *condition* for change in human society, the history of humanity changed from being the product of chance or destiny without cause or clear direction to one with an origin, a direction, a cause, and consequences. With this change, history was lifted from the world of mystery to that of reality, and society could now be studied intellectually.’⁸⁷

Determining the nature of a society’s productive base, its ‘mode of production’, provided real information about that society, because it revealed its stage of historical development, and so disclosed its likely future. It gave political actors a precise guide to which kinds of interventions were likely to succeed and which were likely to fail, because it showed what kind of change went along the historical grain. Gauging a country’s level of development was thus a crucial task. What Adam Tooze has written of Trotsky applies equally to Tan Malaka: ‘Success depended on sharpening one’s historical intelligence so as to recognize and seize unique moments of opportunity.’⁸⁸ Unlike the seers and soothsayers of past ages, Marxists believed they had a reliable means of determining how to act. The science of Marxism, in their eyes, imparted a kind of prophetic gift, a means of seeing ahead. Tan Malaka took Lenin’s success in Russia to be a vindication of Marxist analysis because he believed that Lenin’s mastery of Russian politics stemmed from his application of Marxist thinking to Russia. Lenin, in his view, had studied Russian conditions, determined the country’s stage of development, and so worked out its likely trajectory. Using this information, he had made a political intervention, in October 1917, which had been stunningly successful.⁸⁹

Tan Malaka sought to replicate what Lenin had done in Russia by developing his own analysis of Indonesian society, derived from close observation of local conditions and formulated in accordance with Marxist laws of social development. This analysis would provide a ‘scientific’ basis for his political programmes. Several of his texts are attempts at this: *Naar die ‘Republiek Indonesia’* (1925), *Semangat Muda* (1926), *Massa Actie* (1926), *Muslihat* (1945), and *Politik*

⁸⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 32.

⁸⁸ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-1931* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 30.

⁸⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 95.

(1945) are all applications of Marxism to Indonesia, using an array of transliterated Marxist terms such as ‘feodalisme’ (‘feudalism’), ‘kapitalisme’ (‘capitalism’), ‘kaum proletar’ (‘the proletariat’), and ‘kaum borjuis’ (‘bourgeoisie’). He saw these terms as in some sense universal, since they described historical eras and social classes whose definition stemmed from material facts. He considered the central concepts of Marxist social analysis to be analogous to scientific terms like temperature, liquid, or gas, which described material realities and so were stable across time and space.⁹⁰

Marx’s account of capitalism, for example, could be seen as universal because it described an observable phenomenon, an economic system that could prevail in any place, where one class owned the means of production while another owned nothing but its own labour power, and was exploited as a result. Marx’s analysis of capitalism had been developed primarily in relation to Victorian England, but it appeared to apply equally well to tropical Java and Sumatra.⁹¹ In 1919, when Tan Malaka arrived in Deli, a town at the centre of East Sumatra’s plantation belt, he saw Marx’s definition of capitalism before his eyes. The plantation workers in Deli owned nothing but their labour, while the plantation owners, who offered pitifully low wages, grew rich. In his view, Deli was ‘a land of gold, a haven for the capitalist class, but also a land of sweat, tears, and death, a hell for the proletariat.’⁹² Across colonial Indonesia there seemed to be many such instances of ‘proletarian’ labourers being exploited: on docks, railways, and plantations, in oil fields, rice mills and sugar refineries. In 1926, Tan Malaka estimated that almost half of the population of Java were employed in such occupations, and so belonged to the ‘kaum proletar’.⁹³ All of this made Marx’s analysis of capitalism highly relevant.

⁹⁰ In *Madilog* Tan Malaka cited the evaporation of liquid to vapour at one hundred degrees centigrade as proof of a ‘law’ of dialectical change (the law being that a change in quantity can produce a change in quality). The same law, he claimed, governed human affairs and social change. See Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 223-4.

⁹¹ Anderson has noted that Marxist analysis seemed ‘apt and clear’ to Indonesians for this reason; Anderson, *Language and Power*, p. 137.

⁹² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 43.

⁹³ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda (De Jonge Geest)* (Tokyo: n.p., 1926), p. 24; Robert Cribb has pointed out that Indonesian Communists routinely included agricultural wage labourers as proletarians. Robert Cribb, ‘The Indonesian Marxist Tradition’, in Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight (eds.), *Marxism in Asia* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 251-272, at p. 253.

Yet applying terms like ‘capitalist’ and ‘proletariat’ to Indonesia did present certain problems of interpretation. Unlike in Western Europe, where Marx argued that industrialization had created societies polarized between industrial workers and capitalists, Indonesia comprised a bewildering array of classes. There were farmers in autarkic villages, Rajahs and Sultans in their palaces, wage labourers in factories and on plantations, and a scattering of Dutch, British and American industrialists. The appeal of Marxist terminology was that it could simplify this mass of complexity into comprehensible groups. Yet even sticking to Marxist terms raised problems, since Indonesia combined social classes from a variety of modes of production: proletarians laboured alongside peasants, feudal lords existed side by side with modern capitalists. State-of-the-art industrial technology was used in some sectors of the economy, particularly in the export industries that employed telegraphs, railways, steam shipping, and mechanized production. At the same time, much of the country’s agriculture remained distinctly un-modern, relying on simple tools and manual labour.

How should Communists proceed in such a situation of ‘uneven development’? This dilemma was not unique to Indonesia, but was faced by all Communists outside of the industrialized West. As Nick Knight and Colin Mackerras have noted, Communists operating in such conditions could either wait for capitalism to mature in their countries, to the point where industrial labourers were in the majority, or could give ‘a perfunctory nod in the direction of this orthodoxy’ while pursuing ‘a revolution with socialist objectives ... based on the specific characteristics of their own societies’.⁹⁴ Tan Malaka took the latter path, seeking to develop a political strategy for Indonesia based on Marxist analysis of its conditions. Because he saw Marxism as more of a method than a static creed, he denied that it entailed commitment to any particular course of action. What was suitable for one country at one time might not work in another place or period. As he wrote in *Rentjana Ekonomi* (1945), ‘Truly, Marx and Engels did not ask, and nor do we allow them, to be worshipped. They would be more proud if their theories were well translated, according to place and time.’⁹⁵ In *Thesis* (1946), he stated that ‘Marxism is

⁹⁴ Mackerras and Knight (eds.), *Marxism in Asia*, p. 11.

⁹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi* [1945], in Tan Malaka, *Muslihat, Politik, & Rencana Ekonomi Berjuang* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Narasi, 2014), pp. 129-235, at p. 144.

not a dogma, something for rote memorization... It is one method, dialectical materialism, that must be employed in a manner suitable to time and place.’⁹⁶ In *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* he said much the same: ‘To cling to the *conclusion* of Marx and Engels, reached some one hundred years ago on the basis of the technology, economy, social and political structure, and cultural and spiritual values of western Europe at that time; to adopt wholesale all of Lenin’s conclusions based on his analysis of Russian society in 1917; and to learn all this by heart in order to apply it to Indonesia at the present time is not to exercise the dialectical materialist method of thinking. A Marxist who wishes to arrive at a *conclusion* to be used as a guide for action in Indonesia today has to base these conclusions on premises obtaining in Indonesia right now.’⁹⁷

Each of these passages implicitly contrasted Marxism with traditional styles of Islamic learning in Indonesia. Marxism, according to Tan Malaka, rejected the absolute authority of gurus, even those as exalted as Marx and Engels, and encouraged adherents to think for themselves when formulating their conclusions. This style of learning ran counter to the hierarchical and dogmatic education of the ‘pesantren’ (a traditional Islamic boarding school), where students were taught to accept and repeat the teachings of the ‘kyai’ (religious expert).⁹⁸ He also criticized rote memorization as a means of understanding Marxism, yet this was exactly the method usually employed in ‘pesantren’ schools for studying sacred texts.⁹⁹

Despite his emphasis on methodological flexibility, Tan Malaka did have certain intellectual influences, and borrowed many of his arguments from other Marxist thinkers. Like other Asians who converted to Communism in the wake of the October revolution, such as Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong, he was naturally highly influenced by Bolshevik ideas.¹⁰⁰ These were considered especially relevant, not only because of Lenin’s recent success in capturing power, but also due to the fact that the Bolsheviks had engineered a socialist revolution in Russia, a country which, like Indonesia, had a largely agrarian and non-industrial economy. Chapter Two details the

⁹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Thesis* [1946] (Jakarta: Yayasan Massa, 1987), p. 55.

⁹⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 67-8.

⁹⁸ Anderson, *Language and Power*, p. 63.

⁹⁹ Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Ho Chi Minh became a Communist after being inspired by Lenin’s message of popular liberation. See Ho Chi Minh, ‘The path that led me to Leninism’, pp. 5-7.

ways in which Tan Malaka adapted certain Bolshevik doctrines on the role of the party and the advantages of late capitalist development to claim that Communist revolution was viable, and indeed inevitable, in Indonesia.

What could not be borrowed from elsewhere, however, was an analysis of the specific characteristics of the various classes in Indonesia. In his autobiography Tan Malaka wrote that, ‘To adopt holus bolus such terms as feudal, bourgeois, or proletarian and apply them with all their corresponding characteristics, motivations and history to the feudal, bourgeois, or proletarian classes in Indonesia and India would be uncritical and undialectical.’¹⁰¹ Workers in Indonesia participated in a recognizably capitalist economy, but their mental world was a legacy of Indonesia’s own cultural history. This stress on the importance of culture fit with his emphasis on ‘cultural and spiritual values’ and ‘psychology’ as important factors for understanding a society, even if these were not strictly ‘material’ in nature.¹⁰² An expert in Marxism could not know the path of the Indonesian revolution purely from readings done in, say, Moscow. They had to understand Indonesia itself and the Indonesian people before they could make an informed judgment. Tan Malaka believed that he had such knowledge. Specifically, he believed that he understood the mentality of Indonesian workers, which he considered to be unfortunately ‘backward’, as a result of superstitious habits inherited from Indonesia’s past.¹⁰³ Thus, although he used ‘universal’ Marxist terms, he in fact argued that the Indonesian proletariat had specific characteristics which made it unlike its equivalents in other countries.

At points, Tan Malaka’s arguments left Marxism behind altogether. In *Massa Actie* (1926), *Madilog* (1943), *Thesis* (1946), and *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* (1948), he discussed the possibility of a future federation of Southeast Asian nations, which he gave the name ‘Aslia’ in the 1940s.

¹⁰¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 90.

¹⁰² Tan Malaka’s stress on the importance of ‘superstructural’ ideas and mentalities has led Mrázek to question the degree to which he was in fact a materialist; Mrázek, ‘Tan Malaka: A Political Personality’s Structure of Experience’, p. 18. Discussion of the importance of workers’ ‘mentalities’ was not limited to Tan Malaka, however. In the early twentieth century, a key point of contention among Russian Marxists was how to shake off the apparently non-revolutionary mentality of Russian industrial labourers. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. 2, *The Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 384-398.

¹⁰³ See Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa* [1926] (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Nararsi, 2013), p. 95.

This was not an idle speculation on his part, but a concrete political objective which he believed was highly likely to come about. The essential basis for 'Aslia' would be the shared racial traits of the peoples of Southeast Asia, who in his view constituted a single 'bangsa' ('people' or 'nation').¹⁰⁴ Yet this was an entirely un-Marxist line of reasoning. A 'bangsa' was a vague and ahistorical grouping, spanning multiple classes, without roots in the realities of material production. As such it offered no Marxist basis for political organization and ran counter to the specifically proletarian internationalism endorsed by Marx, Engels and the Bolsheviks.

In fact, Tan Malaka exchanged Marxist class terms for vernacular ones, which subsumed multiple classes, throughout his writings. In the 1920s, he claimed that the Indonesian 'rakyat' ('people') would rise up against the Dutch, while in the 1940s he envisioned the 'pemuda' ('youth') as the primary agents of social change. This suggests that he continued to think in terms of specifically Indonesian social categories rather than classes, despite his use of orthodox Marxist terms. Although he frequently assimilated these categories to Marxist ones, the process was somewhat untidy. In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan, tetapi tidak toendoek kepada kebenaran* ('Submission to Might, but not to Right', 1922), he wrote 'Rajat (= boeroeh dan tani)' ('The people (= workers and peasants)').¹⁰⁵ But within Marx's social taxonomy workers and peasants were two separate classes, with quite different politics. During the revolution, he attributed to the 'pemuda' a proletarian 'spirit', then acknowledged that many, if not most, of them were not industrial labourers. Tan Malaka was thus capable of dropping or eliding Marxist terms when it suited his purposes. His depiction of 'the people' as the constituency of the Communists during the 1920s allowed him to present himself as a nationalist, opposed to foreign domination, rather than the partisan of a particular class. His championing of the 'pemuda' during the revolution enabled him to channel the radicalism of the youth militias which had arisen at the close of the war, and to speak in a language which resonated with the contemporary situation. By moving between these registers, he could claim the scientific prestige of Marxism, an international language of politics with a refined philosophical pedigree and a proven record of success in Russia, while keeping

¹⁰⁴ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁵ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan, tetapi tidak toendoek kepada kebenaran* (Berlin: n.p., 1922), p. 40.

touch with a local audience, who would be more responsive to arguments phrased in vernacular terms.¹⁰⁶

Tan Malaka and Indonesian Political Thought

Tan Malaka presented his Marxism in part as a rejection of Indonesian styles of political thinking. He dismissed, for example, the notion that a 'Ratu Adil' ('just king') could deliver the people from poverty and oppression, an idea which remained widespread during the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁷ This, he claimed, was a false doctrine based on a misguided faith in monarchs. As a Marxist, he believed that kings were always likely to be oppressive because they acted in the interests of the ruling, propertied class, whose power depended on keeping the mass of the people poor and ignorant. He also rejected the notion that the coming of a 'Ratu Adil' could be predicted through prophecy, despite the belief of many Indonesians in the abilities of diviners and the popularity of auguries like the prophecy of Joyoboyo, which foresaw the coming of a just king after the brief reign of the 'yellow man'.¹⁰⁸ According to Tan Malaka, belief in such prophecies was pure superstition, since they were inevitably proven false, and ran counter to the 'materialist' principle of basing predictions on empirical realities.¹⁰⁹ To his mind, both the belief in the 'Ratu Adil' and the faith in the power of prophecy were essentially 'feudal' doctrines. Indonesians living in the era of Rajahs and Sultans had naturally put their faith in a 'Ratu Adil' as the means of their deliverance. Similarly, in the absence of a reliable method of forecasting political change, people were inclined to believe in soothsayers. Because Tan Malaka saw himself as the inheritor of a modern, 'scientific' political tradition in the form of Marxism, he felt able to criticize these approaches as so much primitive superstition. Historical materialism gave him a new framework in which to see

¹⁰⁶ Anderson discusses this tension in *Language and Power*, where he argues that nationalists had to balance indigenous and foreign languages to be politically successful; see Anderson, *Language and Power*, pp. 137-8.

¹⁰⁷ During the nineteenth century, several peasant revolts against colonial rule were led by religious experts who 'developed and transmitted the time honoured prophecies or vision of history concerning the coming of the Ratu Adil - the righteous king', Sartono Kartodirdjo, *The Peasants' Revolt of Banten in 1888: Its Conditions, Course and Sequel* (Martinus Nijhoff: 'S-Gravenhage, 1966), p. 4. In the twentieth century, the Sarekat Islam leader Tjokroaminoto was compared to the 'Ratu Adil', as was Sukarno. See Shiraishi, *Age in Motion*, pp. 66-7 and Mrazek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile*, pp. 87-8.

¹⁰⁸ Colin Wild and Peter Carey (eds.), *Born in Fire: The Indonesian Struggle for Independence* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), pp. 6-11.

¹⁰⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 190-1, 197.

Indonesian political thought, and enabled him to dismiss it as the product of a backward mode of production.

In this sense, Tan Malaka needs to be seen alongside other Indonesian intellectuals who in the twentieth century came to see aspects of Indonesian culture as unsuited to the modern world. The Islamic modernists, like Hamka, who critiqued certain Indonesian religious practices and educational methods were arguing in the same vein. Many Indonesians educated in the colonial school system, as Tan Malaka was, also shared his distaste for what they considered to be 'backward' elements of their own society. In 1905, Mas Goenawan Mangoenkoesoemo, a founding member of the first 'native' political society Budi Utomo, who was then a medical student in Batavia, argued that the Javanese ought to abandon those manners and customs which were blocking modernization.¹¹⁰ In 1935, the Minangkabau novelist Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, who graduated from the same school as Tan Malaka, claimed that too much of Indonesian intellectual life was in awe of traditional methods, especially in education.¹¹¹ At times Tan Malaka went further than any other critic in his denigration of Indonesian culture. In *Massa Actie* (1926), he claimed that Indonesia had not produced a single thinker of world historical importance, and that its greatest civilizational achievements were far behind those of the ancient Greeks.¹¹²

It would be wrong, however, to cast Tan Malaka solely as a critic of Indonesian political thought. He was aware of an indigenous political tradition, which he sought to engage with throughout his writings. Like other Indonesian political writers, he wanted to reconcile tradition with modernity rather than abandoning it altogether.¹¹³ After all, to forsake all Indonesian culture would be to admit that the Dutch had a monopoly on worthwhile learning, which anti-colonial

¹¹⁰ Akira Nagazumi, *The Dawn of Indonesian Nationalism, The Early Years of Budi Utomo, 1908-1918* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1972), p. 35.

¹¹¹ Soetomo, *Towards a Glorious Indonesia, Reminiscences and Observations of Dr. Soetomo*, ed. Paul W. van der Veur, trans. Suharni Soemarmo and Paul W. van der Veur (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), p. xlvii.

¹¹² Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 21.

¹¹³ An important example of this attempt to synthesize Western and Indonesian culture is the Taman Siswa school movement, begun by the Javanese political activist and educationalist Ki Hadjar Dewantara in 1922. Taman Siswa schools combined Western methods of learning, adapted from the ideas of Montessori, with a Javanese emphasis on community. See Ruth T. McVey, 'Taman Siswa and the Indonesian National Awakening', *Indonesia* 4 (1967), pp. 128-149.

activists were naturally reluctant to do. It is important, though, to distinguish between those parts of Indonesian heritage that Tan Malaka considered worth keeping and those he sought to eliminate. He was consistently hostile to certain institutions which had a recognizably Javanese stamp. Much of what he characterized as ‘feudal’ within Indonesian culture was Javanese. He associated autocratic kingship and aristocratic hierarchies primarily with Java, and claimed that both were legacies of Hinduism, which he believed had reached Java in the centuries after the time of Christ.¹¹⁴ By contrast, in the Minangkabau past he found institutions which were essentially communal and democratic: Minangkabau kingship, unlike the Javanese variety, was based on popular consent; villages in West Sumatra had historically been self-governing; the law in Minangkabau was administered communally, through public debate and consensus. In his autobiography, he characterized these institutions as ‘primitive Communist’, rather than ‘feudal’.¹¹⁵ The dialectical logic of historical materialism, whereby societies progressed from primitive Communism, to feudalism, to capitalism and ultimately Communism, meant that as Indonesia moved through this sequence, Minangkabau institutions would be regenerated, while Javanese ones would be destroyed.¹¹⁶ In several of his writings he conceived of Indonesian Communism as a kind of renewal of certain ‘original’ (‘asli’) communal institutions which had been corroded by feudalism and colonial capitalism. Ancient village democracy was a model for the future organization of society into soviets; communal ownership of land was a prototype for public ownership of industry; democratic village courts would be reproduced as people’s courts under a Communist dispensation. His advocacy of Communist revolution in Indonesia could thus be framed as a means of saving the positive parts of Indonesian society from the destructive influence of capitalism. In this sense, Tan Malaka’s Communism was an exercise in conservatism.

To see Tan Malaka as a promoter of Minangkabau institutions fits with Mrázek’s thesis that he was essentially a West Sumatran thinker rather than a Marxist. But the positive aspects of ‘Indonesia Asli’ which he praised were not monopolized by Minangkabau. Village democracy and communal landholding were also widespread in Java, as was the ethos of mutual help (‘gotong

¹¹⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 69.

¹¹⁵ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 48.

¹¹⁶ Tan Malaka believed that history moved through this sequence of modes of production. See Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, vol. 3, p. 50.

royong'). Moreover, the communal villages in both West Sumatra and Java had historically co-existed with monarchical government, and the monarchy was thought to be the source of West Sumatra's legal code, which underpinned its 'primitive Communist' institutions, meaning that 'feudalism' and 'primitive Communism' were in fact inescapably entangled.¹¹⁷ Tan Malaka's case for Communism being a continuation of 'original' communal institutions thus required certain historical distortions.

In places, Tan Malaka was willing to break decisively with Minangkabau thought. His conception of social development was at odds with conventional Minangkabau ways of imagining change over time. The Minangkabau notion that society progressed through the gradual incorporation of foreign elements into the corpus of customary law, or 'adat', via a process of consensus, ran counter to Tan Malaka's conviction that social change occurred only through a violent confrontation between classes. For Tan Malaka, it was class struggle, not 'mufakat' ('consensus'), that was the engine of history. His view of society as being composed of various classes, defined by their relation to the means of production, though inconsistently held, nonetheless had no parallel in Minangkabau thought. His was also an international vision of politics, which dealt in terms of universal categories such as 'capitalism' and 'proletariat', unlike the highly local Minangkabau language of politics, which spoke only of the 'Alam Minangkabau' ('the Minangkabau realm') and the 'rantau' (the world outside).¹¹⁸ He saw Minangkabau institutions *through* these universal terms. Thus, its system of landholding could be described as 'primitive Communism', just as Javanese civilization could be termed 'feudalism'. As he wrote in the third volume of *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, reading Engels's book on primitive Communism, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), helped him see Minangkabau communal life as one example of a generic type of society: 'When reading Engels' book I have been struck frequently by the number of similarities between the original (*Indian*) American society and that in several regions of Indonesia. As one example, let me mention in passing that I see little difference between ancient Minangkabau society, in the dawn of its existence, and this

¹¹⁷ On the role of the kings in formulating Minangkabau 'adat', see Abdullah 'Modernization in the Minangkabau World', pp. 184-6.

¹¹⁸ On this distinction see Taufik Abdullah, 'Adat and Islam: An Examination of Conflict in Minangkabau', *Indonesia* 2 (1966), pp. 1-24.

“self-acting armed organization of the population””, that is, a classless society which, according to Engels, had no need for the state and so existed in a condition of ‘primitive Communism’.¹¹⁹ It is thus impossible to separate out the Marxist and Minangkabau elements in Tan Malaka’s thought, as Mrázek does, since they informed one another. He may have been attracted to Marxism because of his youth in the communal world of the Minangkabau villages, but he ultimately came to see that world through the lens of Marxist terminology.

The Development of Tan Malaka’s Thought

This thesis is structured both chronologically and thematically. Unlike the majority of scholarship on Tan Malaka, which focuses either on his career during the 1920s or his role in the revolution, it takes in the entire span of his life, and covers all of his published books and pamphlets. Only two of these have been translated into English: his autobiography, *From Jail to Jail*, translated by Jarvis and published in 1991, and *Naar De ‘Republiek Indonesia’*, translated by Geoffrey Gunn in 1996. During the first decades of Suharto’s anti-Communist New Order regime there was little publication of Tan Malaka’s works. In the 1980s, however, the Yayasan Massa publishing house reprinted several of his works: *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* (1980), *Menudju Republik Indonesia* (1986), *Thesis* (1987), *Gerpolek* (1987), and *Parlemen atau Soviet* (1987). These editions were careful to note Tan Malaka’s status as a national hero in their opening sections, presumably to avoid the charge of spreading Communist sedition. The opening section of the Yayasan Massa edition of *Thesis* includes the text of Sukarno’s 1963 order granting Tan Malaka the status of ‘Pahlawan Kemerdekaan Nasional’ (‘national hero of independence’).¹²⁰ Since the end the New Order in 1998, there has been a flood of republications of his major writings: *Massa Actie* (published as *Aksi Massa* in 2002), *Gerpolek* (2011), *Madilog* (2014), *Muslihat*, *Politik*, and *Rencana Ekonomi* (published together in 2014). Some of his writings are harder to access, however, existing only in their original published form, in some cases with just a single edition surviving. In order to access his works from the 1920s, I consulted *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*,

¹¹⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 48.

¹²⁰ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 5.

tetapi tidak toendoek kepada kebenaran (1922) and *Semangat Moeda* (1926) at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

Throughout this thesis, these sources are supplemented by newspapers and pamphlets produced by other Indonesian political actors, and by other Asian radicals. Materials from the left-wing and Islamic-Communist Indonesian press, which are discussed in Chapters Two and Four, were accessed at the KITLV archive at Leiden University.¹²¹ Certain pamphlets from the 1920s and the revolution were found through the libraries of Universitas Indonesia and Cornell University.¹²² These sources put us in a position to contextualize Tan Malaka's works and to chart the development of his thought across the entire corpus of his writings. Chapters Two, Three, and Four address Tan Malaka's writings from the period 1921 to 1926, when he was a member of the PKI. These chapters cover, successively, Indonesian history, world history, and religion. Each of these subjects formed a part of Tan Malaka's 'scientific' analysis of Indonesian society, since each provided a separate piece of the puzzle of how to understand Indonesia's potential for social change, and the appropriate means for bringing that change about. Chapter Five is a study of his treatise on philosophy and science, *Madilog*, written in 1943 in Java during the Japanese occupation. *Madilog* was a continuation of his early interest in Indonesian culture, which he had identified in his 1920s writings as the decisive factor holding back political revolution in his country. Chapter Six engages with his revolutionary writings. These, like the texts from the 1920s, were attempts to analyze the political dynamics of Indonesian society and determine its likely future, composed against the backdrop of his struggle with Sukarno, Mohammad Hatta, and Sutan Sjahrir for the leadership of the revolution.

¹²¹ The main PKI journals were *Het Vrije Woord* ('The Free Word'), published from 1916-22, *Sinar Hindia* ('The Light of the Indies'), which ran from 1918 to 1924, and *Soeara Ra'jat* ('The People's Voice'), published from 1918 to 1923. The two Islamic-Communist papers in West Sumatra were *Pemandangan Islam* and *Djago! Djago!*, both begun in 1923. The Javanese Islamic-Communist journal was *Medan Moeslimin*, which ran until 1924. These are all accessible through the KITLV archive at Leiden. The international Communist paper *Inprecorr* was consulted at the British Library in London.

¹²² I consulted Semaun's *Penuntun Kaum Buruh* [1920] (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Jendela, 2000) at the Universitas Indonesia library and Muhammad Yamin's *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia* (1946) at the Cornell University Library.

By studying all of Tan Malaka's writings, it is possible to see his development as a thinker. I will argue, in agreement with Jarvis, that the major elements of Tan Malaka's thought were in place by 1926. His views on Indonesian society and political economy did not substantially change between then and the revolution. In fact, he became trapped in a particular analysis of Indonesian life which he had developed during the 1920s, an analysis that increasingly struggled to accommodate new realities on the ground. His belief in the necessity of a radical social revolution in Indonesia and the impossibility of a moderate anti-colonial leadership seemed apposite in the 1920s, when the PKI was the leading force in the anti-colonial movement and more moderate parties, such as the Javanese association Budi Utomo (the 'Beautiful Endeavour') and Sarekat Islam, were losing popularity as they avoided confrontation with the colonial government. It made less sense in the context of the 1940s, however, when Sukarno's nationalist politics prevailed and the Republican leadership had the power and authority to restrain the radicalism of the 'pemuda' and carry through a policy of diplomacy with the Dutch. Tan Malaka was thus unable to make sense of the failure of the 'pemuda' revolution in 1946 and the triumph of Sukarno and the advocates of 'diplomasi'. Increasingly one gets the sense that rather than being able to see ahead through his mastery of social analysis, he was struggling to keep up. While he foresaw the likely failure of the 1926-7 rebellion, he could not account for the upsurge of 'pemuda' radicalism in 1945, even as he welcomed it, or for his sudden reversal of fortunes in 1946, which he lamented from prison. Although he claimed Marxism offered a flexible approach to politics, where strategies could be molded to existing conditions with scientific accuracy, his Marxist method in fact left him wedded to a set of questionable assumptions by the late-1940s, languishing in jail and far from power.

Indonesian History and Revolution

In his memoir, Tan Malaka wrote that until 1917, ‘Politics was a *terra incognita* for me... I neither hated nor liked it, for I knew absolutely nothing of its existence.’¹²³ This was not entirely true, since he had observed the governance of Minangkabau villages during his youth, but he had not engaged seriously with political literature until his time in the Netherlands. Having grown up in West Sumatra, he may have had little exposure to anti-colonial politics, which began to gather momentum just as he left Indonesia for the Netherlands in 1913. The ‘native’ political societies Budi Utomo and Sarekat Islam had both begun not in Sumatra but in Java, in 1908 and 1912 respectively, as did the more radical Indische Partij (‘Indies Party’), founded in Batavia in 1912, whose leaders were exiled the following year for announcing a ‘declaration of war’ on the colonial ‘system of government’.¹²⁴ It is possible that all of this passed Tan Malaka by during his schooldays at the ‘Sekolah Radja’ in Fort De Kock. It was not until the fevered years of the First World War, which he described as the ‘time of *Sturm und Drang*, when ideas were leaping about, hiding, turning left and right, and breaking through like dammed-up water’, that politics became

¹²³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 27.

¹²⁴ Paul W. van der Veur, *The Lion and the Gadfly, Dutch colonialism and the spirit of E.F.E. Douwes Dekker* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. xxii.

inescapable for him.¹²⁵ Devoting much of his spare time to reading while in the Netherlands, he was initially attracted to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, having read *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5) and *The Will to Power* (1901) in Dutch translation. Impressed by Nietzsche's depiction of the 'iron will' and elevation of the 'Übermensch', which he took to be characteristic of all German culture, he attempted to join the German army, only to be told they did not accept foreigners.¹²⁶ Soon after this, he developed an interest in the French revolution, triggered by his reading of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837), again in Dutch. The universality of the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity appealed to him, offering as they did the possibility of a society where distinctions of race and nation might cease to matter.¹²⁷ Not long after reading Carlyle, however, he came across Marxism, while attempting to understand the October Revolution of 1917. He read Frank van der Goes's 1912 translation of the first volume of *Capital* (1867), followed by Kautsky's *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* (1887), alongside a host of contemporary Dutch pamphlets on the Bolsheviks.¹²⁸

In *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* he described his discovery of Marxism in terms of a religious awakening. Grasping the essential materialist principle that 'material conditions stimulated ideas', transported him to 'a garden of happiness in which to reign'. He was gripped by a powerful sense of his duty to transform the world, 'regardless of the difficulties I might face.'¹²⁹ It was this sense of missionary purpose that made him want to teach the children of plantation labourers when he returned to Indonesia in 1919. In Deli he came face to face with the appalling conditions of Indonesian capitalism. As he put it in his autobiography, 'The very memories of Deli at the time I was there (December 1919 to June 1921) even now tear at my heart. There the sharp conflict between capital and labor, between colonizer and colonized, was played out. The natural wealth of Deli gave rise to the most wealthy, cruel, arrogant, and conservative colonizing capitalist class

¹²⁵ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 27.

¹²⁶ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 26.

¹²⁷ He wrote in his memoir that 'One proof of the "liberty, equality, and fraternity" of the French nation was their hospitality toward the colored peoples who were in their country at that time. Was it not a fact that the Arabs, Senegalese, and Annamese were faithfully and firmly defending "France" in the European battlefield?', Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 27.

¹²⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 27.

¹²⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 27-8.

as well as the most oppressed, exploited, and humiliated class, the Indonesian contract coolie.’¹³⁰ It was in Deli that he composed *Sovjet atau parlement?* (‘Parliament or Soviet?’), which would later become his first published political tract. In 1921, having seen through his contract at the plantation school, he travelled to Java, intending to ‘set up an education system suited to the existing needs and spirit of the masses.’¹³¹ He was recruited by the PKI leader Semaun that year in Yogyakarta and given the task of setting up a school for workers’ children in Semarang. He would remain attached to the PKI for a further six tumultuous years, before eventually breaking away in 1927 to form his own party, the Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI). During his association with the PKI he published his first political writings:

1. *Sovjet atau parlement?* (‘Soviet or Parliament?’), Semarang, 1921
2. *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan, tetapi tidak toendoek kepada kebenaran* (‘A Step towards Might, but not towards Right’), Berlin, 1922
3. *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia’* (‘Towards the “Indonesian Republic”’), Canton, 1925; Tokyo (=Manila), 1925
4. *Semangat Moeda* (‘The New Spirit’), Tokyo (=Manila), 1926
5. *Massa Actie* (‘Mass Action’), no recorded place of publication, 1926

Taken together, these publications represent the first sustained exercise in Communist political thought in Indonesia, and in Southeast Asia more broadly. The Vietnamese Marxist scholar Truong-Chinh did not develop a comparable historical-materialist analysis of Vietnamese history until 1948.¹³² The following chapters analyze these texts thematically, from three perspectives. This chapter examines them as reflections on Indonesian history, seen through the prism of historical materialism. Chapter Three traces the place of world history in these works. Chapter Four discusses the role of religion, particularly Islam.

¹³⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 43.

¹³¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 63.

¹³² See ‘Marxism and Vietnamese Culture’ in Truong-Chinh, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977).

Each of these themes is connected to the overarching subject of these books: revolution. Tan Malaka was an active revolutionary in these years and his writings were addressed to the problem of how to create a revolutionary transformation of Indonesian society. His analyses of Indonesian history, world history and religion were instrumental, in that they were intended to illuminate the way forward towards Communism. This was not an abstract subject in the 1921-6 period, because at that time the members of the PKI were engaged in serious debate over whether to launch a bid for power, which they did in 1926 - a decision which Tan Malaka opposed.

This chapter begins by sketching the context of the state of the PKI and Indonesian politics in the years between 1921 and 1926. It then documents Tan Malaka's discussions of Indonesian history, and contextualizes these discussions within the ongoing debate over whether the PKI should attempt to seize power through a revolution. Finally, Tan Malaka's analysis is contrasted to the arguments of other Marxists whose works he had read.

The PKI, 1921-6

The period 1921-6 marks the tail-end of Indonesia's 'age in motion'.¹³³ The constellation of cultural associations, trade unions and political parties which sprang up in the early twentieth century, and which began to openly challenge the colonial government during the 1910s, started to decline during these years, as the colonial state stepped up its efforts to suppress dissent, arresting and deporting opposition leaders and curtailing freedom of the press. The failed Communist uprisings in Java and Sumatra of 1926-7, which were followed by the mass arrest and deportation of political radicals, marked the end of an era. Indonesian political life did not reach the same level of intensity until the Second World War.

When Tan Malaka arrived in Semarang in the summer of 1921, the political mood of the city seemed to him somewhat subdued. The wave of radicalism, strikes and political violence

¹³³ This term was coined by Takashi Shiraishi and is a play on the Indonesian word 'pergerakan' ('movement'), which was used to describe the national anti-colonial movement but which also denotes motion and upheaval. See Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926*.

which had gripped Java at the close of the First World War was ebbing. Government repression was setting in.¹³⁴ The Sarekat Islam (SI), which had been the major force in Indonesian politics over the previous decade, was reeling from the arrest of its leader, Tjokroaminoto, and was rapidly shedding support.¹³⁵ The SI was also increasingly at odds with its ally, the PKI, over the Communists' secular language of 'class war' and their association with the atheist Communist International, which the PKI had joined in 1920. At its 1921 Congress, held in October, the central branch of the Sarekat Islam imposed party discipline and expelled all PKI members.

In 1921, the PKI itself was moving towards an increasingly radical and oppositional stance in the face of mounting government hostility. The Dutch trade unionists and socialist intellectuals who had established the party in 1914 were being hounded out of the country. Henk Sneevliet, the party's founder, had been banished from the colony in 1919. He was soon followed by his deputy, Adolf Baars. In their place the Javanese trade unionist Semaun, though still a man in his twenties, was now leading the party. The departure of its Dutch members gave the PKI a much more Indonesian character, a fact that Darsono, a member of the committee who had been converted to Communism by witnessing Sneevliet's defence speech, believed would aid its efforts to gain popular support.¹³⁶ Having opted out of the new Volksraad ('People's Council'), the advisory parliament set up by the government in 1918, which had only limited representation for 'natives' and was based on a restricted franchise, the party was focusing on reaching out the masses directly, through trade unions and, under the banner of the Sarekat Islam, people's schools ('sekolah rakyat'). These schools were designed to offer basic education to the children of workers, since the provision of government schools remained extremely limited. It was Semaun's intention for Tan Malaka to run one such proposed school in Semarang, which he did briefly in 1921-2.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1 (1991), pp. 61-2.

¹³⁵ Tjokroaminoto was arrested and tried in the aftermath of the 'Afdeling B' ('Section B') scandal in 1919, in which the colonial police uncovered a secret Sarekat Islam operation to overthrow the government. See McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 40-1.

¹³⁶ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 204.

¹³⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 64-5. He recorded his experiences of teaching in the pamphlet *S.I. Semarang dan Onderwijs* ('The Semarang S.I. and Education') (Semarang: Drukkerij Minahassa, 1921).

Semarang was then known as the 'kota merah' ('red city') and was the PKI's strongest centre. Located on Java's north coast, it was a commercial hub and a semi-industrial city, with a busy harbour, factories, mills, and streets full of firms selling imported goods.¹³⁸ Its population had almost doubled since 1905, expanding from 76,413 in that year to 126,628 in 1920.¹³⁹ In 1930, a fifth of the city's population worked in industry, while a further tenth worked in transport. Thousands were employed as workers on the docks and as day labourers unloading goods from trains.¹⁴⁰ When Tan Malaka arrived, the PKI dominated both the city's Sarekat Islam branch and the railway workers' union (the Vereniging van Spoor-en Tramwegpersoneel or VSTP), which was headquartered there and chaired by Semaun. It was the VSTP's press that published *Sovjet atau parlement?* in 1921. The PKI also published a newspaper from Semarang, *Sinar Hindia* ('The Light of the Indies'). Despite the depth of its popular presence, the continual arrest and exile of the party's leaders meant that it lacked capable cadres in its upper ranks. In 1921, the party had only 208 members, a figure that was down from previous years.¹⁴¹ When Semaun departed for Moscow in October 1921, Tan Malaka, who had been a party member for only a few months, was persuaded to stand for chairman, a position he was duly elected to at the party Congress in December 1921.

On his election, Tan Malaka faced two immediate problems. The first was whether to seek a reconciliation with the SI leadership, or to break with them entirely, as some within the party urged. On this issue, he was clear that the PKI should continue to cooperate with the SI. His efforts in this direction will be considered in Chapter Four. The second problem he faced was how to retain the PKI's radical character in an increasingly restrictive political environment. Semaun had sought to shield the PKI from government repression by avoiding direct confrontation and instead building up support gradually, through the labour movement and schools. Tan Malaka's approach was less cautious. He resolved to challenge the government on its police powers and sought to organize a campaign against the right to banish citizens of the Indies (the 'exorbitante rechten'), a

¹³⁸ Ruth McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 14-15.

¹³⁹ A.J. Gooszen, *A Demographic History of the Indonesian Archipelago, 1880-1942* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1999), p. 77.

¹⁴⁰ Gooszen, *A Demographic History of the Indonesian Archipelago, 1880-1942*, p. 78.

¹⁴¹ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 396.

campaign which he hoped would gain support from all anti-government parties.¹⁴² Before this campaign could begin, however, he was forced to take a stand on a strike launched by workers in government-owned pawnshops, which broke out in January 1922. Although the pawnshop workers' union was closer to SI than the PKI, Tan Malaka decided to support the strike and hinted that the PKI would escalate the industrial action into a general strike. For this he was arrested and exiled in March 1922.¹⁴³

While in exile, Tan Malaka had time to reflect on Indonesian politics within the *longue durée* of Indonesian history, no longer preoccupied by the day-to-day work of running the PKI or teaching. As he travelled, he could also begin to see Indonesia in a regional and global context, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. Free from the Dutch censorship regime, he could write as he wished, publishing his books overseas, before having them smuggled into Indonesia. In his absence, the PKI moved in an even more radical direction. All hopes of a reconciliation with the SI leadership were ended in 1923, as the pro-PKI branches of the SI withdrew to form the Sarekat Rakyat ('People's Association'). The PKI's 1924 Congress resolved to strive for the establishment of a Soviet state in Indonesia, which went beyond the party's previous programme, composed by Adolf Baars in 1918, which had pledged to create democratic assemblies and nationalize industries, rather than immediately set up soviets.¹⁴⁴ In December 1925, the party's leaders met in secret at the Prambanan Temple complex in Central Java and decided to begin preparations for a revolutionary seizure of power. This shift towards a more revolutionary position may have been partially inspired by Tan Malaka's own writings, particularly *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Tan Malaka, who was at this point in Manila, on discovering the party's plan to begin a revolt, made an attempt to have the decision reversed, giving a report with his reservations to his colleague Alimin, to be delivered to a party meeting in Singapore. Alimin deliberately withheld his views from the PKI leadership, however, who pushed on with their plans and made their way

¹⁴² McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 119.

¹⁴³ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 122.

¹⁴⁴ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 188-9; Fritjof Tichelman and Irfan Habib, *Marx on Indonesia and India* ([Germany]: Karl Marx Haus, 1983), p. 21.

to Moscow in 1926 to seek arms and money. It was in this context that Tan Malaka composed *Semangat Muda* (1926) and *Massa Actie* (1926), both of which argued against a Communist uprising in the near future. He succeeded in dissuading some PKI branches from joining the revolt, which broke out sporadically in West Java at the close of 1926, and in West Sumatra on New Year's Day, 1927, entailing industrial action, attacks on indigenous administrators, and the killing of a handful of Europeans.¹⁴⁵ By 4 January the revolt had been put down. In the aftermath 13,000 suspected Communists were arrested, four and a half thousand were imprisoned, and over one thousand were sent into internal exile, to the concentration camp of Boven Digul in West Papua.¹⁴⁶ The PKI was not resurrected in Indonesia until 1945, though it retained an underground presence throughout the remainder of the Dutch colonial period and during the Japanese occupation.¹⁴⁷

This political narrative has been masterfully told by Ruth McVey in *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (1965). What has not been explained, however, is why Tan Malaka took apparently contradictory positions, encouraging Communist revolution in 1925, but arguing against it in 1926. To understand why he adopted these stances, we need to develop a fuller image of his political thought. This chapter will address his vision of history, which was crucial in determining his views on the revolutionary potential of Indonesia. Discussions of history appear particularly prominently in *Sovjet atau parlement?*, *Toendoek kepada Kekoeasaan* and *Massa Actie*. The version of Indonesian history presented in these works is not entirely consistent though and, as we shall see, changed in important ways across the texts.

¹⁴⁵ M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), p. 179; 'The Bantam Report' in Harry J. Benda and Ruth T. McVey (eds.), *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2009), p. 110.

¹⁴⁶ M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, p. 179.

¹⁴⁷ See Anton Lucas (ed.), *Local Opposition and Underground Resistance to the Japanese in Java, 1942-1945* (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1986).

Tan Malaka's Historical Method

Tan Malaka first began to read histories during his school days at the 'Sekolah Radja'.¹⁴⁸ He was immediately drawn to the subject, as he recalled in his autobiography: 'When I began to read with great pleasure histories of the world, they opened new vistas to me, and my attention was held by the strategies and victories of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and Genghis Khan.'¹⁴⁹ As he read, however, he began to feel that historians' focus on military leaders obscured more than it revealed: 'my interest in Napoleon's glorious ideals and force of his personality was limited by the question, for what purpose and for what class were all these wars and killings carried out?' His encounter with Marxism in the Netherlands provided him with a new methodology for understanding historical events. He came to see histories centred on great individuals as 'bourgeois' and 'superficial'. Historians had to address 'deeper causes' if their analyses were to have any real worth. These causes were to be found in 'the needs of production, owned or controlled by a particular class in a state operated in the interest of that class.' Wars were ultimately driven by material interests, and politics was a form of class struggle. In other words, he became convinced that historical materialism was the best way to understand the past.¹⁵⁰

In his view, existing histories of Indonesia were generally inadequate. The manner in which Indonesian history was taught in government schools was hopelessly prejudiced and gave far too favourable a view of the Dutch East India Company: 'In the war between the Dutch and the Javanese or the Acehnese, for example, it is never said that the Dutch robbed and cheated. Our people are always in the wrong, tricksters, stupid and lazy, dirty and thieving.'¹⁵¹ Yet Indonesian historical writing had its own shortcomings. As he wrote in *Massa Actie*, 'The history of Indonesia is not easy to read, let alone write. The histories of our country are full of magic, tales, fragments and contradictions. There are no historians from the kingdoms of Majapahit or Mataram who can

¹⁴⁸ The curriculum at the 'Sekolah Radja' in Fort De Kock comprised Dutch, Malay, handwriting, arithmetic, geometry, Indies geography and history, Dutch history, natural science, surveying, drawing, draftsmanship, agricultural techniques, pedagogy, singing and physical education. Elizabeth E. Graves, *The Minangkabau Response to Dutch Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 115.

¹⁴⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 37.

¹⁵⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 37.

¹⁵¹ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 56.

match the historians that Rome produced 1400 years earlier, like Tacitus and Caesar.’ The chroniclers of Indonesia’s past were ‘storytellers, flatterers of the *raja* who told beautiful and glorious tales to captivate the heart of their listener.’ Nonetheless, within these histories there was a kernel of truth. As he put it, ‘Amidst the clutter in these writings, the truth is visible, the islands of Indonesia come into view, the kingdoms and cities that rose and fell, the marching of soldiers, the wars won and lost, the riches, the tranquility, and the ebb and flow of civilizations’.¹⁵² Tan Malaka sought to add substance to this blurred outline of Indonesia’s past. His goal was to write a new history of Indonesia from an Indonesian perspective that would address both the bias of colonial history and the imperfect style of Indonesian historical writing. This history would necessarily remain impressionistic, due to a dearth of reliable empirical evidence - he complained in *Massa Actie* that there was not a single statistic available from the Majapahit era (1293-c.1500)¹⁵³ - but it would nonetheless represent a step in the right direction, because it would be founded on a correct historical methodology.

Tan Malaka openly acknowledged that Marx was the source of his approach to history. *Semangat Muda* begins by echoing the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) on the universality of historical materialism: ‘Every society on the face of this earth, in Asia or Europe, ancient or modern, is based on classes [klassen] or castes, specifically a high caste, a low caste and a middle caste. According to the thought of KARL MARX, the development of these castes is a result of the organization of the means of production, such as hoes, chisels and machines.’¹⁵⁴ Seeing history in this way allowed the historian to grasp the essential dynamics of any society: ‘The existence of a particular caste society gives rise to its politics, religion and law [adat] ... Karl Marx has said the history of all nations is a struggle between the lower and the higher castes, between the exploiters and the exploited, between the oppressor and the oppressed.’¹⁵⁵ These dictums applied

¹⁵² Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 20-1.

¹⁵³ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁴ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 1; the parallel text in *The Communist Manifesto* is the famous opening statement that ‘The history of all hitherto societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, no hidden, no open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-construction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.’ Karl Marx

to Indonesia as much as to the West. Indeed, he criticized rival political figures such as Cipto Mangunkusumo, from the nationalist Nationaal Indische Partij (NIP), and the Sarekat Islam leaders Tjokroaminoto and Abdul Muis for their failure to understand Indonesian politics through the lens of Marxism: 'Nationalists and Islamists in our country do not at all understand Marxism, specifically the existence and position of castes in Indonesia and the relationship between caste and politics'.¹⁵⁶ Communists saw more clearly, he believed, informed by their historical materialist outlook.

Many of Tan Malaka's historical categories were direct translations or transliterations of Marxian ones. To distinguish historical eras, he employed terms such as 'feodalisme' ('feudalism'), 'kapitalisme' ('capitalism'), and 'kommunisme' ('Communism'). To delineate social groups, he wrote of the 'kaum proletar' ('the proletariat'), 'kaum borjuis' ('bourgeoisie'), and the 'kaum tani' ('peasantry'). Despite the formal similarity between the Malay translations and their Marxian originals, however, Tan Malaka gave many of these terms new meanings as he used them. As we shall below in this chapter, Indonesian 'feudalism' did not have much in common with feudalism as described by Marx, while Indonesian 'capitalism' differed markedly from Western capitalism. Moreover, in Indonesia 'capitalism' and 'feudalism' appeared not to be separate modes of production at all. Instead, the two systems were interwoven. Multiple historical eras overlapped, co-existing in the same time and space. Similar problems arose in sorting out 'proletarians' and 'peasants', since in Indonesia industry, as an adjunct to plantation agriculture, was located in the countryside and the same labourers alternated between industrial and agricultural work. At points, Tan Malaka fell back on the general term 'rakyat' ('the people') to describe the constituency of the Communists, despite the fact that this term did not describe any relationship to the means of production.

Just as Arif Dirlik has claimed that Mao Zedong placed 'Marxism within a Chinese world of discourse that in its vocabulary is not readily accessible to the outsider, no matter how

and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), pp. 477-519, at p. 482.

¹⁵⁶ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 31.

thoroughly s/he may be armed with Marxist concepts', it may be said of Tan Malaka that he expressed Marxism in a distinctively Indonesian idiom.¹⁵⁷ He was not afraid to exchange Marxian terms for vernacular ones, speaking frequently of the 'kromo' (the common people) or 'kaum kuli' ('the coolie class') rather than the proletariat. This fit with his view of Marxism as flexible approach to politics. Altering or supplementing its terminology was part of adapting it to local circumstances: 'we must observe the *geest* or spirit of Marxism, that programmes must fit with national conditions.'¹⁵⁸

It should be borne in mind that Tan Malaka's essays in Indonesian history were not idle scholarly exercises, but had direct political implications. Questions of history and revolution have always been inseparable in Marxism. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels made it clear that revolutions occurred only at specific historical junctures: the expansion of commerce in the early modern period laid the ground for the triumph of the bourgeoisie over the old feudal aristocracy;¹⁵⁹ the growth of industry in the nineteenth century was, in their view, creating the conditions for the bourgeoisie to be overthrown by the proletariat.¹⁶⁰ Any proposals for revolutionary change which did not take account of the dynamics of history were dismissed as 'Utopian', because they assumed that a new society could be brought about regardless of historical circumstances.¹⁶¹ As Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): 'Men make history their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'¹⁶² It is not surprising, therefore, that Communist revolutionaries have been much concerned to understand the history of the societies that they hoped to transform.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ Arif Dirlik, 'Mao Zedong and "Chinese Marxism"', in Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino and Rebecca F. Karl (eds.), *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 119-148, at p. 120.

¹⁵⁸ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 35.

¹⁵⁹ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 485.

¹⁶⁰ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 486-96.

¹⁶¹ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 514-17.

¹⁶² Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: ABAA, 1975), p. 15.

¹⁶³ Trotsky's *Results and Prospects* [1905] (in *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974)) and *1905* [1906] (London: Allen Lane, 1972), for example, are both essays on Russian history.

Tan Malaka was conscious of the importance of historical arguments for justifying his political opinions. In his view, it was sensitivity to historical dynamics which distinguished Communists from earlier generations of political actors in Indonesia, who had fallen back on 'superstitious' methods to determine their actions. In *Massa Actie*, he noted that the twelfth century King Joyoboyo of Kediri had consulted an astrologer to determine the future of his realm, yielding the famous prophecy that a 'yellow people' would rule in Java for 'the life of a maize plant'.¹⁶⁴ In *Semangat Muda*, he wrote that 'in the feudal age, the schemes for bringing about a new government involved soothsayers and incense. A *guru* or a *kyai* [Islamic holy man] would divine from books or palm reading when the *Ratu Adil* or Imam Mahdi would come.'¹⁶⁵

The success of Communism was not guaranteed by religious prophecy, like the Imam Mahdi, or by reference to a superior past political order, such as that embodied by the *Ratu Adil*.¹⁶⁶ Rather, Communism's triumph was underwritten by the logic of historical materialism, which purported to show that Communist society would inevitably emerge from capitalism as a result of the historical development of capitalism itself. As such, Communist political reasoning represented a major departure in Indonesian political thought. Communists like Tan Malaka claimed knowledge of which interventions would be effective not because they had divine inspiration or because they were restoring an old order, but since they understood how societies evolved and when they were ripe for revolutionary change. Producing an accurate account of Indonesia's history was thus a critical task for Tan Malaka, since it would provide an apparently scientific answer to the question of whether the PKI should embark on a revolutionary course.

Pre-colonial Indonesia

Tan Malaka used a variety of terms to refer to the distant Indonesian past, none of which were taken from Marx: 'zaman dahulu' ('the old era'), 'zaman purbakala' ('the ancient age'), 'zaman

¹⁶⁴ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 25.

¹⁶⁵ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁶⁶ John Dunn makes this point in *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 5-7.

yang lalu' ('the past age'), or simply 'sebelum zaman Kompeni' ('before the time of the Company').¹⁶⁷ In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he characterized this era as the age of the 'raja', a time when the lands of the Indies were ruled by despotic kings. Rulers in this period had absolute power, being free from any parliamentary check. Although occasionally there was a ruler who 'beraja yang adil' ('reigned justly'), most kings governed as tyrants.¹⁶⁸ The exception to this rule was the Minangkabau lands of West Sumatra, where the people were self-governing.¹⁶⁹

A more positive image of old Indonesia was presented in *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*. Here Tan Malaka claimed that while the power of the kings was technically absolute, it was rarely exercised, because monarchs were not generally interventionist: 'although sometimes there was a king who was arbitrary and despotic, he could not swallow up the property of his subjects'.¹⁷⁰ Most Indonesians, he said, lived simple and untroubled lives in the 'desa' (village), as farmers and artisans. Because villages held land communally in this era, none went hungry from a lack of access to the fruit of the means of production. As he put it, in the time when 'every village had a rice field', then 'every peasant had enough rice, buffalos and cows' and 'every house had woven fabrics'.¹⁷¹

This era, in his view, was in many respects a golden age. It was the time when Indonesian poetry, art, architecture and music had reached their highest refinement: 'The beautiful wayang, gamelan, books and temples certainly prove that the land of Java before the time of the Company was full of wisdom, wealth and civilization'.¹⁷² This was an age when 'there was still wealth and dignity among the people', when the great temples of Borobudur and Mendut had been constructed, which 'today still stand strong and magnificent and are famous around the world ...

¹⁶⁷ The phrase 'zaman kuno' is used in *Parlemen Atau Soviet* at p. 112, 'zaman purbakala' is used in the same work at p. 7; 'zaman yang lalu' appears in *Aksi Masa* at p. 138; 'sebelum zaman Kompeni' is used in *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, at p. 10.

¹⁶⁸ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁹ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 98.

¹⁷⁰ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 9.

¹⁷¹ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 9.

¹⁷² Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 10.

who in our country now or in Europe could match the skill of that time?’ The artisans of Java, Aceh and Minangkabau had crafted fabrics and metalworks of famous quality.¹⁷³

Besides the kings, and the farmers and artisans of the ‘desa’, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan* also identified a mercantile class in pre-colonial Indonesia. This class sold the goods produced by the country’s craftsmen across Asia. The presence of a thriving mercantile community was attested by (un-named) Indonesian historical sources: ‘the histories bear witness that in early times the sea was full of the ships of the Javanese. Ships that sailed to Malaka, Siam, Hindustan and Parsi.’¹⁷⁴ Gresik, Jepara and Tuban had once been prosperous port cities.¹⁷⁵ Pre-colonial Indonesia had, Tan Malaka claimed, been both an agricultural and a commercial society, a combination of autocracy and proto-socialism, with a proud and flourishing culture. This halcyon period was ruptured, however, with the arrival of colonial rule.

The ‘Age of the Company’

For Tan Malaka, the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (known as the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC) in Indonesia at the end of the sixteenth century marked a new phase of Indonesian history, the ‘zaman Kompeni’ (‘age of the Company’). In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he provided a brief sketch of how the Dutch became entangled with the Indies. He narrated how the Dutch had been drawn to the Indies by their desire for profits, following Spanish and Portuguese traders. The VOC, unlike earlier groups of Asian merchants, attained its profits through force: indigenous labourers were made to produce export crops, such as cloves and nutmeg, while rival traders were eliminated, establishing a Dutch monopoly that extracted profits back to the Netherlands. By manipulating local rulers, the VOC extended its influence across the archipelago. Any acts of rebellion - and there were many, climaxing in Diponegoro’s revolt of 1825-30 - were ruthlessly crushed, first by the Company, then by the Dutch colonial government which succeeded it in 1800. During the nineteenth century, the Dutch intensified their exploitation of indigenous

¹⁷³ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁵ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 10.

labour through the Culture System (1830-1870), a system of forced cultivation of export crops which operated through the ‘sweat and blood of the *Kromo*’ and ‘drained mountains of treasure to the Netherlands’.¹⁷⁶

In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, Tan Malaka discussed the consequences of the monopolistic policy of the Dutch for indigenous commerce. He wrote, ‘the ships of the Javanese disappeared’, replaced by the ‘ships of foreign countries’. The once great ports of Gresik, Tuban and Bantam became ‘villages without importance.’¹⁷⁷ The flourishing native trade of pre-colonial Indonesia was, in his analysis, entirely destroyed by Company rule.

The impact of industry

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Tan Malaka argued that Dutch imperialism had entered a new era, with the inception of the so-called ‘Liberal period’ (c. 1870-1900), when the colonial government had opened up the country to private capital, ending the government’s monopoly on the export trade. This was a watershed in Tan Malaka’s view because it marked the beginning of the importation of transformative new technologies. The emblematic new invention of this era was the railway. In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he noted that in the days of the Company - and before - goods were mostly transported by horses, buffalos and sailing boats. After 1875, however, came ‘trains as fast as lightning (a flash) running every hour with tea, coffee, oil, sugar, and so on, from the villages or the mountains to the ports.’ New steamships transported these goods across the world, and, at the same time, allowed manufactured goods from the West to enter the Indies. A complex infrastructure of ‘post and telegraphy, firms and banks’ arose to service this commerce.¹⁷⁸

These new services and industries required new types of labourers. The colonial government’s provision of Western-style schools, as part of the ‘Ethical Policy’ from around 1900, was according to Tan Malaka nothing other than a means of creating a class of educated

¹⁷⁶ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, pp. 132-3.

¹⁷⁷ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁸ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 141.

Indonesians who could provide the skilled (and cheap) workers necessary for this new economy. As he put it, 'education came after and because of the industry of the present age'.¹⁷⁹

In *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, Tan Malaka described how these new technologies had not only industrialized transportation, but also mechanized production in the Indies: 'Around fifty years ago' (i.e. 1873), he wrote, 'our Indies were penetrated by a new style of industry (factories run by great machines)'.¹⁸⁰ These factories processed primary commodities such as sugar and rice, before they were exported. This type of industrial agriculture went hand in hand with the concentration of land into plantations, which was enabled by the passage of the Agrarian Act in 1872. This law allowed 'natives' to lease their property to foreign companies for an extended period of time. The result was that 'the spacious and fertile fields fell into the hands of the capitalists making sugar, tea, coffee, quinine etc.'¹⁸¹

In the 1870s the Indies had thus entered a new economic regime. Cultivators no longer owned their land, but leased it out to capitalists, who employed them as labourers in their factories or workers on their plantations. This amounted to the creation of a 'kaum proletar' ('proletariat') in Indonesia, though Tan Malaka did not consistently use this term. As he wrote in *Sovjet atau parlement?*, 'The *sawah* [rice paddies] and the fields have been leased for sugar factories, displacing thousands of the 'rakyat'. Thousands of the *Kromo* class have been forced to flee to the cities, forced to become slaves to the sugar capitalists, forced to run to Deli, Kalimantan and elsewhere to get a rag of cloth and a mouthful of rice'.¹⁸² In *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan* he was even more severe, arguing that the combination of land encroachment and competition from mechanized industries had destroyed the old world of the villages altogether. As he put it, 'today there are no longer any craftsmen, captains or poets, but nearly all the *bumiputera* [native Indonesians] have become coolies and labourers.'¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 54.

¹⁸⁰ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 54.

¹⁸¹ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 53.

¹⁸² Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 138.

¹⁸³ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 10.

With the collapse of the village economy, he argued, came the ruin of the indigenous civilization that had thrived in pre-colonial Indonesia. In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan* Tan Malaka observed gloomily that the wayang and gamelan were now a shadow of their former glory, because poverty had drained the life out of the ‘desa’. New mechanical technologies were even replacing the old customs. Indonesians now exalted the gramophone and the cinema ‘far more than our own plays. This too is a result of capitalism, that has introduced an *adat* that is filthy, as can be seen in the cinemas today. Capitalism has crushed the people of the Indies, not only in their economic life, but also in their *adat*, not only on the outside, but also on the inside.’¹⁸⁴ The poor and demoralized proletariat of Indonesia were left vulnerable to the temptations of vice and crime: opium, alcohol, theft and prostitution flourished under capitalism, despite all being strictly forbidden under the conventions of Islamic morality.¹⁸⁵

For Tan Malaka, then, imperialism was more of a process than a static set of relations. The impact of colonialism varied significantly from era to era. Indonesians had been coerced and exploited by the Dutch East India Company, but they had not been stripped of their land and put to work in industry until the late nineteenth century. Dutch rule had first wiped out the great seafaring traders of the Indonesian archipelago through monopoly commerce, then sundered communal life of the villages through the introduction of plantation capitalism. The cumulative effect of Dutch rule and capitalism was thus the destruction of all the positive remnants of pre-colonial society. Even the famed artisans of Java and Sumatra had been bankrupted by competition with Western manufacturers. The steamships and the railways had transformed Indonesia into a producer of primary goods, a ‘society of coolies’.¹⁸⁶ These were the consequences of Indonesia moving from the ‘zaman yang lalu’ (‘the past age’) to the ‘zaman kapitalis’ (‘the capitalist age’). In the process of making this transition, Indonesia had lost its indigenous bourgeoisie, the native

¹⁸⁴ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 10.

¹⁸⁵ Tan Malaka argued that the advent of capitalism had forced women into prostitution in *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 11. Darsono made the same claim in his article ‘Kommunisma dan Islamisma’, published in *Sinar Hindia*, 15 February 1921. In a 1921 letter to a Dutch friend, Tan Malaka described a plantation where ‘Gambling, adultery, all the vices of man are encouraged [among the workers] ... as long as they work. This is the purest form of capitalism.’, Chr. L. M. Penders (ed.), *Indonesia: Selected Documents* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977), p. 280.

¹⁸⁶ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 10.

mercantile class, and gained an indigenous proletariat. The political implications of these developments were substantial and were spelt out fully in *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*.

History and Revolution

Tan Malaka composed *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'* in Singapore in 1924, two years after his exile from Java. The text was written in Dutch and published in 1925, first in Canton, then in Manila. It is unclear how many copies reached Indonesia, but the colonial authorities found editions of the book in the possession of rebels arrested in the aftermath of the 1926-7 uprisings. There is also some evidence that it was read by the young Sukarno and by Mohammad Hatta.¹⁸⁷ The text was probably smuggled into the country via Singapore, and was very likely read by the PKI leadership.

Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia' has been seen as the first call for a revolution in Indonesia. It was cited by Yamin as proof that Tan Malaka was the 'father' of the Indonesian Revolution of 1945-9, which resulted in the creation of his conjectured independent Indonesian Republic.¹⁸⁸ Tan Malaka himself, in his autobiography, took credit for having foreseen the Indonesian revolution twenty years in advance.¹⁸⁹ But why was Tan Malaka confident of the success of an Indonesian revolution in 1924? After all, the colonial state was cracking down on political dissent at the time, and the PKI-SI alliance, which he had tried to preserve, had irretrievably collapsed. The key source of his confidence was his faith in the dynamics of historical development. His commitment to Marxism led him to see politics differently, privileging long-term trends over the surface detail of high politics. The crucial fact about the Indonesia of the 1920s, in his view, was that capitalism was creating a proletariat without the moderating influence of a national bourgeoisie. The dispossessed indigenous labourers were natural enemies of the Dutch, having 'nothing to lose but their chains'. The colonial state, meanwhile, could not draw on a sympathetic local bourgeoisie to

¹⁸⁷ Geoffrey C. Gunn, 'Introduction', *Tan Malaka's Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'* (Jakarta: Badak Merah Semesta, 2015), pp. 4-5.

¹⁸⁸ Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 63.

‘help prop up shaky Dutch imperialism.’¹⁹⁰ The class conflict inherent to capitalism was thus unusually sharp in Indonesia, which meant that sooner or later a revolutionary situation would arise. The increasing repression of the Dutch was proof not of the colonial government’s strength, but evidence that a violent confrontation with the people was on the way: ‘The contradiction between the Indonesian ‘rakyat’ and Dutch imperialism is becoming sharper and more intense. The suffering of the masses is growing more extreme. Their hopes and dreams of freedom grow with their suffering. Revolutionary politics is spreading far and wide among the Indonesian ‘rakyat’. The sharpening conflict between the rulers and the ruled is the reason by the ruling party has become crazed and arbitrary in its actions.’¹⁹¹

Because he had already argued that Dutch imperialism had destroyed the indigenous Indonesian bourgeoisie, Tan Malaka could claim that class war in Indonesia was identical with nationalist struggle, because class conflict amounted to a contest between the oppressed millions of the Indonesian ‘rakyat’ on the one side, against a handful of foreign capitalists on the other. On these odds, the chances of success for an anti-capitalist Indonesian revolution seemed overwhelming. As he put it, ‘In the clash that may arise between Dutch imperialism and the Indonesian people, no Indonesian stands to lose any property. In Indonesia we may declare to all the people: “You have nothing to lose but your chains.”’¹⁹² The message for the PKI was clear: organizing the broad masses for a revolutionary uprising against the Dutch was a priority. *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia’* contained a radical programme of nationalization and the creation of democratic institutions, to be implemented after a popular uprising, led by the PKI and centred on the industrialized areas of Central Java.¹⁹³ The PKI would lead this revolution because other parties had shown that they lacked the courage or determination to take a radical stance. The more moderate parties Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam and the National Indische Partij had all lost their popular support, in Tan Malaka’s view, because they had failed to confront the colonial government. This lesson was not lost on the PKI leadership, who pushed ahead with their plans for a revolution in 1925.

¹⁹⁰ Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, p. 10.

¹⁹¹ Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia* [1925] (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2000), pp. 10-11.

¹⁹² Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, p. 15.

¹⁹³ Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, pp. 39-43.

Revisions, 1926

Between the composition of *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'* in 1924 and the publication of *Semangat Muda* and *Massa Actie* in 1926, Tan Malaka had a change of heart over the prospects for a Communist-led Indonesian revolution. This volte-face was a result of a re-evaluation of the trends of Indonesian history and a consequent re-analysis Indonesian capitalism. He now argued that although Indonesia lacked a national bourgeoisie, the process of proletarianization in the Indies had been so distorted by the workings of the colonial economy that the emerging Indonesian proletariat retained a 'backward mentality', which made it unfit for revolution, at least in the near-future. Indonesia was in fact trapped between modes of production, stuck in a hybrid of capitalism and feudalism, with no immediate way out.

In *Massa Actie*, Tan Malaka stressed that the historical character of pre-colonial Indonesia, despite its achievements, had been persistently 'feodalis' ('feudal'), a word he had not used consistently in earlier texts. He now argued that although Indonesia before Company rule had been commercially vigorous, it had never developed into a fully-fledged capitalist society. In his view, while 'In the Majapahit Empire there were batik, tile and ship companies with sizeable capital' that 'employed thousands of workers' and 'sailed their ships to Persia and China', the Majapahit Empire had nonetheless been only a *proto-capitalist* society, since the tension between the 'coast' and the 'hinterland' had never reached sufficient intensity to generate a social revolution and bring about a capitalist mode of production.¹⁹⁴

Because this capitalist revolution had not taken place, pre-colonial Indonesia had, he said, remained steadfastly 'feudal'. As he put it, the 'great nations' that had once stood in Java, Sumatra and Borneo had never 'taken the step out of feudal society'.¹⁹⁵ The milestones of progress out of feudalism, such as the limitation of the power of kings, which had begun in Europe in the Middle Ages, were nowhere to be found in Indonesia. The Majapahit Empire, which of all the pre-colonial

¹⁹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 26.

¹⁹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 8.

Indonesian polities had attained 'the highest level - in terms of government, politics, law and culture', still 'never knew the principles of civil government. For centuries the government was neither for nor of the people.' There was no Indonesian Magna Carta, only centuries of submission. Partially Tan Malaka attributed this conservatism to the influence of Hinduism, which had been imported from India and had helped, in his view, to preserve the rigid political and social hierarchies of Java.

Just as Indonesia had not been able to imitate Europe's transition into capitalism, the civilizational achievements of Indonesia's feudal age, though impressive in themselves, paled in comparison with those of the West. While Tan Malaka had praised Borobudur as worthy of any modern European architect in *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, he wrote in *Massa Actie* that 'Our wonder Borobudur is not as great as Pythagoras's triangle'.¹⁹⁶ He now judged that 'The Greek people were far ahead of the Indonesians - if the Majapahit Empire is considered the most advanced - in matters of government, politics, law and culture.'¹⁹⁷ In this way he tempered his earlier praise for pre-colonial Indonesia, stressing the tyranny of its system of government and its comparatively crude social, economic and cultural development. This point would prove important in his analysis of the negative legacies left by the feudal era on the Indonesian people's patterns of thought.

Tan Malaka also reassessed the nature of Company rule in *Massa Actie*. While he repeated the claim that the VOC had killed off indigenous proto-capitalism, he also stressed that, in the political sphere, the Dutch were no more autocratic than Indonesia's earlier rulers. The Hindu rajahs and Islamic Sultans were also outsiders who had established oppressive rule over indigenous Indonesians. In his view, Indonesia had known only despotism: 'The true Indonesian nation from the first times until now has been locked into submissive slavery, targeted by foreign robbers.'¹⁹⁸ Indonesia was 'always the puppet, and other countries the puppeteer.'¹⁹⁹ Thus, despite its novel focus on the cultivation of export crops and monopoly commerce, the VOC was politically a continuation of feudal government, even if its variety of despotism entailed an intensification of

¹⁹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 8, 9.

¹⁹⁷ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 21.

¹⁹⁸ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 20.

¹⁹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 9.

economic exploitation and had the effect of choking indigenous commerce. Company rule was just another turn of the dynastic wheel.

When the Dutch allowed the introduction of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century, they did so as a continuation of their mercantilist policy of maximizing the extraction of Indonesia's natural wealth, that is, as an extension of the 'foreign robbery' that had been going on in Indonesia for centuries. Modern industrial technology was employed only insofar as it enriched foreign investors. As a result, Indonesian industrialization was heavily concentrated in a few, export-oriented sectors. Industry was centred on the processing of primary products, such as sugar, coffee and rubber, not on the manufacture of secondary goods, which were imported from the West and from Japan. In *Semangat Muda* Tan Malaka observed that Indonesia lacked any manufacturing industry of its own.²⁰⁰ Indonesian capitalism was thus fundamentally different from the capitalism of metropolitan economies. Although an Indonesian proletariat was being created, it was being put to work in rural areas, not in cities, and it was engaged in seasonal labour, which allowed it to be periodically diffused into the countryside, preventing class formation. Moreover, the absolute size of this proletariat was not as great as in the West, since proletarianization was limited to the export economy and was thus concentrated in a handful of enclaves in Java and Sumatra, where industrial-style agriculture was practiced. Outside of these regions, most workers remained engaged in subsistence farming, especially in the Outer Islands. In *Semangat Muda*, Tan Malaka estimated that at most 40% of the Indonesian population were proletarians, compared to 75% in the industrialized West.²⁰¹ This naturally had serious consequences for Communist politics in the Indies, since the Communists aspired to lead the proletariat to a revolutionary seizure of power.

In *Semangat Muda*, Tan Malaka spelled out the differences between the proletariat in the West and in Indonesia: 'The Indonesian proletariat is still young, and retains ties with its relatives in villages, and often still has land in the villages. While the industrial proletariat in Europe has had many generations of work in manufacturing, our proletariat is still backward in this style of work, still believes in superstition and remains passive. The Western industrial proletariat is

²⁰⁰ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 24-5.

²⁰¹ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 24.

disciplined in work, no longer bound by superstition, and is active in mind and labour.’²⁰² Indonesian capitalism thus retained a feudal residue, since the peasantry had not fully developed into a mature proletariat. Capitalism, as an exercise in colonial extraction, had created plantations, not industrial cities. Industrial development had been fast, but the mentality of the workers remained primitive. As he wrote in *Massa Actie*, ‘The rapid shift from a feudal system to capitalism, which was not brought about by the will of the Indonesian people, has quickly altered ways of thinking. However, the change in mentality usually lags behind economic change. Generally, our people appear modern, like capitalism, but their way of thought is still old, still stuck in the *zaman dahulu*, they still embrace the Mahabharata, Islam and various forms of superstition and belief in ghosts, djinns, mysterious evils, sacred stones and so on. They are still like children and think in fantasies.’²⁰³

Not only did ways of thinking inherited from feudal Indonesia remain, colonial capitalism had also failed to dissolve the old feudal elites. In *Semangat Muda*, Tan Malaka noted that feudalism persisted in the Javanese princely states of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, where the Sultans and Sunans still reigned.²⁰⁴ The Dutch colonial state, like the VOC before it, worked *through* the old aristocratic classes, rather than displacing them. The hereditary indigenous civil service was a key component of colonial rule. This meant that the Indonesian ‘rakyat’ suffered under a double oppression: by foreign capitalists and indigenous elites. This made its status as a ‘proletariat’ at all dubious, given that the old bonds of feudal society remained.

The ‘backward mentality’ of the Indonesian proletariat presented a potentially intractable problem for Tan Malaka. Having argued that Indonesia was ready to make the transition into Communism based on the sharpness of its class conflict, he had then to acknowledge that the primary revolutionary class might not be revolutionary after all. In *Massa Actie* and *Semangat Muda*, he claimed that the proletariat could be *made* revolutionary through a series of strikes,

²⁰² Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 26.

²⁰³ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 95. This critique foreshadows the Vietnamese Marxist Truong-Chinh, who wrote in 1948 that Vietnamese culture suffered from ‘a weak scientific basis’. He attributed this to ‘too much Chinese influence’, in contrast with Tan Malaka’s focus on the influence of Hindu and Muslim beliefs. Truong-Chinh, *Selected Writings*, p. 235.

²⁰⁴ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 41.

boycotts and protests, but this process would be gradual.²⁰⁵ It would take time to erode the old patterns of thought and would require energetic propaganda on the part of the PKI, who bore responsibility for ending the useless 'Hindu-Muslim' belief in magic and training the masses in the science of materialism.²⁰⁶

Having made a series of arguments which positioned Indonesia on the threshold of Communist uprising in *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, Tan Malaka thus had to plead for more time in his 1926 texts, because despite objectively favourable conditions, he claimed that Indonesia's working class still lacked the necessary subjective will to carry out successful revolution. There would eventually be a revolutionary confrontation between the government and the people, but it would not happen overnight. Before any successful revolt, strength would have to be built up through the labour movement and through a general mobilization of the Indonesian 'rakyat' by the PKI.

The immediate tasks of the PKI were thus to organize and educate the people. They were well positioned to carry out these tasks, since their promise of national independence and social revolution enabled them to appeal to all the oppressed classes of Indonesia - peasants, soldiers, artisans, petty traders and workers - unlike the narrowly nationalist or Islamist parties, such as BU and SI, which sought only a transfer of power from the colonial state to a set of indigenous elites and made no attempt to improve the material circumstances of the people.²⁰⁷ In order to be effective, the Communists would need to be disciplined and trained in the science of Marxism. The PKI, he argued, ought to focus on building support in the industrial centres, while the Sarekat Rakyat, the branches of Sarekat Islam which had gone over to the PKI, would gather support in smaller towns and the rural areas. Together, these two organizations would create a revolutionary coalition capable of toppling the colonial state. In the long term, their success was assured, given the self-destructive nature of capitalism. A premature revolt, however, would be disastrous, and

²⁰⁵ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 17; This is the overriding message of Tan Malaka's *Aksi Massa*.

²⁰⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 140-3.

²⁰⁷ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 34-6.

would allow the government to counter-attack.²⁰⁸ Time was on the Communists' side, but they had to wait for their moment.

This explains why Tan Malaka opposed the PKI's revolt in 1926-7. His concern was that Indonesia lacked the subjective prerequisites for a successful revolution. The PKI still needed to iron out the primitive legacies of pre-colonial Indonesia, which had been left in place by colonial rule and continued to exist alongside the fast-developing capitalism of the plantation belt in Java and Sumatra. He did not doubt that the 'rakyat' could be won over to the revolutionary cause, and that the PKI was the party to lead them, but he maintained that the rapid and distorted development of Indonesian capitalism meant that an educated Communist elite was required to put the nascent proletariat on the right track and prepare them for revolution. If the party attempted to seize power before laying the necessary groundwork among the people, it would fail. The events of 1926-7 confirmed Tan Malaka's analysis, though they also cost him his place in the PKI.

Tan Malaka in Indonesian Context

To understand Tan Malaka's writings on Indonesian history and his consequent analysis of the appropriate political strategy for the PKI, we must see his works of the 1920s as interventions in ongoing debates. Much of what he argued was drawn from other Indonesian writers, both within and outside the PKI. The image of the Indonesian 'desa' as a serene and primordial community, for example, which is reproduced in *Toendoek kepada Kekoeasaan*, was a commonplace during the early twentieth century. In 1919, Abdul Muis, a prominent member of the Sarekat Islam, argued in the same manner as Tan Malaka that life in the rice-growing villages was generally virtuous, because cultivators could feed their families and meet their needs. According to Muis, it was when the 'kromo' became wage labourers and were separated from their natural setting that they fell into poverty and vice.²⁰⁹ The Dutch colonial authorities routinely described the 'desa' as the basic unit of Indonesian society and likewise characterized it as a communal and egalitarian society.²¹⁰ Tan

²⁰⁸ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 95-114,

²⁰⁹ Suzanne Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism: A History of Development in the Netherlands East Indies* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2007), p. 81.

²¹⁰ Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism*, p. 46.

Malaka's lament over the destruction of the traditional village culture was echoed by certain 'ethical' Dutch civil servants and social scientists who likewise romanticized the 'desa' as a harmonious and authentic indigenous community, and sought to shield it from the negative impact of Western capitalism.²¹¹ An unexpected congruence thus existed between the views of the Dutch 'ethici' (the advocates of the Ethical Policy) and their most committed opponents, the Communists.

Tan Malaka's Marxist analysis of the transition from the village economy to the plantation economy as a process of proletarianization had already been elaborated by his fellow PKI cadre Semaun in his 1920 text *Penoentoen Kaoem Boeroeh* ('The Guide of the Working Class'), published by the VSTP press and presumably written for literate labourers. Like Tan Malaka, Semaun saw the pre-capitalist Indonesian villages as self-sufficient communes, with egalitarian property relations and democratic structures of government.²¹² Life in the 'desa' was, in Semaun's view, 'quiet, sleepy, serene and peaceful'.²¹³ Villagers collectively owned the land that they worked and enjoyed the full product of their labour, under a system he described in a 1922 Report for Comintern as 'primitive Communism'.²¹⁴

Like Tan Malaka, Semaun argued that major economic change had commenced in the Indies during the late nineteenth century, when industrialization had begun in earnest. As he wrote, Europe's 'surplus of machines or industrial tools' had led to investment in Indonesia which created 'sugar refineries, rice mills and so on'.²¹⁵ Industrial forms of transportation had been developed to carry and export these goods, giving rise to railways, trains and steam shipping.²¹⁶ He too observed that these technologies had transformed Indonesia into an entirely export-oriented economy, dependent on the West for manufactured goods: 'Fabrics, cups, plates and so on can be brought here by steamship from Europe and coffee, tea, tobacco, sugar and so on can be exported from

²¹¹ Anderson, *Language and Power*, pp. 133-4.

²¹² Semaun, 'An Early Account of the Independence Movement', *Indonesia*, Vol. 1 (April 1966), pp. 46-75, at p. 51; see also S. Dingley [Iwa Kusumasumantri], *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia* (Berlin: n.p., n.d. [1926]).

²¹³ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 2.

²¹⁴ Semaun, 'An Early Account of the Independence Movement', p. 51.

²¹⁵ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 18.

²¹⁶ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 19.

Indonesia to Europe.²¹⁷ The new economic regime was highly unequal. Whereas in the ‘desa’, ‘men were their own masters’ and ‘there was virtually no working class, or class of employers’, the capitalist division of labour was based on a fundamental imbalance between the owners of the means of production and their employees, who owned nothing but their labour power.²¹⁸ The classless world of the village had been replaced by a system marked by severe inequality: the owners of land, factories and mines extracted great profits, while their workers lived in poverty and squalor. As he put it, ‘the employer class alone grows richer’, while ‘the working class lives in poverty.’²¹⁹

For Semaun, the proletarianization of the Indonesian people brought not only dependence and material poverty but also a general decline in the quality of life and work. As he explained, ‘For what reason do we now live in worry and tumult, hardship and trouble? Because we have lost the freedom to decide our work for ourselves, because pleasurable employments have been squeezed out by the machines and the new factories.’²²⁰ The view that Indonesia had experienced a rapid and traumatic industrialization was repeated in the PKI’s introduction to Communism, published in Semarang in November 1923: ‘If we look at the state of society ten or twenty years ago, we see that the state of Java was not the same then as it is now. Then there were no trains, no great factories, no cars, no planes and other new inventions... Before there were railways, cars or planes, people were far away if they went to a town 100 kilometres away. But what is 100 kilometers now that there are trains or cars?’²²¹ Change was so swift that it was impossible to keep up: ‘The present progress of the world is extremely rapid. We do not know what changes tomorrow or the day after will bring.’²²²

²¹⁷ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, pp. 10-11.

²¹⁸ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 5; The PKI’s 1923 manual expressed the same thought: ‘The villagers who live from farming are independent in their fate, while townspeople who live from their labour are dependent on and totally bound to the fate of the capitalists who give them their work’, *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India* (Semarang: n.p., 1923), p. 42.

²¹⁹ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 27. Darsono argued that the arrival of foreign capital had caused mass impoverishment in Indonesia, ‘The Situation in Indonesia, Co-Report of Comrade Samin’, *International Press Correspondence*, 4 October 1928, p. 1244.

²²⁰ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 20.

²²¹ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, pp. 41-2.

²²² *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 45.

The outline of a materialist history of Indonesia was thus already in place by the early 1920s: Indonesia had transformed from a village society based on communal ownership to a semi-industrial society based on wage labour. Jarvis's claim that a 'Marxist historiography' of Indonesia did not develop until the 1940s is thus decisively false.²²³ It was Marxist history that provided the rationale for the PKI itself, since if Indonesia could be described as 'capitalist', due to its employment structure and the presence of industry, then it could be argued that the country was on the road to Communism as a natural consequence of its own capitalist development. The PKI's 1923 introduction to Communism spelled out the logic of this position: 'capitalism cannot but crumble, because it has created the power that will destroy it. Karl Marx, the great teacher of the Communist movement said that capitalism digs its own grave. This is entirely true.'²²⁴ The progression from capitalism to Communism was a historical necessity: 'Communism follows capitalism like its shadow.'²²⁵ This transition was underwritten by the overarching logic of historical materialism, which proved that societies went through periodic social transformations; capitalism's eventual destruction was as certain as the extinction of slavery. As the PKI's manual declared: 'The world was once made up of countries based on the work of the slave class [kaum budak], then there arose the power of the nobility, with their serfs [hamba], in a period known as feudalism, since the end of the 18th century there has been the present system that is called capitalism, and after the death of capitalism comes Communism.'²²⁶

What Tan Malaka added to the PKI's Marxist historiography was a novel stress on the commercial vitality of pre-colonial Indonesia through his argument that the Majapahit Empire had been a proto-capitalist society with an embryonic bourgeois class. He may have been influenced in this view by the recovery of the fourteenth century manuscript *Nagarakertagama*, published between 1905 and 1914, which showed the extent of the trading empire of Majapahit.²²⁷ By the 1920s, many Indonesians were writing of the greatness of pre-colonial Indonesian trade. In a 1923 article, Mohammad Hatta, then an economics student in the Netherlands, wrote that in the sixteenth

²²³ Jarvis 'Introduction', *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. xlix.

²²⁴ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 37.

²²⁵ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 48.

²²⁶ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 46.

²²⁷ Wild and Carey (eds.), *Born in Fire*, p. 8.

century the 'Indonesian Kingdoms' had 'an intensive commercial trade with nations round the Persian Gulf, India and Further India, China and Japan'.²²⁸

Tan Malaka put the idea of a commercial pre-colonial Indonesia into Marxist terms, positioning the Majapahit Empire somewhere between feudalism and capitalism. He then carried forward the implications of the Dutch suffocation of indigenous traders for contemporary Indonesian society. His claim that Dutch rule had eroded the position of this national bourgeoisie, to the point where modern Indonesia consisted only of foreign capitalists and oppressed indigenous workers, became PKI orthodoxy. Musso noted in 1928 that 'from the beginning of their domination over Indonesia', the policy of the Dutch had been to hold down indigenous commerce, resulting in 'the total suppression of native trade and the rapid impoverishment of the natives. The policy has also the consequence that nowadays in Indonesia a native bourgeoisie does not exist, and on the other hand, the investment and development of the foreign capital has created a new class, the Indonesian proletariat.'²²⁹ Tan Malaka's analysis naturally suited Musso, who was one of the strongest advocates for revolution in 1926-7, since it implied that the polarized class structure of Indonesia favoured a Communist revolution. Significantly, however, Musso left out Tan Malaka's caveats, expounded in *Semangat Muda* and *Massa Actie*, about the proletariat's 'backward mentality' and its political inexperience.

A pamphlet titled *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, published in Berlin in 1926 under the pseudonym S. Dingley (Ruth McVey has speculated that the author may have been the PKI cadre Iwa Kusumasumantri) contrasts with Tan Malaka's vision of Indonesian history in certain revealing ways. Like Tan Malaka, Dingley argued that Dutch colonial policy had been extractive and monopolistic from the start and that the opening up of the Indies to foreign capital in the late nineteenth century had resulted in rapid industrialization and proletarianization, especially in Java. On pre-colonial Indonesia, however, their accounts were quite different. Dingley did not claim that the 'rajahs' were generally un-interventionist, but rather stressed the uncompromising brutality of

²²⁸ Mohammad Hatta, 'Drainage' (1923), First published *Hindia Poetra*, 6, 1923; reproduced and translated in Noer, *Mohammad Hatta, Portrait of a Patriot*, pp. 27-35.

²²⁹ Musso, 'The Foreign Capital of Indonesia', *International Press Correspondence*, 31 May 1928, pp. 541-2.

feudal Indonesia. He claimed that the great monuments of old Java, such as Borobudur and Prambanan, which Tan Malaka praised for their beauty, had been built by slave labour at the behest of feudal tyrants.²³⁰ In his view, the peasants of Indonesia had been exploited by feudal rulers since the 4th century BC, when Hinduism had arrived in the archipelago.²³¹ Peasants, in Dingley's account of pre-colonial Indonesia, did *not* own their land collectively, but were tenants of the king, who was the sole landlord.²³² Conditions improved somewhat during the Majapahit era, when the influence of Buddhism softened the Hindu autocracy, but the new empires did little for the people, preferring to wage endless wars.

Dingley made no mention of a great indigenous commerce during this period, or of the serene life of the 'desa'.²³³ In his vision, Indonesia had always been the land of the despotic king and the oppressed peasant; the Dutch had merely added additional layers of capitalist exploitation, first through exploitative commerce, then through brutal industrialization. This was what made the condition of the peasants so miserable in Indonesia and, he argued, what created the terrain for a revolutionary peasant uprising against the remaining feudal elites and the foreign capitalists. Depending on one's perspective, pre-colonial Indonesia could thus appear to be a regime of brutal feudalism, as for Dingley, or a landscape of placid proto-socialist villages, as for Semaun.

Tan Malaka and Marxist Historiography

Tan Malaka was a self-taught Marxist. Although he had a greater knowledge of Marxist texts than his PKI colleagues, he was nonetheless an autodidact, having learned the tenets of Marxism through his own private readings in the Netherlands. It is significant that his initial encounter with Marxism came during the First World War, since it meant that he discovered socialism primarily through the writings of the Bolsheviks, which were in vogue after 1917, rather than through the works of the more moderate social democrats, like Karl Kautsky, who appeared to have been discredited by their support for the war. Although he read Kautsky's *Economic Doctrines of Marx*

²³⁰ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 11.

²³¹ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 10

²³² Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 10.

²³³ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 11.

(1887) in Haarlem, he did so as a primer on Marxist economic thought, not as a guide to political doctrine. On the key issue of whether a reformist or revolutionary path to socialism should be taken, his sympathies were clearly with Lenin, whose *State and Revolution* (1917) he may have read in the Netherlands, and whose ideas were widely publicized after 1917.²³⁴

Many of Lenin's arguments against parliamentary socialism were repeated in *Sovjet atau parlement?*, where they were used to make the case against the PKI's involvement in the Volksraad, to show that Soviet democracy was superior to parliamentary democracy, and to claim that Indonesian Communists should aspire to create a Soviet system of government.²³⁵ Tan Malaka's call for 'mass action' as a means of mobilizing the working masses against capitalism was clearly derived from the pro-Bolshevik Dutch author Henriette Roland-Holst's *De Revolutionaire Massa-Actie* (1918), which was itself a criticism of the social-democratic reliance on parliamentary institutions, which Holst claimed had drained the vitality of the working class and ultimately led to socialists being captured by bourgeois interests.

In terms of Marxist historiography, Tan Malaka seems to have read little beyond the *Communist Manifesto* and the first volume of *Capital*. In many ways his depiction of pre-colonial Indonesia resembles what Marx considered the most backward form of society, the 'Asiatic'.²³⁶ As described in *Capital*, 'Asiatic' societies were a combination of self-governing village communes and despotic central governments.²³⁷ They were static because their basic social form - the village - was self-sufficient and self-perpetuating.²³⁸ While Marx believed there could be cyclical dynastic changes in such a society, he argued that there could be no cumulative development.²³⁹ Thus, 'Asiatic' societies lay outside progressive history because they had no

²³⁴ Tan Malaka wrote in his memoir that he became familiar with the arguments of the Bolsheviks in 1917, reading 'many pamphlets being published on the Russian social revolution of October 1917', *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 27. In volume three of *From Jail to Jail*, he quotes directly from *The State and Revolution*, see Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, vol. 3, p. 46.

²³⁵ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, pp. 70-8.

²³⁶ In the 'Preface' of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx states that 'In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society', Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, p. 263.

²³⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 479.

²³⁸ Marx, *Capital*, p. 479.

²³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, p. 479.

internal capacity for evolution. In this respect they differed fundamentally from European societies, which over time had progressed through a number of modes of production, from slavery to feudalism, and from feudalism to capitalism.

Marx's impression of 'Asiatic' society was drawn from the writings of various eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophers and political economists, who characterized the East as backward and unchanging, a landscape of isolated villages and tyrannical governments.²⁴⁰ While the image of pre-capitalist Indonesia presented by Tan Malaka repeats many of these judgments, it does not quite conform to Marx's view of 'Asiatic' society. Tan Malaka's claim that there was a thriving maritime trade in pre-capitalist Indonesia is at odds with Marx's characterization of 'Asiatic' societies as being effectively autarkic, with little or no external trade.²⁴¹ 'Asiatic' economies, for Marx, were too primitive to have a large commercial class, because the division of labour, and thus class differentiation, remained so unadvanced. Tan Malaka's image of pre-colonial Indonesia retained the 'Asiatic' village structure, but placed it alongside a proto-capitalist coastal economy.

Like other Indonesian Communists, when Tan Malaka did classify pre-colonial Indonesia, he described it as 'feudal'.²⁴² Yet feudalism in this sense meant only that the society was primarily agricultural and that it was ruled by a monarchical elite.²⁴³ In a number of important ways Indonesia did *not* resemble a feudal society. In the first place, Indonesia did not have the same pattern of landholding as feudal Europe, because land continued to be held collectively by the villagers, rather than by a class of landlords. Second, unlike feudalism in Europe, Indonesia's 'ancient age' did not evolve out of slave society and did not evolve into capitalism. Tan Malaka's claim that the Majapahit Empire had been persistently feudal implied that the Indies had been

²⁴⁰ Perry Anderson has shown that Marx drew on Hegel, Montesquieu, Mill and Adam Smith in his depiction of Asian society. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (Verso: London, 1974), p. 472.

²⁴¹ Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, p. 478.

²⁴² Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 21; Semaun, 'An Early Account of the Independence Movement', p. 51; Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 10.

²⁴³ Chinese Marxist historians also referred to China before the nineteenth century as 'feudal'; see Albert Feuerwerker, 'China's Modern Economic History in Communist Chinese Historiography', *The China Quarterly*, Volume 22 (June 1965), pp 31-61.

marooned in feudalism for many centuries without ever becoming capitalist. He thus implicitly upheld Marx's judgment that Eastern history was relatively static, whereas Western history was dynamic, because capitalism had arisen only in the West.

This raised the further question of whether colonial Indonesia could adequately be described as 'capitalist', given that its form of capitalism was a result of foreign intervention, rather than an endogenous development. At what point did Dutch intervention turn the Indies into a capitalist economy? This question turned on how capitalism was defined. The PKI's 1923 introduction to Communism began by defining capitalism as a way of producing goods based on the pursuit of individual profit. Under capitalism, one class - the capitalists - owned the means of production ('the land, factories, mines, and other businesses'), while 'the majority of mankind has no ownership of the means of production, that creates all the wealth of the world. This majority is called the proletariat and lives always in dependency on the capitalist class.' Capitalism had originated in Europe, but was spread across the world by its never-ending need for profits, with the result that 'Europe brought the other continents under its influence and these continents were forced to produce goods capitalistically, because if they did not, they themselves would perish.'²⁴⁴

This definition included two quite different understandings of capitalism. On the one hand, capitalism was defined as a particular form of class society, and was inseparable from proletarianization and, by implication, industrialization, since the proletariat is described as working in factories and mines. On the other hand, capitalism was defined as production for profit on a (world) marketplace. Yet production for profit might occur without a wage-labouring or industrial proletariat, as, for example, on slave plantations, or among any group of coerced labourers. This tension created some confusion about when exactly capitalism had reached Indonesia. Tan Malaka at times described the era of the VOC as 'capitalist', because the Dutch traders had sought to gain profits through the coercion of indigenous labour. At other points, however, he called Indonesian capitalism 'young' and 'in its early stages of development', because

²⁴⁴ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 2.

industrial technology had been imported only recently, which implied that industrialization and proletarianization were the defining aspects of capitalism.²⁴⁵

The Indonesian case was complicated further by the fact that while industrial capitalism was relatively new, it was already highly *advanced*. Aside from the apparatus of modern machinery entailed in the oil and sugar industries, in *Massa Actie* Tan Malaka observed that there was a cartel among the sugar producers, the ‘suiker syndicaat’, and that the Handelsvereniging Amsterdam (the Amsterdam Trade Association, founded 1878) combined many companies within itself. Such concentration of production into cartels was a sign of a mature capitalist economy, which Lenin had identified primarily with Germany, France and the United States.²⁴⁶ This made Indonesia resemble the advanced capitalist West, rather than any colonial or pre-capitalist economy. In fact, in Tan Malaka’s view Indonesia was in some ways *ahead* of its European colonizer. The Netherlands had no great centres of production to match the oil fields of Sumatra’s East Coast or the sugar refineries of Central Java. In *Massa Actie*, he claimed that Indonesia had more industrial development than the Netherlands, which was itself parasitic on Indonesian industry: ‘The centre of Dutch industry is now situated in Indonesia, the centre of trade and finance being the Netherlands. Bankers, industrialists and merchants stay in the Netherlands, while the workers and peasants are in Indonesia.’²⁴⁷

On this account, the shift from feudalism to capitalism, which in Marx’s narrative had taken centuries in Europe, had been dramatically telescoped in Indonesia. While pre-colonial Indonesia had been stuck in feudalism, Indonesia since the late-nineteenth century appeared to be developing at breakneck pace. Although Tan Malaka had doubts about whether the mentality of the people had kept pace with the speed of material change, the scale of the economic transformation was undeniable. In its journey from feudalism to capitalism, however, Indonesia appeared not to have developed in the same manner as Western capitalist economies. Marx’s claims for capitalism’s

²⁴⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 45; Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, p. 20. In his 1922 report for Comintern, Semaun argued along the same lines that capitalism had arrived in Indonesia as recently as 1900, when the full force of international capital began to be felt. Semaun, ‘An Early Account of the Independence Movement’, pp. 50-1. Dingley argued in the same in *The Peasants’ Movement in Indonesia* at p. 32.

²⁴⁶ See V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* [1917] (London: Penguin, 2010).

²⁴⁷ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 6.

historically progressive role, made in the *Communist Manifesto*, were premised on its ability to erode feudal social structures and increase the productive powers of society.²⁴⁸ Neither of these claims seemed to fully apply in Indonesia. Colonial capitalism was holding back economic development in certain sectors, for example by preventing the emergence of an Indonesian manufacturing industry, while *preserving* certain indigenous feudal elites. The ‘backward mentality’ of the workers and the persistence of the aristocratic classes gave Indonesia the outward appearance of a feudal society, despite its evident industrialization. This was a paradox unaccounted for in Marx’s scheme of historical development.

Indonesia resisted simple categorization within the Marx’s typology of modes of production. It was a hybrid society, which combined aspects of capitalism and pre-capitalism.²⁴⁹ Tan Malaka was not the only Indonesian Communist alert to this fact. In his 1928 report on Indonesia for Comintern, Darsono observed that ‘it will be difficult to find another country in which there is such a large number of various stages of development as will be found in Indonesia. Each one of the islands comprising what is known as Indonesia is on a separate stage of development.’²⁵⁰

On the surface, the fact that Indonesia was not an entirely capitalist economy suggested that Communism was not appropriate for the country and would have to wait until further capitalist growth had smoothed out the economy’s uneven development. This is what the Dutch socialist Henri Hubertus Van Kol, who had worked as an engineer in Java, advised at the International Socialist Congress in Amsterdam in 1904. Van Kol denied that capitalist development had properly begun in Indonesia. In his view, the country still required a lengthy phase of capitalist growth under Dutch imperial rule before there could be any socialist politics. As he put it, ‘It is ...

²⁴⁸ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 485-91.

²⁴⁹ This, in fact, is what the influential Dutch economist J.H. Boeke had argued in his 1910 thesis *Tropical Colonial Economies: The Problem*. According to Boeke, Indonesia had a ‘dual economy’: a primitive, indigenous economy existed alongside an advanced, export-oriented European economy. In 1923, the statistician and colonial civil servant A.M.P.A. Scheltema argued that Indonesia comprised an exceptional range of stages of development, from hunter-gathering in New Guinea, to market oriented production of rubber in Sumatra. One Dutch commentator, J.W. Meijer-Ranneft, remarked on life in Indonesia: ‘Here we live in all centuries at once ... sometimes in a very small area.’ Quoted in Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism*, pp. 103-4.

²⁵⁰ ‘The Situation in Indonesia’, *International Press Correspondence*, 4 October 1928, p. 1243.

our duty not to hinder the development of capitalism, an indispensable chain in the history of humanity.’²⁵¹ At the 1907 Socialist International Congress, held in Stuttgart, he reiterated his view that ‘capitalism is necessary in the colonies before there can be thought of socialism’; ‘the jump from barbarism to socialism is impossible... The contrary view is not only *unscientific*, it is *stupid* and *narrow-minded*.’²⁵² The Indonesian social democrats, who split from the PKI in 1920, upheld this line of thought, claiming that Indonesia was too economically undeveloped for Communist politics, which was appropriate only to advanced industrial economies.

In many ways, the Bolsheviks shared this scepticism over the degree of capitalist development in the colonial world. At the Second Congress of the Third International in 1920, Lenin characterized the colonial world as ‘backward’, being overwhelmingly made up of peasants. In his view, the ‘colonies and the Eastern countries’ had ‘no proletariat, or practically no proletariat.’ At times, he implied that these nations were still largely pre-capitalist and retained their ‘feudal’ character. As a result, the revolution in the colonial world have to be a nationalist revolution, led by the national bourgeoisie against foreign imperialism and indigenous feudalism, because the proletarian class was still in its infancy.²⁵³ This was the essential message of the ‘Theses on the National and Colonial Questions’ which emerged from the Second Congress and were printed in *Het Vrije Woord* (‘The Free Word’, the PKI’s Dutch language journal).²⁵⁴ Tan Malaka reversed every element of Lenin’s analysis in *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia’*. Indonesia, in his view, was not a country with a vast peasantry and a powerful national bourgeoisie; it was a quasi-capitalist society constituted by a small elite of foreign capitalists and a mass of oppressed indigenous labourers, where the national bourgeoisie was trivially insignificant. As a result, *pace* Lenin, it was ‘bourgeois nationalism’ rather than Communism which was inappropriate for Indonesia.

²⁵¹ Hélène Carrère d’Encausse and Stuart Schram (eds.), *Marxism and Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 126.

²⁵² Quoted in Karl Kautsky, *Socialism and Colonial Policy* [1907] (Belfast: Athol Books, 1975), p. 41, emphasis in original.

²⁵³ Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, pp. 149; 157-8.

²⁵⁴ Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, pp. 152-5. See ‘De Kommunistische Internationale’, *Het Vrije Woord*, 20 November 1920.

The arguments used by Tan Malaka to refute Lenin were remarkably similar to those used by the Bolsheviks themselves to make their case for a revolution in ‘backward’ Russia. In 1905, Trotsky argued in *Results and Prospects* that Russia’s late capitalist development meant the country was singularly well positioned for a socialist revolution, because the proletariat was strong and rapidly growing, while the bourgeoisie was relatively weak, due to the dominance of foreign capital and the state in industrial development.²⁵⁵ As a result, only the working class could fulfil the historical tasks usually assigned to the bourgeoisie: the abolition of feudalism and the establishment of democracy. This democratic revolution, under the hegemony of the working class, would rapidly progress into a socialist revolution, enabling Russia to jump from its hybrid of feudalism and capitalism into a new socialist mode of production.²⁵⁶ This doctrine later became known as ‘permanent revolution’, because there would be no pause between the democratic and socialist phases of the revolution, even though these two revolutions might be hundreds of years apart in Western Europe.

The plausibility of Trotsky’s account was widely accepted after 1917, since it offered an explanation for why Communist revolution had broken out in Russia, which was on the capitalist periphery, rather than in Western Europe or the United States, the capitalist core.²⁵⁷ Tan Malaka was repeating conventional wisdom when he stated in *Massa Actie* that during the Russian revolution ‘feudalism could be said to be weak, and the young bourgeoisie was beaten back by years of war, while the new working class was vigorous and educated according to the doctrines of Lenin.’²⁵⁸

In the debates on the colonial question at the 1922 Comintern Congress, attended by Tan Malaka, M.N. Roy argued that permanent revolution might also take place in the colonial world. In his view, the Asian bourgeoisie, like the Russian one, was incapable of leading revolutionary

²⁵⁵ Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, p. 49.

²⁵⁶ Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, pp. 101-2.

²⁵⁷ The Dutch Communists David Wijnkoop and Henriette Roland-Holst, both of whom Tan Malaka was familiar with, argued that the October revolution had succeeded because of the strength of the Russian proletariat and the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie. See David J. Wijnkoop, *De Russische en de Duitse Revolutie* (1919) and Roland-Holst, *De Revolutionaire Massa-Actie*.

²⁵⁸ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 93.

change, because it was too weak, being overwhelmed by colonial capitalists: 'the new bourgeoisie of the Eastern countries, or at least the greater part of the bourgeoisie' was not engaged in 'the struggle against feudalism. It carries on the struggle of a weak underdeveloped and oppressed bourgeoisie against a powerful and highly developed bourgeoisie. Instead of a class struggle, this struggle is, so to speak, a struggle between competitors, and therefore contains possibilities of compromise.' His analysis was more or less the same as Tan Malaka's. Both agreed that the bourgeois classes in Asia were unable to take power for themselves and so were not revolutionary. As Roy argued, 'Unfortunately, the bourgeoisie has come a bit too late in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, some hundred and fifty years too late. It is in no wise inclined to play the role of liberator because it can and will go only so far, but no further. Consequently, the nationalist revolutionary movement, in these countries where millions and millions of human beings aspire to national liberation, and want to free themselves economically and politically from imperialism ... cannot achieve victory under the leadership of the bourgeoisie.'²⁵⁹

Like Tan Malaka, Roy argued that the proletariat was the only truly revolutionary class in Asia, because it alone could confront colonial power and liberate both the workers and the peasants. The weakness of indigenous bourgeois classes meant that the responsibility for social change would fall to the emerging proletarian classes in Asia, who had been created by the industrialization that had commenced in India the nineteenth century. As he put it, 'Is there another social factor capable of intervening in this struggle, and of wresting the leadership from those who have thus far been directing it? In the countries where capitalism is sufficiently developed, we find that such a social factor is already beginning to manifest itself. A proletarian class is in the process of being created there, and in countries where capitalism has begun oppressing the peasantry, this gives birth to a large mass of poor landless workers. This mass progressively joins in a combat which is not purely economic, but which is daily taking on a more political character'.²⁶⁰ The only point of difference between Roy and Tan Malaka was that Roy thought the working class would have to struggle to win the leadership of the revolution from the Indian bourgeoisie, whereas Tan Malaka believed that in Indonesia's case there was no indigenous bourgeoisie to speak of, so the

²⁵⁹ Carrère d'Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, pp. 191-2.

²⁶⁰ Carrère d'Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, p. 192.

proletariat would lead the revolution by default. The conclusion which they both drew was that late capitalist development in the colonial world had created an opportunity for a proletarian-led revolution, and a transition from fledgling capitalism to Communism.

In the case of Russia, India and Indonesia, what mattered was *how* capitalism had developed, not just the absolute level of industrial development in each country. What was common to all of these countries was that capitalism had emerged late and so through foreign influence, which meant that local bourgeois classes were weaker than in the West, while the growth of the proletariat was comparatively rapid. In each case, knowledge of history was essential, because the revolutionary potential of any country was inseparable from the nature of its historical evolution. A careful study of history produced what at first seemed a counter-intuitive conclusion: Communist revolution was more likely to break out in the capitalist periphery and the colonial world than in the metropolitan West. By reading Tan Malaka's early writings alongside those of other Communists, we can appreciate the similarities in the structure of their arguments. Tan Malaka, Trotsky, and M.N. Roy all used Marxist analysis to understand rapid economic and social change in their countries, and to find potential means to improve the condition of the poor, whom they saw as being oppressed and exploited by the progress of capitalism. When it came to the work of creating a Communist uprising, however, it is Tan Malaka's relative caution and *lack* of faith in the revolutionary potential of the workers that stands out, and contrasts sharply with the radical enthusiasm of Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, from whom both he and Roy drew inspiration.

For both Tan Malaka and Roy, Trotsky failed to give sufficient reasons why permanent revolution ought not to extend to the colonial world. In his 'Report on the Communist International', issued on 28 December 1922, when Tan Malaka was in Moscow, Trotsky followed Lenin in arguing that revolution in the colonies was likely to be 'bourgeois' and nationalist because of the lack of capitalist development. In his view, the real driver of socialism would not be the numerically insignificant 'native communist nuclei' but the 'proletariat of the metropolitan centers'.²⁶¹ Tan Malaka argued just the opposite: capitalism was in some ways advanced in

²⁶¹ Leon Trotsky, 'Report on the Communist International' (1922), accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/12/comintern.htm>.

Indonesia, meaning that revolution would have to be socialist and led by Communists. While it seems likely that Trotsky influenced Tan Malaka's thinking on revolution, alerting him to the possibility of creating a socialist society outside the West, they diverged sharply over whether Europe by necessity had to be the centre of the emerging world revolution.

Tan Malaka's Marxist Analysis and the 1926-7 Uprisings

A striking feature of Tan Malaka's analysis of Indonesia's class structure in his 1920s texts is the frequent slippage from 'kaum proletar' ('the proletariat') to 'rakyat' ('the People'), with various iterations in between, such as 'kromo' ('common people') and 'kaum kuli' ('coolies'). The equation of the proletariat and the 'the People' suggests that he did not see the peasantry as a separate class at all, but rather considered all Indonesians to be proletarians by virtue of the fact that they were ruled by foreign capitalists. The fact that so few of the *bumiputera* were capitalists themselves reinforced this view. Only in *Semangat Muda*, when considering the extent of the Indonesian proletariat, did he acknowledge that a sizeable class of non-proletarian Indonesian peasants existed at all.²⁶² The image of Indonesian class struggle as a contest between the 'rakyat' and the Dutch could be used to show that a revolutionary overthrow of colonial power was very likely, as was argued in *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, or it could be used to demonstrate that revolution had to be delayed, because the 'rakyat' was not yet revolutionary, as he claimed in *Massa Actie* and *Semangat Muda*. In both cases, Tan Malaka deployed Marxist analysis to elaborate an essentially *nationalist* narrative of a subjugated people oppressed by a foreign power. The fact that he used the term 'rakyat' at all shows that he instinctively fell back on a non-Marxist, nationalist vocabulary, since 'the people' did not refer to any relationship to the means of production.

Another distinctive aspect of Tan Malaka's Marxism was his refusal to see capitalism as a progressive historical force. Marx and Engels, in the *Communist Manifesto*, envisaged the capitalist-led destruction of agrarian feudal society as a positive development, which had greatly

²⁶² Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 24.

expanded the productive power of industry, concentrated workers into cities and ended ‘the idiocy of rural life.’ Tan Malaka argued that Indonesia’s experience of capitalism was much less constructive. In the Indies, colonial capitalism was holding back urbanization and the development of manufacturing industry, while cementing the position of an oppressive feudal elite. Unlike Marx and Engels, Tan Malaka did not celebrate the decline of village life which capitalism had brought about. In his view, the destruction of ‘desa’ society was a tragedy. Modern life under capitalism was decisively worse than life in the pre-capitalist villages had been. Read this way, Indonesia’s history was one of decline rather than not progress.

In this light, Tan Malaka’s Communism took on a conservative hue, because he was politically committed to defending the ‘desa’ from the ravages of capitalism and the continual oppression of feudal elites. In his vision for socialist Indonesia, the communal ownership of the villages serves as a model for the communal ownership of industry. Villages once flourished when farmers held the land collectively, so the same logic ought to apply to industry. Each of his revolutionary programmes contained pledges to restore the institutions of the ‘desa’, through the creation of democratically elected village councils and village-level Soviets. His Communism thus entailed a return the old world of the pre-capitalist village, while simultaneously promising to develop industrial production under a new socialist dispensation. Communism, while restoring the ‘desa’, would also result in more industrialization because collective ownership and centralized planning would, he argued, end the ‘anarchy of production’ and so enable greater industrial efficiency.²⁶³

Tan Malaka was therefore simultaneously committed to restoring the best of pre-colonial society and accelerating the development of new productive technologies brought in by the foreign capitalist regime. It was not clear, however, if the villages and the factories could satisfactorily coexist in Indonesia. After all, the labourers in Indonesia’s factories came from the villages, and by its very nature agricultural industry displaced peasant cultivation, because land that had once grown rice was now needed to grow export crops. Not only were these two systems of production

²⁶³ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 32; Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, p. 18.

potentially incompatible, they also called for diametrically opposed institutional set-ups. Preserving the village required decentralization into local communes, while nationalization of industry called for centralization, to direct production and distribution. This contradiction went to the heart of Tan Malaka's Communist politics. The desire to end capitalism stemmed partially from a conservative impulse, a wish to protect valuable aspects of pre-capitalist life.²⁶⁴ At the same time, ending capitalism was appealing because it promised to accelerate modernization, allowing the productive forces to rapidly expand, regardless of the social consequences.

This contradiction pointed to a fundamental tension within the idea of historical materialism itself, as described by Marx. The transition from primitive Communism, embodied in Indonesia's case by the village, to class society, manifested in the plantation and the factory, entailed a *gain* in productive power, but a *loss* in social integration. History could be read as a story of progress or deterioration, depending on one's priorities. If the Communists prioritized social integration, then they needed to preserve the village; if they prioritized productivity, then the factory came first.

In the run-up to the 1926-7 revolts, the PKI deployed both messages in an attempt to win over both industrial labourers, who were promised better hours and conditions under a new regime of industrialization, and rural workers, who were promised an end to unjust taxation and village democracy, implying a restoration of old village life. Yet, in its attempt to win over every constituency of the Indonesian people, the PKI diluted its self-declared proletarian character. For some cadres, the appeal to the rural population risked turning the party into a 'populist' movement, a deviation from the path laid out by the Bolsheviks which prioritized industrial labourers as the primary force of the revolution.²⁶⁵ Elements within the PKI felt that the party had gone too far to appeal to non-proletarian elements and called for the dissolution of the Sarekat Rakyat in 1925, a motion which was narrowly defeated. This dispute centred on the fundamental problem which Tan

²⁶⁴ This, after all, was the reason that the Russian Marxists had raised the possibility of skipping stages in the nineteenth century, in the hope that Russia's village commune might survive into the modern world and escape the destructive influence of capitalism. See Teodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism'* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

²⁶⁵ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 42.

Malaka had also encountered: how to organize a Communist politics in a country where it was unclear where the proletariat ended and the peasantry began?

When the Communist uprisings occurred in 1926-7, they broke out in West Java and West Sumatra, two regions with little in the way of industrial development, that were largely agricultural in character. In many ways, the rebellion resembled earlier peasant uprisings against the colonial government more than a modern Communist revolution: Islamic authorities were heavily involved in mobilizing the rebels; charms, incantations and amulets were used to give rebels invulnerability; rumours circulated that Communists would restore the *Ratu Adil*.²⁶⁶ Despite Tan Malaka's attempts to put Communist politics onto a new 'scientific' footing through the use of Marxist analysis and historical materialism, the PKI in fact had greatest success in mobilizing support through the old-fashioned, 'primitive' methods that he had condemned and believed should be rooted out. In this sense, the events of 1926-7 confirmed his view that the 'rakyat' remained superstitious and were thus imperfect instruments of revolution.

Tan Malaka's Communist narrative, however, had more in common with older styles of Indonesian political thought than he acknowledged. Although new Marxist terms were deployed, the Communists were nonetheless repeating an essentially millenarian story: capitalism and its machines had rapidly dispossessed and impoverished the people; this new system of exploitation would soon be overthrown in a great reckoning and replaced with a regime of justice and general prosperity. At the close of *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, he wrote that in the coming republic there would be 'great wealth', a blossoming of 'intellect and culture' and an end to 'hunger, suffering, slavery and pariahs'. A 'new era' would dawn, in which the Indonesian people would reach 'a final destination: independence, culture, and happiness for all the nations of the earth.'²⁶⁷

At times the PKI played up the similarity between Communism and the *Ratu Adil*. An article in *Sinar Hindia* on 13 January 1923, titled 'The Capitalist World', argued that the advent of the new Communist age *was* the coming of the 'Ratu Adil' prophesied to King Joyoboyo. The

²⁶⁶ 'The Bantam Report', pp. 106-11.

²⁶⁷ Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, pp. 66-7.

just king, though, would be ‘government of the people themselves’ under Communism rather than any individual ruler.²⁶⁸ Despite its Marxist veneer, Tan Malaka’s politics overlapped significantly with vernacular idioms. By casting capitalism as a great destructive force and Communism as redemptive and *restorative*, his essays in Marxist historiography helped produce the result he had sought to avoid: a ‘superstitious’ revolt against a wicked ruler, rather than a politically-informed workers’ revolution against capitalism. Despite his attempts to phrase his ‘scientific’ arguments in terms that would be legible and appealing to Indonesians, the aspects of Communist doctrine that seem to have resonated most with the Indonesian public in the 1920s were those that reprised familiar indigenous and Islamic themes of millenarian rebellion and the promise of restoring a just order.

²⁶⁸ *Sinar Hindia*, 13 January 1921, ‘Doenia Kapitalisme’.

World History and Revolution

In addition to considering the past, present and future of Indonesia, in the 1920s Tan Malaka was much preoccupied with world affairs. Following his exile in 1922, he was forced to travel, after being banned from returning to Indonesia. Over the course of the 1920s, he lived for spells in the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, China, Singapore, and the Philippines. His peripatetic life was, in a way, a continuation of the tradition of his homeland, the Minangkabau region of West Sumatra, which had a longstanding custom of promoting travel among male youths. This custom was intended as a way of furthering young men's understanding of the world, in the hope that the learning acquired through their journeys could be put to use in improving the *Alam Minangkabau*.²⁶⁹ Tan Malaka's own scholarship to study in the Netherlands may have been conceived of by his family as a way for him to gain such knowledge, turning him into a *perantau*, a traveller who would one day return to improve his village. Throughout his writings he expressed a romantic view of travel, which he saw as an exercise in adventure that tested the limits of human endurance and ingenuity. In *Massa Actie* he wrote of his awe for the Indonesians of 'ancient times' who had 'traversed all the islands between two great oceans, between America and Africa.'²⁷⁰ In

²⁶⁹ Abdullah, 'Adat and Islam: An Examination of Conflict in Minangkabau', p. 6.

²⁷⁰ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 22.

Thesis (1946), he praised the bravery of Columbus, whose ‘spirit of adventure’ had led him to discover a new continent.²⁷¹

Besides being an experienced traveller, Tan Malaka also lived in a time of globalized communications, where events from across the world were reported in daily newspapers. Like other educated Indonesians, he kept up to date with world events by making a thorough reading of the press, which he was able to do in a range of languages.²⁷² In *Massa Actie*, he referenced articles he had read in *The Manila Tribune*, *The International Ocean*, and the *Indische Courant*. Through his travels and his readings, he built up a knowledge of the world which informed his politics and encouraged him to think comparatively, seeing Indonesia in relation to wider contexts.

The years of Tan Malaka’s youth were extremely dramatic in terms of world events. The defining experience of his early life was the First World War and the unravelling of the international order which followed it. By the time he was in his early twenties he had lived to witness the collapse of the Chinese, German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. When he returned to post-war Europe in 1922, it seemed like a devastated continent. He observed in Germany that ‘the people were suffering greatly’, and ‘the economy was falling into ruin’.²⁷³ When he arrived in the nascent Soviet Union later that year, earnest discussions were still taking place about the imminent demise of capitalism. In 1946, he recalled that in the immediate aftermath of the war, it had seemed that capitalism was ‘about to collapse’.²⁷⁴

Living through such tumultuous times gave Tan Malaka a sense of the instability of governmental structures, even in the metropolitan West. He became convinced that dramatic political transformations were not only possible, but could occur very rapidly. This was quite different to the worldview of his parents’ generation, who had viewed Western power and Western

²⁷¹ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 1.

²⁷² On the emergence of a newspaper-reading Indonesian public see Henk Schulte Nordholt, ‘Modernity and cultural citizenship in the Netherlands Indies: An illustrated hypothesis’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, 3 (2011), pp. 435-457.

²⁷³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 87-8.

²⁷⁴ This recollection was recorded in *Situasi Politik Luar dan Dalam Negeri* (1946), accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/indonesia/archive/malaka/1946-Situasi.htm> on 10 August 2017.

civilization as sturdy and permanent. In 1901, Kartini, the Javanese champion of women's education, had written of 'Europe, the centre of civilization, and of enlightenment'.²⁷⁵ For those Indonesians who came of age during the First World War, the West was the centre of instability. As Manu Goswami has written, the 'cascading crises of the interwar era spawned a conception of politics as the dynamic (re)constitution—the willed production and transformation—of society.' The dominant mood among anti-colonial and anti-capitalist activists of the inter-war years was one of 'open-ended possibility'.²⁷⁶

As we saw in the last chapter, Tan Malaka wrote extensively about Indonesia's prospects for revolution between 1922 and 1926. He was conscious, however, that Indonesia's political future would not be exclusively determined by events within the country itself. In his view, the connections created by the capitalist world economy meant that Indonesia's fate was ultimately bound up with larger political and economic processes that were occurring on a global scale. As he wrote in *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, 'If we describe capitalism as one structure and the countries of the world as piles supporting the edifice, then Indonesia appears as only one of these props. We already know that sooner or later the structure will inevitably collapse. However, only practice can determine the shape and extent of the collapse and the way it collapses. It is very possible that all the props will immediately fall and, along with it, the whole edifice. However, it is also possible that the props will not fall immediately, but in succession. Each time a prop falls part of the building changes.'²⁷⁷ For Tan Malaka, therefore, politics in the capitalist era was by its nature global, because capitalism had unified the countries of the world into a single structure, with a shared historical destiny. History worked on two interrelated scales, the national and the global.

The pre-capitalist era, by contrast, was on Tan Malaka's account a much less inter-connected world. In *Sovjet atau parlement?* he explained how the transition from a world of

²⁷⁵ Kartini, *Letters to a Javanese Princess*, p. 107. On the fracturing of the singular notion of 'Civilization' after the First World War, see Prasenjit Duara, 'The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 12, 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 99-130.

²⁷⁶ Manu Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms', *American Historical Review* 117, 5 (2012), pp. 1461-1485, at p. 1463.

²⁷⁷ Tan Malaka, *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, p. 31

nations to a single international economy had occurred: 'In this capitalist age, there are no longer any unknown or isolated countries. Long ago, thousands of years in the past, the Egyptian, Greek, Roman or Islamic Empires existed in seclusion. There was no connection between America and the continent of China, which was enclosed by a great wall of stone, long and tall. So it was in Japan, where until recently the people were forbidden to leave the country, and foreigners were banned from entering. The broad seas and the high mountains were great barriers to the interaction of nations, so that it may be said that the old world was divided into many worlds, and that each was basically ignorant of the others.' Capitalism, and its attendant technologies of transport and communication, had transformed this situation and made the many worlds of the pre-capitalist past into a single interconnected globe: 'in the present age, broad seas, or high mountains cannot hinder contact between nations. Ships and trains connect the nations of the world at speed. There are no mountains so high that they cannot be flown over by airplanes, and there are no seas so deep that they cannot be fathomed by submarines. The telegraph and the telephone can spread the news of the world in one or two minutes. The nature of the economy in the capitalist age is international'.²⁷⁸

Because modern Indonesia existed within this global capitalist economy, it was vital to understand the trends that structured international capitalism. This is why Tan Malaka devoted so much space in his writings to the subject of global history and global politics. According to his own analysis, a revolution in Germany or India might transform the political landscape in Indonesia, and would create an entirely new set of political possibilities.

Tan Malaka also experienced globalism first hand in these years, as he moved from city to city following his exile from Indonesia in 1922. In the years that followed, he spent time in Rotterdam (1922), Berlin (1922), Moscow (1922-3), Canton (1923-4), Singapore (1924) and Manila (1925-7). He gained a sense of the international revolutionary movement as a real, embodied phenomenon, meeting Dutch, Indian, Vietnamese, Russian, and German Communists. He also came face to face with the leaders of the national revolutions of Asia, meeting Sun Yat-

²⁷⁸ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, pp. 165-6.

Sen in Canton in 1923, and the Philippine anti-colonial radicals Manuel Quezon and Jose Abad Santos in Manila.

An inescapable fact wherever he travelled seemed to be the suffering of ‘proletarian’ labour, from the German workers struggling through the hardship of hyper-inflation, to the Filipinos toiling on the plantations.²⁷⁹ He was shocked by the inequality he encountered in Canton, where the streets were ‘traversed by millionaires and beggars, professors and illiterates, and people shouldering bridal litters, vegetables, and even some of the refuse and waste generated by two million people everyday.’²⁸⁰ As the global nature of capitalism presented itself to him in these stark, brutal facts, he gained materials for his own writing. He did not mention the Philippines at all in *Sovjet atau parlement?* (1921) or *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan* (1922), but it features heavily in *Massa Actie* (1926), which was itself composed during his time in Manila. His years in the Philippines also gave him an enduring admiration for Jose Rizal, the anti-colonial writer and activist, whom he lauded in *Semangat Muda* (1926) and, later, in *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* (1948).

Perhaps most significantly, his time moving through the cities of Europe and Asia made him acutely conscious of questions of national difference and racial status, not least his own. He found much to admire in Berlin, writing that ‘If one measured humanity merely on the basis of qualities of the mind – such as skill, willpower, and superiority in science, discipline, and organization – then it is the Germans who would have to get the laurels for achievements made in the last seventy-five years, especially in the fields of science, military science, and organization.’²⁸¹ Nonetheless, he found something missing: ‘human beings need other qualities apart from those required to subjugate other nations, and the most needed quality is genuine humanitarianism.’²⁸² Western Europeans tended towards ‘uppishness, setting oneself apart, and acting in a “businesslike” manner (for one’s own advantage).’²⁸³ In Moscow, he felt much more in sympathy

²⁷⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 88, 118.

²⁸⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 109.

²⁸¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, 87.

²⁸² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 87.

²⁸³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 97.

with the locals, sensing an affinity with Russians based on what he perceived to be their racial similarity to Asians: 'Perhaps because of a mixture of some Asian blood, or because they lived in a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist atmosphere as in Asia, the movements, voices, and faces of the Russians were generally more in tune with ours than were those of the West Europeans. The Russians still had a sense of equality and camaraderie in their behaviour as we do ... Unrestrained laughter still prevailed, welcomes were warm and were reflected in the face, and joy and sadness were expressed and not hidden or feigned.'²⁸⁴

This sense of belonging and easy companionship vanished when he arrived in China in 1923. Unable to speak the language and suffering in the unfamiliar climate, for the first time he felt completely alone, lost among what he considered an entirely foreign people.²⁸⁵ In the face of these hardships he suffered a total '*physical breakdown*' in 1924.²⁸⁶ It was not until he reached the Philippines that his health began to recover. In Manila, unlike in Canton, he felt completely at home. He observed that there was 'absolutely no difference in appearance between the Filipino peasant and the Menadonese, Bugis, Malay, Batak, Padang, Sundanese, or Javanese peasant.'²⁸⁷ He began to perceive the extensions, and the limits, of a 'greater Indonesia', beyond the borders of the Dutch East Indies, which included the islands of the Philippines, but stopped short of the Chinese mainland. His travels also revealed that colonial capitalism, in all its manifestations, was inescapably entwined with racial inequality. In Manila, he found that 'the higher we go on the political, social, economic, and cultural ladder, the more we see of yellow and even white skin. And the lower we go on those ladders, the more the color brown predominates, the color of most of Indonesia's original inhabitants.'²⁸⁸

He was equally struck by the differences between the society and economy of the Philippines under American rule and that of Indonesia under the Dutch. As we shall see, he began to argue that while capitalism had brought about the economic integration of Asia with the West,

²⁸⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 96-97.

²⁸⁵ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 111.

²⁸⁶ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 112.

²⁸⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 117.

²⁸⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 118.

it had not brought uniformity. To some extent it was actually heightening difference. The fact that capitalism in Asia operated largely through colonialism meant that Eastern capitalism and Western capitalism were fundamentally different. Moreover, because different Asian nations were colonized by different European powers, no two countries had exactly the same institutions, despite all being parts of world capitalism. The upshot of this was that while events in one area affected all others, nations nonetheless retained their own historical paths.

In Tan Malaka's judgment, each of these national paths was moving towards some sort of revolution. In the West, he believed that the revolution would take the form of a proletarian uprising against the bourgeoisie. In the colonial world, revolutions would be directed against the imperialists and would be led either by local bourgeois classes or by the vanguard parties of the working masses. It was not clear exactly when these revolutions would break out. Nor was it clear whether capitalism would collapse first in the metropole or the periphery. But the demise of capitalism and its replacement by a new Communist world order was, in his view, inevitable. This belief in the imminent mortality of capitalism was clearly influenced by Tan Malaka's experiences during the First World War. As we have seen, he encountered Communism through the texts of Bolsheviks, who viewed the war as an existential crisis of capitalism and saw the October revolution of 1917 as marking the beginning of the transition to a new Communist age. Although Tan Malaka grew increasingly pessimistic about the immediate prospects for revolution as the 1920s wore on, his faith in the long-term triumph of Communism remained undiminished. His belief in the victory of Communism, like his conviction that an Indonesian revolution was inevitable, was ultimately derived from his understanding of the dynamics of history. The transition from capitalism to communism, by means of violent revolution, was a historical necessity, because it sprang from irreconcilable class conflict within the capitalist system itself. The decline of capitalism in the twentieth century was as inevitable as the fall of feudalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Time was on the Communists' side.

For Tan Malaka, the overthrow of capitalism was distinct from earlier social revolutions, however, in that the shift to a new Communist mode of production would occur *globally*. Capitalism had emerged sporadically in one region of the world, the West, and had then been

spread to other regions, mainly through colonialism, over several centuries. The emergence of Communism, by contrast, would be a relatively rapid and international phenomenon, encompassing both East and West. He witnessed the growing resistance of organized labour wherever he went. Workers were as restless in Canton as in Berlin. The prospect of an imminent world-wide revolution of the oppressed opened up possibilities for a complete overhaul of the global political order under a new Communist dispensation. Nations themselves might cease to exist altogether under a new regime of brotherhood and solidarity. Tan Malaka began to explore these possibilities in *Massa Actie*, where he made the case for a postcolonial Southeast Asian federation of nations, based on the shared racial traits of the peoples of 'greater Indonesia'. The interaction of national and global history would ultimately result in new forms of political organization.

The Phases of World History

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels presented an uncomplicated statement of their theory of history, declaring that 'The history of all hitherto societies is the history of class struggles.' The contours of the past were a succession of relations of production, each with its own characteristic antagonism between a ruling group and an oppressed class: 'Freeman and slave' in the ancient world, 'lord and serf' in the feudal Middle Ages, and 'bourgeoisie and proletariat' in modern, capitalist society.²⁸⁹ These relations of production were themselves dependent on the prevailing level of technological development: feudal society was primarily agricultural; capitalist society was based on large-scale industrial production.²⁹⁰ The conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat under capitalism would, they claimed, resolve itself into a new Communist form of society, based on the equitable distribution of the fruits of industrial production.

Tan Malaka repeated much of this historical narrative in his own writings. In his first political essay, *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he sketched his vision of world history. He bracketed the

²⁸⁹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 482.

²⁹⁰ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 491.

ages of the world loosely into modes of production. Global history was, he said, divided into three phases:

1. The old age, when people worked with their hands (not through machines), as farmers and artisans, as it was once in the continent of China, the Islamic Empire, Hindustan and Europe before 1789. The form of government was kingly and aristocratic (monarchism).
2. In Europe since 1789, and America, the capitalist class has controlled production, first and foremost through the employment of great machines. The style of national government is parliamentary.
3. The time between capitalism and socialism. In this period soviets are established, which are the result of the struggle of the people and illustrate the power of the people to bring about Socialism.²⁹¹

In *Semangat Muda*, published five years later in 1926, Tan Malaka presented a similar scheme of world history. He described the distant past as the 'Zaman Bangsawan' ('the age of the nobility'), when people had laboured in the fields with 'hoes or ploughs' and crafted goods by hand.²⁹² Production was generally for use, and commerce was limited. The workers and peasants were ruled by the 'Raja' and the nobles, whose authority was buttressed by the teachings of the 'churches or mosques'.²⁹³ The 'Zaman Bangsawan' had been much the same 'in India, Java, China and Japan'.²⁹⁴ This age of nobles was supplanted by the 'Zaman Hartawan' ('the age of the wealthy'), which commenced in Europe 'around two hundred years ago'.²⁹⁵ The 'age of the wealthy' was characterized by large-scale mechanical production and a flood of new technologies, such as trains, steam ships and factories, which would have seemed fantastical by earlier standards: 'With the turn of a single screw, a machine can generate the power of a thousand horses. Messages can be delivered and orders can be sent to the four corners of the earth through the telegraph and the radio.'²⁹⁶ The conflict between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, which had brought about the 'age of the wealthy', was replaced by conflict between workers and the owners of property. Eventually the workers would overthrow their exploiters and usher in the 'Zaman Diktatur

²⁹¹ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 129.

²⁹² Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 2.

²⁹³ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 2-3.

²⁹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 3.

²⁹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 3.

²⁹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 4.

Proletar' ('the age of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat'), during which workers would take control of the means of production and the state, organizing the economy for the good of the people.²⁹⁷ Class conflict would evaporate under this new regime, because for the first time in human history power would be in the hands of the majority. As he wrote, 'In the Age of Communism, castes will disappear, oppression and exploitation will disappear, wealth, intelligence, knowledge, art, and literature will be the common property of mankind.'²⁹⁸

These images of world history, although they retain a Marxian structure, diverged from Marx's own historical account in several striking ways. In the first place, Tan Malaka did not consistently use Marx's own terminology. Rather than speaking of 'feudalism', he writes of the 'zaman kuno' ('the old age') or the 'zaman bangsawan' ('the age of the nobility'). The term 'Capitalism' is exchanged for the 'zaman hartawan' ('the age of the wealthy') in *Semangat Muda*. Slavery disappears altogether as a historical era. The pre-capitalist age is described as being made up of kings, farmers and artisans, but no mention is made of slaves. In fact, there is no reference at all to the property relations of pre-capitalist society. Did the agricultural labourers of the 'old age' own their own property, or were they tenants, serfs, or even slaves? Was property held collectively or privately? Some of his examples, such as the Islamic Caliphate, were partially slave societies. Others, like *ancien regime* Europe, were not. The breadth of his definition, which refers only to the style of government and the dominant form of production, allowed these distinctions to be blurred.

Another striking feature of Tan Malaka's vision of world history is that while pre-capitalism is taken to be a universal stage, with examples ranging across Asia and Europe, capitalism is marked out as a distinctively Western phenomenon. No claim is made for an endogenous Asian capitalism. Historical India, Java, China, Japan and the Islamic Empire are all relegated to the status of pre-capitalist societies. This, in part, was a result of his definitions. He did not deny that Asian societies had historically been commercially dynamic. As we have seen, he believed that there had been profit-seeking merchants in pre-colonial Asia, whom at times he

²⁹⁷ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 10-13.

²⁹⁸ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 13.

labelled as a 'bourgeoisie'. Yet his definition made it clear that 'capitalism' entailed large-scale mechanical production, which had never arisen in Asia, having begun only in the West during the nineteenth century following the industrial revolution. The emergence of capitalism marked a moment of divergence in the world history: in the West a new form of industrial society arose; the East remained pre-capitalist and was gradually enveloped by Western capitalism, primarily through imperialism.

The Emergence and Non-Emergence of Capitalism

Tan Malaka detailed the processes which resulted in the emergence of capitalism in the West in several of his works. In his account, the rise of capitalism was inseparable from the decline of feudalism, which he judged to have begun around 1500. He considered feudalism to have been anchored in the power of the monarchy and the nobility, which was itself propped up by religious authority. In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he argued that kingly power had first begun to be restrained in England. Magna Carta (1215), the English civil war, and Glorious Revolution were the first milestones on the path towards the end of feudal authority. Following the English example, parliamentary institutions had spread across Europe in the nineteenth century, especially after the revolutions of 1848. Running parallel to this process of democratization, he saw a secular decline in the importance of Christianity, which had underpinned monarchical authority. As he put it, after the time of Christ 'For more than fifteen centuries the people of the West were preoccupied with religion alone.' All learning was ultimately directed towards salvation, so 'the laws of nations were left to experts in the afterlife, the Priesthood.' Europeans began to challenge the wisdom of the priests, however, as they came to realize that 'the Priesthood were human too, and this world is not the afterlife. So the great power of the Priesthood was dissolved.' After the spell of religion had been broken, the people rose up against kings and nobles 'in struggles and wars that claimed millions of lives' and which established parliamentary government based on the principle of 'the liberty and equality of every man.' The dethroning of the priesthood was thus a crucial development, which made possible the decline of feudalism.

In his texts written after his exile in 1921, Tan Malaka focused increasingly on the French Revolution as the climax of the struggle against feudalism. In *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, he praised the Enlightenment philosophers Voltaire and Rousseau as the leading theorists of the French revolt against monarchical power. In *Semangat Muda* and *Massa Actie*, he claimed that the English revolution was only a prelude to the more substantial French revolution of 1789.²⁹⁹ The French revolution, he said, had sparked a new period of revolutionary upheaval across the European continent, a battle of ideas that had ended in 1848 with a decisive victory for the principles of representative government.

Following Marx and Engels, Tan Malaka viewed the political transition from monarchism to parliamentarianism as a byproduct of deeper changes occurring within the economic structure of Western European societies. In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he claimed that the drive towards the creation of parliamentary institutions was led by the bourgeoisie, the class which controlled industrial production, because parliaments were vehicles for furthering bourgeois class interests. He added more detail to this account in *Semangat Muda*, where he argued that the bourgeoisie was able to challenge the old feudal elites because it had built up power through its growing wealth, which was itself a result of the increasing concentration of industrial production and the expansion of trade which had taken place under the *ancien regime*. In *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, he classified the French revolution as an uprising of the bourgeoisie, with the workers and peasants in support, against the noble and priestly classes who were holding the capitalists back.³⁰⁰ In *Semangat Muda*, he repeated this view, writing that 'in the age of Feudalism or the age of the Nobility, the wealthy class was squeezed by the nobility and the Raja. In Europe in 1789 the French wealthy class was able to defeat the nobility and establish capitalism of the kind we have now.'³⁰¹

This raised the question of why bourgeois revolution had broken out in Europe, but not in the East, since there were also insurgent capitalist classes in Asia. Tan Malaka's commitment to the notion that societies developed along a set sequence of modes of production, a sequence that

²⁹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 1, 4.

³⁰⁰ Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, pp. 57-9.

³⁰¹ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 1.

was based exclusively on European history, made him view the Asian past in terms of lacking and failure, since Asia had failed to match the European ‘norm’ by evolving into capitalism.³⁰² He began to address this theme in *Massa Actie*, where he attempted to explain Indonesia’s failure to make the transition to a capitalist economy. The Majapahit Empire, he argued, had been a promising vehicle for capitalist development. There was substantial commercial activity and a powerful bourgeoisie, especially in Java’s port cities. Why, then, had a capitalist revolution had not materialized there? The first reason he offered was political instability: the Majapahit Empire had been crippled by civil war, which prevented further economic progress.³⁰³ This governmental fragility was partially a result of the highly international nature of its commercial economy, which invited foreign traders to manipulate and undermine local rulers. The Chinese, in particular, had been persistent meddlers in Javanese affairs.³⁰⁴ Tan Malaka pointed out that it was a Chinese-Javanese, Raden Patah, who had founded the Sultanate of Demak in c.1475, which eventually brought down the Majapahit Empire.³⁰⁵ Taruna Jaya, who overthrew the ‘corrupt’ rulers of Mataram in the seventeenth century, came close to establishing a new polity, but he was in turn defeated by the arms and scheming of the Dutch East India Company.³⁰⁶

Political instability, however, ought to have favoured a bourgeois revolution, because it worked to undermine old feudal centres of authority and created space for the emergence of a new capitalist order. Tan Malaka argued that this order had not emerged because the national bourgeoisie in Indonesia had never reached the same level of strength as its counterparts in Europe. Most traders were foreigners or *mestizos*: ‘If the ports had had strong industry and national trade, then undoubtedly Java would have experienced a social revolution, brought about and led by powers of a national scale, like the bourgeois revolutions against feudalism that occurred in Western Europe.’³⁰⁷ The proto-capitalist economies of the Indonesian archipelago were

³⁰² On the idea that making Europe a universal model reduces Asia to a permanent state of ‘lacking’, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³⁰³ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 27.

³⁰⁴ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 29.

³⁰⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 27.

³⁰⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 27-8.

³⁰⁷ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 26.

fundamentally different from those of medieval Europe, however, because they were more international and, as a result, less amenable to social change. Foreign traders created instability, but did not channel that instability towards national revolutionary progress.

Another reason advanced by Tan Malaka for the failure of Indonesian capitalism was the relative strength of religion. In his view, religious belief remained a powerful force in the East long after its importance had declined in the West. Although Asia was historically the generator of Europe's religions, unlike the West it had never shaken off religious authority. Tan Malaka regarded the monotheism of the Near East as an advance on European indigenous religion. As he wrote in *Sovjet atau parlement?*, 'In the distant past, around twenty centuries ago, what is now the West (Europe) was in ignorance and darkness. Then suddenly this ignorance and darkness was dispelled by a great flash of light that radiated from the East (Asia), from the Christian religion. It is not my intention to outline the nature and origin of this religion in the East, which was the cradle of other religions such as Judaism and Buddhism. My aim is only to remind that the awakening of Europe from its centuries-long slumber was due to the East.'³⁰⁸ Despite this historic achievement, however, he believed that Asia had become stuck in the religious age which Europe had left behind. In *Sovjet atau parlement?* He wrote that, 'While the people of the West have reached the conclusion that the mind and the body are the highest treasures in the world ... the people of the East remain confined (tied) by custom [adat], are still preoccupied with the afterlife and waste away their lives shackled by their various beliefs.'³⁰⁹ The tenacity of religion had political consequences in Asia. The Indian poor believed that they had to be 'diligent, respectful, patient, and grateful, and that power and wealth were intended by God for the nobles and the priests alone.'³¹⁰ This belief had been imported to Indonesia through the influence of Hinduism. Europe had made great strides forward in science and politics after reducing the authority of the priesthood. In the East, however, people remained beholden to religion. As he put it, 'Eastern culture' had never produced a genius comparable to 'Newton, Marx, and Lenin'.³¹¹ In politics, people were

³⁰⁸ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 4.

³⁰⁹ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 5.

³¹⁰ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 113.

³¹¹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 140.

taught that mankind 'ought to be divided into various groups (for governing and working)'.³¹² Because there had been no undermining of religious authority in Asia, revolutionaries in Asia could not break the power of the old order and establish the same kind of capitalist societies that the bourgeoisie had been able to forge in Europe.

In *Massa Actie*, Tan Malaka used the example of Diponegoro's rebellion in the Java War (1825-30) to illustrate the failure of Asian societies to break through into capitalism. Diponegoro, he claimed, was hamstrung by two weaknesses which had bedeviled the Majapahit Empire: a weak national bourgeoisie and the lack of a secular mentality. As he wrote, 'If Java had had a revolutionary national bourgeoisie, Diponegoro would have been supported in his struggle against Mataram and the Company by that class. This would have been a noble and necessary accomplishment. But it was not to be - the rotten Islamic bourgeoisie had been economically destroyed by Dutch capital.'³¹³ Diponegoro gained his greatest support not from a progressive national bourgeoisie, but from backward-looking religious leaders: 'In his resentment against Mataram and the Company, [Diponegoro] joined with Kyai Mojo, an Islamic religious leader and fanatic whose slogan was "Holy War", not nationalism.'³¹⁴ Despite Diponegoro's personal qualities - a 'will of steel' and the ability 'to attract people like a magnet attracts iron' - he was bound to fail, because his rebellion went against the grain of historical development. In effect, he was 'counter-revolutionary' in that he sought to suppress capitalist development brought about by the Dutch. The Javanese bourgeoisie that ought to have supported him was 'weak, in technological and economic terms', compared to the more vigorous capitalists of the Dutch East India Company. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time: 'If Diponegoro had been born in the West and had led a revolution with his pure soul, he would be compared to Cromwell or Garibaldi. But he "rescued a leaking boat", a class facing extinction.'³¹⁵

Indonesia, like other Asian nations, did not develop capitalism endogenously but through colonial intervention. As a result, it lacked many of the institutions which Marx argued were

³¹² Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 114.

³¹³ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 30.

³¹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 30.

³¹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 29-30.

typical of bourgeois society. As we saw in the last chapter, Indonesia's industrial economy was almost entirely concentrated in a narrow export sector. There was little urbanization and manufacturing, and the 'feudal' classes of peasants and aristocrats remained predominant. Yet colonialism was itself varied, and had created a diversity of institutions across Asia. When Tan Malaka began to view Indonesia in a comparative, international context, after his time in China and the Philippines, its form of colonial capitalism started to appear to highly unusual.

Capitalism and imperialism

In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, Tan Malaka outlined the reasons why capitalism was continually expanding into new territories. Following Marx, he argued that competition among capitalists, added to the vast productive capacities of mechanized industry, gave rise to periodic crises of overproduction which necessitated the pursuit of new markets. Like Lenin, he believed that imperialism was a means for capitalist nations to capture new markets and so maintain their profits. Colonies were also rich in labour and resources to be exploited. Thus, capitalists operating in the colonial world set up extractive industries and employed local workers as wage labourers. In Chapter Two we saw how Tan Malaka described the operation of this process in Indonesia. He also saw the same forces at work in other colonies. In *Massa Actie*, he noted that the British relied on India as a market for their textiles, while simultaneously exploiting the country for raw cotton, turning it into 'a vast cotton field.' American capitalists were similarly buying up land in the Philippines to create rubber plantations.³¹⁶

In Tan Malaka's view, however, there was not a straightforward relationship between imperial rule and capitalist development. In the first place, capital could be invested in countries outside formal imperial control. In *Toendoek Kepada Kekoeasaan*, he wrote that 'foreign capitalism has made great progress' in China, despite the fact that China was not a European colony.³¹⁷ Japan, meanwhile, had made the leap from pre-capitalism to capitalism without any direct imperial intervention.

³¹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 37, 40

³¹⁷ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 30.

More subtly, he argued in *Massa Actie* that capitalist development in much of colonial Asia had taken place through a *loosening* of imperial power. The most uncompromising imperialists were the Spanish and Portuguese, in terms of the enforcement of their rule and their customs, especially Christianity. As he noted, ‘Whoever refused to give in to [Spanish and Portuguese] coercion was beheaded.’³¹⁸ But the Philippines under Spain had experienced minimal economic development. Under the more liberal dispensation of the Americans, however, capitalism had begun to flourish in the Philippines. There were now ‘factories, trading houses, and shipping companies’.³¹⁹

What accounted for this difference? For Tan Malaka, the answer lay not with the colony but the colonizing power. When Spain began its imperialist incursions into the Philippines, it was still an essentially pre-capitalist economy. As he wrote, ‘When Spain and Portugal came to Asia around 500 years ago, they had not yet entirely thrown off feudalism. Portugal and Spain were agricultural countries, characterized by manual labour, noble classes and a priesthood (there was not yet an industrial class).’ Because the Spanish had no ‘manufactured goods that they could sell in the markets of their colonies’, they were forced to ‘plunder goods, which could be sold at a higher price in Europe.’³²⁰ By contrast, when America intervened in the Philippines at the close of the nineteenth century it was ‘the most powerful and richest country on Earth’, with a thriving capitalist economy forged through the revolutionary upheavals of the American Revolution and the Civil War.³²¹ Unlike the Spanish, the Americans had plenty of manufactured goods to offer and so could obtain the commodities they wanted through trade. Whereas the Spanish had held down all indigenous economic and political activity through ‘barbaric imperialism’, the Americans practised ‘liberal imperialism’, which ‘grants full independence to big landlords and the native bourgeoisie’.³²² Under American rule, the Philippines had not only economic freedom, but a measure of self-government, with its own Senate and House of Representatives.

³¹⁸ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 34.

³¹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 40.

³²⁰ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 33.

³²¹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 34, 42.

³²² Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 33.

Tan Malaka thus developed a comparative theory of imperialism in *Massa Actie*: the more economically advanced the colonizer, the greater the degree of economic and political liberty in the colony. Indonesia had been colonized by the Dutch when capitalism was still fairly undeveloped in the Netherlands, which had itself only recently thrown off Spanish rule. As he wrote, 'When the Dutch sent their pirate ships to Indonesia, their country was made up of farmers, artisans and small coffee shops.' Little had changed in the intervening three hundred years. The Netherlands was 'still a country of farmers and merchants. And it can be no other way, because it has no basis for heavy industry, such as coal, iron or textiles. If the Dutch did not have their colonies they would doubtless be like Belgium or Sweden. At most they would be a quiet country of farmers and small merchants like Denmark.'³²³ Because the Dutch had no industry and so nothing to trade, they practised 'robbery, destruction and murder' to get the goods they desired. Indigenous traders were bankrupted by the violent monopolistic policy of the East India Company, and there were no genuine institutions of self-government. The Dutch were basically no different from Spain and Portugal: they had no colonial policy except plunder.

British imperialism, on the other hand, was closer in style to that of the Americans. As he wrote, 'Britain established a foothold in India in 1750, 100 years after its bourgeois revolution, led by Cromwell.' Following Britain's transition to bourgeois society, 'British capitalism advanced extremely fast, as did ideas of free trade, liberalism, constitutionalism and the belief in liberty.' Britain needed not just raw materials from India, but *consumers*: 'as an industrialized nation with an enormous output, Britain needs markets.' In order to trade with Indians and sell to them, intermediaries were required. As he put it, 'Do not the firms and companies, both import and export, in the great trade between Britain and India, need Indian middle men as brokers? And doesn't the bayonet not always work to force a people to buy goods? Like it or not, it is necessary to raise the standard of living, if one wants to one wants to acquire steady buyers.' Because the British capitalists were more ambitious than their Dutch and Spanish counterparts, in that they wanted to create markets and not only extract resources, they allowed greater scope for Indian

³²³ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 43.

economic activity. This meant that an indigenous Indian bourgeoisie had survived under British rule, whereas its Indonesian counterpart had been crushed by the monopoly commerce of the Dutch.

It was this Indian bourgeoisie that had begun the agitation for greater economic powers which took off in the early twentieth century. The boycott movement of Tilak had, in Tan Malaka's view, enabled 'the growth of various industries, including weaving - which is now a national industry'. He estimated that there were now around 200 weaving mills in Bombay alone, 'almost all' of which were 'owned and managed and staffed by Indians. British textiles have been beaten back through severe competition, not only in India, but also in Africa, China, and sooner or later in Europe too.' There were also 'Industries like coal and iron; and modern metal industries' that were 'held by Indians.' The war had shown the strength and importance of Indian industry: 'During the World War, Britain bought train carriages from "Tata Coy", now (a few years later) it has made an agreement to buy train engines also.' Britain's more liberal imperialism thus allowed an Indian bourgeoisie to exist. When that bourgeoisie had secured greater economic rights, through the boycott movement, Indian industrial capitalism had started to emerge. As he put it, 'without the violence of British imperialism, Indian national capital now stands by itself ... India has now entered the age of advanced heavy industry. Britain is no longer the workshop of the world, even within its own empire; and India is no longer Britain's cotton field.' As in the Philippines, capitalism had developed in India through a *reduction* in imperial control.

Tan Malaka therefore distinguished between two forms of imperialism. The old 'barbaric' style, practised by Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, was focused on seizing resources and coercing indigenous labour. The new 'liberal' style, pioneered by Britain and followed by America, involved cooperation with local classes and granted a degree of economic and political liberty to imperial subjects. The first style was purely extractive, while the second entailed economic development in the colony. This difference was not due to British or American imperialists being more benevolent than the Spanish or the Dutch. Rather, it stemmed from the fact that Britain and the United States had more developed capitalist economies, which could produce manufactured goods to trade in their colonies and because British and American capitalists

wanted to turn the people of the colonies into consumers of their goods. As he put it, ‘The difference in the type of extortion and oppression among the colonizers is not due to differences in human nature in the imperialist countries. In fact, it is down to the degree of capitalist development in each country when they reached Asia, and their style of capitalism.’³²⁴ Historical materialism, he believed, could explain the divergent paths of Asia’s colonial countries.

Indonesia, however, presented something of a paradox. It did have industrial development, in its export sector, but lacked an industrially advanced colonizer. It had the institutions of a backwards colony, with little or no self-government and virtually no indigenous bourgeoisie, but it nonetheless had industries to match those colonies which were governed by more ‘advanced’ capitalist powers, like India and the Philippines. The answer to this riddle lay, in Tan Malaka’s view, with the Dutch ‘liberal’ policy, begun in the 1870s, which had opened Indonesia up to foreign investment. The result of this policy was that Indonesia was being industrialized not by its ruling power, or by local capitalists, but by *foreign* investors. He observed in *Massa Actie* that most of the capital being invested in the rubber industry was British and American.³²⁵ As he put it, ‘Little Holland, that once devoured everything for itself, is now forced to share with more powerful nations.’³²⁶ The mismatch between Indonesia’s advanced industry and its crude institutions was caused by the persistent failure of the Netherlands to become an advanced capitalist economy. In his view, ‘If the Netherlands was a country where industry was advancing, sooner or later they would doubtless have been forced onto a reformist political path, like Britain and America.’ The Dutch ‘would have had to adopt a liberal policy towards the Javanese or the Indo-Javanese and the Javanese nobility. In this way, the political and economic progress that has arisen in the Philippines and India, could have taken place in Indonesia too.’³²⁷ As it was, Indonesia was destined to follow its own path, different from its Asian neighbours.

³²⁴ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 33.

³²⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 53; Dingley also notes the importance of British, Japanese and American capital, especially since 1914, in *The Peasants’ Movement in Indonesia*, pp. 7-8.

³²⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 51.

³²⁷ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 44.

On Tan Malaka's account, capitalism had become global in two waves, and in two distinct senses. The Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch had brought capitalism to Asia in the sense that they sought profits there, but they had not set-up capitalist institutions in the countries they colonized. In fact, they had suppressed indigenous capitalism where they could. It was un-colonized countries, like Japan, which had made the greatest progress towards capitalist development. It was only under the more liberal imperialism of Britain and America that Asian capitalist classes had been able to flourish within a colonial system. In this second sense, 'world capitalism' had arisen only recently, after British reforms in the early-twentieth century and the advent of American rule in the Philippines, and with the influx of British and American capital into Indonesia. Yet Tan Malaka believed that capitalism was developing so fast in Asia that it was hurtling towards collapse. By spreading capitalist dynamism to the East, in an attempt to aid the growth of their own economies, Britain and America had in fact accelerated the decline of capitalism itself.

Paths to Revolution

As a follower of Marx, Tan Malaka believed that history moved in a progressive direction, with Communism as its final destination. As he wrote in *Semangat Muda*, 'As a river must flow to the sea, so our society must progress into the age of community, peace, and civilization.'³²⁸ This teleological vision of history bears some resemblance to the Minangkabau conception of society as moving towards peace and prosperity through the perfection of 'adat'.³²⁹ Unlike the Minangkabau vision, however, which stressed reform through consensus as the means of progress, in Tan Malaka's view progress was usually achieved through violent revolution. When barriers to progress arose, they had to be broken down by force: 'just as a river, whose flow is slowed by a mountain, will penetrate that mountain, so a society whose progress is hampered by an oppressor caste or an oppressor nation will defeat that caste and nation.'³³⁰ Many of the great victories for freedom in human history were achieved by meeting force with force: 'people who are stamped on will struggle to free themselves from under the boot. The ruthless Nero worked to advance the

³²⁸ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 67.

³²⁹ Abdullah, 'Modernization in the Minangkabau World', p. 188.

³³⁰ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 67.

cause of the Christians. George III brought about Washington, who freed America from British oppression. Tsarism in Russia brought about Bolshevism. Britain in India created the Boycott movement and Swaraj'.³³¹ The imperialist nations themselves had achieved their power following successful bourgeois revolutions against feudal oppression in their own countries.

Tan Malaka saw history as being essentially structured by these revolutionary confrontations.³³² He gave little detail in his account of world history beyond the dates of famous revolutions. The French Revolution of 1789, for example, marked the beginning of Europe's transition from feudalism to capitalism. In the same manner, he saw the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 as the starting point for a new transition from capitalism to Communism. Just as the French Revolution had come at a time when feudalism was decaying, the Bolshevik Revolution emerged out of the catastrophic destruction of the First World War, which revealed the bankruptcy of the capitalist order. As he wrote in *Sovjet atau parlement?*, 'Throughout the evolution of the world, throughout known history, there has never been a war that can equal the intensity of the recent war... A plague or cholera that afflicts mankind is not one tenth of the pestilence caused by the greed of the capitalist class in the present age.' The war had not only shown that capitalism was unsustainable, it had created an opportunity for a new regime had to emerge: 'just as thunder and lightning precede the clear air, so the storm and typhoon in Europe herald the age that must come, that now breaks its dawn in the land of Russia.'³³³

The crisis of capitalism, exemplified by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, was felt in every part of the global capitalist economy. In *Sovjet atau parlement?* (1921), Tan Malaka observed that the peace in Europe had brought no respite. In Britain, where capitalism was 'the oldest and most mature in the world', labour had become markedly more militant since the war. In Austria, capitalism was evidently on its last legs: 'Austria, which was once great and famed, is now very backward economically, politically'. In France and Italy, Communist parties were growing 'stronger and more powerful'. Germany and Hungary had witnessed Communist

³³¹ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 68.

³³² Ho Chi Minh shared the idea that history was essentially a series of revolutions. See Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, pp. 132-4.

³³³ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 146.

uprisings in the very recent past. There was a real possibility that a workers' revolution might succeed in Europe in the near future. As he put it, 'European capitalism is very shaky, and could collapse any day.'³³⁴

In Asia, Tan Malaka saw the same revolutionary spirit at work. Japan, which after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 had, in his view, become a capitalist society, was suffering from the same global capitalist malaise. There were 'fierce strikes, not only for higher wages, but also for political rights, like the right to vote'. Communism was spreading there, especially among students. There were also good reasons for thinking that China, in the face of incursions by Britain, Japan and other capitalist powers, would prove a fertile ground for Communism.³³⁵ In India, the nationalist resistance to British rule was taking on an increasingly socialist hue. In Tan Malaka's eyes, Gandhi had a tremendous opportunity to guide the anti-colonial movement in India onto a Communist track. India was especially important for him, because he believed that a successful Indian revolution could fatally weaken global capitalism, for two reasons. First, because it would topple British capitalism, which was already reeling from the war. If the British domino fell, the other tottering European economies would follow. As he put it, 'If British capitalism falls, then undoubtedly capitalism in other European countries will not stand.' Second, an Indian revolution would enable Russia and India to join forces, and so create a powerful Eurasian socialist bloc from which to spread Communism. Asia, and especially India, might bring down the edifice of global capitalism altogether.³³⁶ Asians, who had failed to make the breakthrough into industrial capitalism, would thus be at the forefront of world history, leading the way forward into Communism.

In *Toendoek kepada Kekoeasaan*, written in 1922 in Berlin, Tan Malaka repeated his view that capitalism was in its death throes, and that much of the destabilization was coming from Asia. He argued that Japan, where historical progress had been so rapid, was experiencing a degree of industrial strife that signaled its readiness to advance to the new Communist age: 'The Japanese

³³⁴ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 153.

³³⁵ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, section on China, pp. 159-7.

³³⁶ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 158.

people have already soared away from the Middle Ages (= the age of the farmer) to the age of capitalism, and can also move from the age of capitalism to the age of Communism.’³³⁷ The Chinese were ‘tearing down capitalism’, as evidenced by the recent success of the dockers’ strike in Hong Kong. In India and Java, too, revolutionary parties were on the move. As he put it, ‘across the East, with more than 1000 million people (more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the world), there is a great movement. This great movement will not stop until all oppressors and exploiters, both foreign and internal, are burned in the fires of revolution.’³³⁸ The emerging revolutionary conflagration was unlike earlier rebellions against colonialism in that it was *international*. Tan Malaka observed that the Dutch had once been able to pacify rebellions in Aceh or Jambi by simply exiling rebel leaders. His own experience, however, showed that this tactic no longer worked: ‘I have been exiled from the Indies by the Dutch capitalists, but I have been accepted with good cheer by the (Dutch) proletariat that is exploited and oppressed by its own people.’³³⁹ Because both the East and the West were in revolt against capitalism, the revolutionary crisis could not be contained: ‘There is no longer any place in the world where capitalism can be predatory and arbitrary without restraint, as before. Now the proletariat has awoken and is screaming. Because of this there is no longer any place in the world where capitalism can exist safely. As the proletariat grows greater and greater, so the ranks of the capitalists grow weaker.’³⁴⁰ The international networks forged by the capitalists were being turned against their creators.

In the early 1920s, Tan Malaka wrote as if the world revolution might overthrow capitalism in the very near future. When he began to write on politics again in the mid-1920s, however, he was more pessimistic about the prospects of revolution. In *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia’* (1925), he reflected that the metropolitan capitalist economies had stabilized in recent years. On the left, much of the momentum had been lost, primarily due to what he considered to be a betrayal by the social-democrats, who had made their peace with the capitalists and turned against their former Communist allies. This analysis was repeated in *Semangat Muda* (1926), where he observed that it was now the right that was making progress in Europe, with Fascists advancing in Italy and

³³⁷ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, 30.

³³⁸ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 30.

³³⁹ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 31.

³⁴⁰ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 31.

elsewhere.³⁴¹ His belief in Asia's revolutionary promise, however, remained undiminished. *Massa Actie* (1926) began with the declaration that 'Asia has awoken! Sooner or later the shackled Asian nations will surely gain freedom and independence.'³⁴²

In his 1925-6 texts, however, Tan Malaka began to differentiate between Asian national revolutions. Whereas he had spoken about the global advance of Communism in *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he now argued that each Asian nation would have its own path, because colonial institutions differed from country to country. In *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, he claimed that India and the Philippines would have 'bourgeois' revolutions, where local capitalist classes would replace the colonial rulers and establish a parliamentary system of government. Britain and America had already begun to compromise with the national bourgeoisie in these countries, so it was only a matter of time before they handed over complete control. As he wrote, 'in British India, Egypt, and the Philippines ... there is a strong native bourgeoisie, whose economic interests are tied to the imperialist economy and so can be safely trusted with the succession of political power. Therefore (though this is yet to be confirmed) national independence in India, Egypt, and the Philippines, with the masses more or less in support, will be by means of a "dominion" and "National Parliament".'³⁴³ This argument was repeated in more or less the same form in *Semangat Muda* and *Massa Actie*.

The Asian country which Tan Malaka believed would take the most radical path was Indonesia. As he wrote in *Massa Actie*, Indonesia was the 'the weakest link in the long steel chain that binds the East'.³⁴⁴ Dutch rule was the weakest of all the Western imperialisms, and, crucially, the Dutch had not allowed a national bourgeoisie to survive, with whom they might be able to make some form of compromise, allowing an independent but capitalist Indonesia to emerge. As we saw in the last chapter, he believed that Indonesia's only feasible revolutionary path was through a general uprising of the working masses, led by the Communists, against both capitalism

³⁴¹ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 19.

³⁴² Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 5.

³⁴³ Tan Malaka, *Menuju Republik Indonesia*, p. 161.

³⁴⁴ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, opening, p. 5.

and imperialism. This was argued consistently across *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*, *Semangat Muda*, and *Massa Actie*, though his views on the timing of the Indonesian revolution did change.

On this account, it was Indonesia, not India, that would be in the vanguard of Asia's - and the world's - progress towards Communism. The strange survival of Dutch imperialism in Asia had created the conditions which would allow Indonesia to leap into the new Communist age. For the first time, Indonesia had the chance to play a decisive part in the history of the world.

The Post-Revolutionary World Order

In *Massa Actie*, Tan Malaka began to outline his vision for a post-imperial order in Southeast Asia. He believed that his survey of the trends of world history had revealed that imperialism in the region was on its way out. As we have seen, he argued that in the medium term it was likely that an independent capitalist nation-state would emerge in the Philippines, whereas a Communist state was likely to develop in Indonesia. This, however, was only an interim solution. After all, to accept an Indonesian nation-state would be to accept the arbitrary borders established by the imperialists: 'Although it is our goal, we cannot limit our action to "only" independence for an Indonesian nation free from Dutch imperialism. A limitation like this would restrict us economically, strategically and politically.' There was a fundamental continuity of 'bangsa', he claimed, across the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago and the Philippines (which Tan Malaka called 'Northern Indonesia'). Filipinos were really Indonesians: 'As a people with a common origin, Filipinos and Southern Indonesians share facial features, noses, a way of talking, a delight in labour and a will to work, and their languages have an undeniable connection.'³⁴⁵

Indonesians, Malays and Filipinos also shared an economic and political predicament. In Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines, the *bumiputera* had been dispossessed by foreign traders and were governed by foreign powers. Unifying these nations into a 'Greater Indonesia' ('Indonesia Raya') would enable economic and geopolitical co-operation. The ultimate

³⁴⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 135.

goal was a “Federal Indonesian Republic” (FRI), which means a union of 100 million oppressed people, who occupy the strategic centre of the Asian continent, between two oceans. Besides this, it means the unification of all the production of the world’s tropical nations; and the awakening of a new culture, the birth of a new nation and a new power in the East.’³⁴⁶ From the ruins of imperialism a new greater Indonesian nation would arise, erasing the divisions sown by Europeans. Rather than competing to produce the same goods, the Philippines and Indonesia would be able to co-operate and coordinate production. Rather than being splintered into hundreds of hostile ethnic groups by the politics of ‘divide and rule’, the archipelagic *bumiputera* would be able to embrace their shared identity.³⁴⁷ A future was coming into focus where all ‘Indonesians’ would be united, bringing to a close five hundred years of disunity created by imperialism. The working of global history was bringing an entirely new world into view. Even from his often lonely exile in China and the Philippines, this prospect filled Tan Malaka with electrifying revolutionary optimism.

Tan Malaka’s World History in Context

Tan Malaka’s analysis of Indonesia’s historical development within the context of the growth of world capitalism mirrored the efforts of other Asians to understand their countries’ pasts in terms of a Marxist schema of world history. In his 1921 essay, *India in a Transition Stage*, M.N. Roy cast India’s past since the eighteenth century as an exercise in capitalist integration. He argued that Britain’s subjection of India was a result of the expansion of British capitalism and its consequent pursuit of profits overseas. Before the arrival of the British, he claimed, India had been ‘feudal’, but had gradually transformed by the intrusion of capitalism, sustained by British rule, into a capitalist society.³⁴⁸ Just as Tan Malaka saw Diponegoro’s rebellion against the Dutch as a feudal counter-revolution, Roy saw the 1857 mutiny as ‘the last attempt of the dethroned feudal potentates to regain their power’.³⁴⁹ Marxism could explain both the British presence in India and the Indian reaction in simple terms of class interests. In the same manner, Mohammad Hatta, in ‘The Economic World Structure and the Conflict of Power’ (1926), argued that colonialism was, at root,

³⁴⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 136.

³⁴⁷ For Tan Malaka’s commentary on the strategy of ‘divide and rule’, see *Toendoek kepada kekeuasaan*, p. 39.

³⁴⁸ Sibnarayan Ray (ed.), *Selected Works of M.N. Roy*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 189-208.

³⁴⁹ Ray (ed.), *Selected Works of M.N. Roy*, Vol. 1, p. 189.

a conflict of material interests between rulers and ruled; between expansionist European capitalists and the exploited peoples of Asia. Marx, in his view, had elucidated matters by capturing the essential role of conflict in human history.³⁵⁰ Both Roy and Hatta, however, drew a simple equation between capitalism and imperialism. Unlike Tan Malaka, they did not explore the variations within imperialist policy, or the ways in which imperialism could obstruct capitalism as well as encouraging it.

Other Asian Marxists, in common with Tan Malaka, also applied Marxist ideas to show that their struggles were part of larger global movements. Ho Chi Minh too believed that his own revolutionary endeavour was part of a historical chain, which stretched backwards in time and outwards across the world. In his 1927 essay *Duong Kach Menh* ('The Revolutionary Road'), he traced a revolutionary lineage that encompassed the French and American revolutions, the Meiji Restoration, the reunification of Italy, the foundation of the Chinese Republic, and the October Revolution. There were two revolutions underway in the world, he claimed, the class revolution which pitted the exploited workers and peasants against the capitalists, and the national revolutions against colonial powers, which were gathering steam in Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, and India. The two were joined by the Communist International, which supported all uprisings of the oppressed across the world. In this manner Marxism allowed Asian revolutionaries to see themselves as part of a process with an unstoppable historical momentum, extending across borders, with a heroic past behind it. The extensive travels of Ho Chi Minh and Tan Malaka, which included stays in Moscow and contact with foreign Communist parties, can only have reinforced their impression that they were part of a world movement. In fact, Tan Malaka's insistence on the international nature of revolution made him suspect to some in Indonesia. In 1925, the Sarekat Islam paper *Hindia Baroe* described him as 'an internationalist (one that does not attach his heart to his country and nation)'.³⁵¹ But for Tan Malaka, as for Ho Chi Minh, national and international struggles were bound together, and politics could not be understood purely at a national level.

³⁵⁰ Hatta, 'The Economic World Structure and the Conflict of Power', pp. 38, 41.

³⁵¹ *Hindia Baroe*, 10 January 1925, 'Tan Malaka dan Partijnja'.

Where Tan Malaka parted company from other Asian Marxists was in his vision of a united Southeast Asian federation. Tan Malaka encountered Pan-Asianism while in China, but rejected it on Marxist grounds. In 1923, when in Canton, he met Sun Yat-Sen, at that time perhaps the world's best-known advocate of Pan-Asian collaboration, who encouraged him to 'cooperate with Japan'.³⁵² For Tan Malaka this was out of the question: Japan was a capitalist-imperialist power. When in the Philippines, however, he came into contact with the radical lawyer Jose Abad Santos and the politician Manuel Quezon, both of whom believed in Pan-Malay unity.³⁵³ The concept of Pan-Malayism resonated with Tan Malaka not only due to his sense of the essential continuity of 'bangsa' between Indonesians and Filipinos, but also because it raised no objections on class grounds, since all the Malay peoples were ruled by foreign powers and so were neither 'bourgeois' nor 'imperialist'. It is unclear, though, why he believed 'bangsa' ought to have centrality when constituting a nation, given Marx's focus on class as the key source of identity. It seems that his travels in Singapore and the Philippines gave him a sense of a broader *bumiputera* people, with whom he felt he had much in common and who he believed he instinctively understood. In 1925, while on the boat from Hong Kong to Manila, where the passengers were mainly from the Philippines, he observed that his own appearance was '100 percent Filipino and in fact more authentic than 20 to 30 percent of the Filipino racial mixtures.'³⁵⁴ Travel gave him a sense that he belonged to a larger racial group. While he admired the Chinese, and indeed passed for an ethnic Chinese in the 1930s while undercover in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Amoy, he did not doubt that they belonged to an alien 'bangsa'. In *Massa Actie*, he wrote of the 'bangsa Indonesia' on the Malay peninsula who 'cannot defend themselves from being overwhelmed by the Indian and Chinese bangsa, who continue to flood there.'³⁵⁵

The very concept of Indonesia was, in any case, in flux at this time, having only recently come into wide circulation.³⁵⁶ In *Sovjet atau parlement?* and *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, Tan Malaka wrote of 'The Indies' ('Hindia'), rather than 'Indonesia'. Having disposed of the term

³⁵² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 101.

³⁵³ Mrazek, 'Tan Malaka: A Political Personality's Structure of Experience', p. 33.

³⁵⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 115.

³⁵⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 135-6.

³⁵⁶ For the genealogy of the term 'Indonesia', see R. E. Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

‘Hindia’, which had an inescapable association with the Dutch, being frequently rendered as ‘Hindia Belanda’ (‘The Dutch Indies’), he could explore the more expansive notion of ‘Indonesian’ nationhood. From outside the country, he felt that he could begin to see a ‘Greater Indonesia’, which was in fact the true, underlying Indonesia, that extended to Malaya and the Philippines and had been fractured by centuries of colonial domination. The creation of the ‘Federal Indonesian Republic’ could be phrased in terms of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle, since its constituent nations had been historically oppressed by Western capitalism and imperialism, but it gained its coherence because it unified the Indonesian ‘bangsa’.

Tan Malaka’s pursuit of a ‘Greater Indonesia’ suggests that his cosmopolitanism had certain limits. Although he claimed that the capitalist world economy had created fundamental connections between nations, and that politics was inescapably international as a result, he believed that the emerging ‘world revolution’ of the international proletariat, working in collaboration, was a stepping stone to a world made up of extended nation-states, where language, ‘bangsa’, and state would be aligned. In claiming this, he followed a similar logic to contemporary Indonesian nationalists who argued that ‘bangsa’ was a fundamental basis of a nation-state. In October 1928, a congress of nationalist youth organizations in Jakarta swore fidelity to the ‘tanah air Indonesia’ (‘Indonesian homeland’), the ‘bangsa Indonesia’ and ‘bahasa Indonesia’ (the ‘Indonesian language’).³⁵⁷ Tan Malaka’s ‘bangsa Indonesia’ was expansive, in that it covered both the Catholic Philippines and Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaya. As such it was evidently not co-terminous with the ‘bangsa Islam’, placing Tan Malaka’s conception of the Indonesian nation in opposition to the more exclusivist understanding of Malay nationhood then in circulation. In 1926, the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (Malay Union of Singapore), for example, stated that the ‘bangsa Melayu’ was limited to Muslims.³⁵⁸ Religion was not at the core of Tan Malaka’s ‘bangsa Indonesia’. Rather, he saw the ‘bangsa Filipina’ as sharing a common ‘economics, culture and politics’ with Indonesia. He also saw a linguistic continuity, claiming that ‘before the Spanish

³⁵⁷ See Keith Foulcher, ‘*Sumpah Pemuda*: the making and meaning of a symbol of Indonesian nationhood’, *Asian Studies Review*, 24, 3 (2000), pp. 377-410.

³⁵⁸ Ariffin bin S.M. Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Concepts of Democracy and Community Among the Malays, 1945-1950*, PhD thesis, Australian National University (1989), p. 24.

came to Indonesia, the Malay language was the official political language of the Philippines.’ Spanish rule had divided Indonesia from the Philippines and so caused Malay as a ‘language of association’ to perish, diminishing ‘the sense of unity among the people’ and so making it difficult to build ‘national unity’ (‘persatuan nasional’).³⁵⁹

The centrality of ‘bangsa’ in Tan Malaka’s political imagination put him at odds with more radical Marxist conceptions of cosmopolitanism. While he campaigned for the dissolution of some borders, such as those between the constituent nations of ‘Greater Indonesia’, he implicitly sought the preservation of others, such as those between the Federal Indonesian Republic and its neighbours. In this sense he stopped short of the aspirations of those Marxists who desired the abolition all borders and the creation of a world where all people could flourish as individuals. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote that ‘working men have no country’. They believed that Communism would accelerate the destruction of ‘National differences’ which they argued was already being brought about by ‘the world market’.³⁶⁰ The first manifesto of the Communist International, written by Trotsky and issued in 1919, which was published in Dutch in *Het Vrije Woord* (on 13 September 1919),³⁶¹ then in Malay in *Soeara Ra’jat* (21 January 1921)³⁶² and *Sinar Hindia* (22 March 1921),³⁶³ outlined a comparable vision for a post-national future: ‘The national State, which imparted a mighty impulse to capitalist development, has become too narrow for the further development of productive forces... The small peoples can be assured the opportunity of a free existence only by the proletarian revolution, which will liberate the productive forces of all countries from the constraint of the national State, unite the peoples in closest economic collaboration on the basis of a common economic plan’.³⁶⁴ For Tan Malaka, in contrast, the *telos* of revolution was not the destruction of all borders among the peoples of the

³⁵⁹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 135-6.

³⁶⁰ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 502-3.

³⁶¹ ‘Manifest van de Communistische Internationale aan het Proletariaat der Gangsche Weerld’, *Het Vrije Woord*, 13 September 1919.

³⁶² ‘Manifest Baroe dari Kaoem Kommunist diterbitkan dari Moskou dalam 1919’, *Soeara Ra’jat*, 16-21 January 1921.

³⁶³ ‘Manifest Baroe dari Kaoem Kommunist dan diterbitkan dari Moskou dalam 1919’, *Sinar Hindia*, 22 March 1921.

³⁶⁴ ‘Manifesto of the Communist international to the Workers of the World’ (1919), in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International, 1919-1943, Documents, Volume I, 1919-1922* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1955), pp. 38-47, at p. 42.

world, but the *restoration* of the underlying unity of the Indonesian 'bangsa' through political statehood. His internationalist style of political analysis and his belief in world revolution thus went hand in hand with a commitment to an extended Indonesian nation state.

Islam and Communism

The last two chapters explored Tan Malaka's vision of history and his belief that the passage of time was creating the conditions necessary for Communist revolution in Indonesia, and revolution in Asia more broadly. Any Indonesian revolutionary project, however, had to reckon not only with the country's historical dynamics, but also with its religion, Islam. Tan Malaka was a self-declared follower of Marx, but he operated in an overwhelmingly Islamic country. The constituencies on whose behalf he claimed to be acting - the 'working class' ('kaum buruh') and 'the People' ('rakyat') - were made up almost entirely of Muslims. In the Dutch colonial taxonomy, 'inlander' ('native') and Muslim were synonymous. Native Christians were considered to be quasi-Europeans. Any political movement that sought to mobilize 'the people' was therefore by necessity a movement of Muslims. The Indonesian 'national movement' had started to come to life with the emergence of the Sarekat Islam, an explicitly Muslim association.³⁶⁵ Tan Malaka was aware that addressing the subject of Islam was a political necessity for Communists. In *Semangat Muda* (1926), he admitted frankly that in certain areas of the Indies the PKI would have no success unless

³⁶⁵ Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942*, p. 7.

they made it clear where they stood on Islam: ‘Although the National Program is for all the Natives and people of Indonesia ... sometimes we must explain our position regarding religion, for example in Solo, Yogya, Aceh, Banjarmasin.’³⁶⁶

Tan Malaka himself had been raised in the Islamic milieu of West Sumatra. As he recalled in *Madilog*, ‘I was born into a devout Muslim family. In the time when Islam could be said to be in its infancy in Indonesia, the family produced a learned Ulama, who is still considered holy today! My mother and father were both pious people who feared Allah and followed the word of the Prophet.’³⁶⁷ From his parents and the *surau* in his village he received an elementary Islamic education: ‘When I was very young I could already interpret (*tafsirkan*) the *Al Qur’an*... My mother told me the stories of Adam and Eve and the Prophet Joseph. The story of the leader Muhammad, son of Abdullah, was not often told, because, who knows why, I always cried when I heard it.’³⁶⁸ The young Tan Malaka developed a strong admiration for the Arabic language, though he could not read or speak it: ‘I still consider the Arabic language to be perfect, rich, melodious, expressive and noble... I myself have not had the opportunity to continue my education in Arabic, that began decades ago in the modest *surau*, and it is now completely forgotten.’³⁶⁹

When he moved to Fort de Kock in his teenage years to become a student at the ‘Kweekschool’, Tan Malaka entered a course of study that was entirely secular. Schoolboys were required to dress in the ‘European’ (i.e. non-Islamic) style. While in the Netherlands (1913-19) he lost all contact with Islamic religion, living exclusively among Christians. After his return to Indonesia in 1919, he seems to have harboured certain doubts regarding religion. In a letter to a Dutch friend in 1920 he expressed scepticism about the religious practices of Indonesians: ‘At present I am occupied with the question: “Is the supernatural possible?”. I am at present living among a mystically inclined people, and one of these days I will strike a real mystic. There are charlatans, but there are also some who are convinced.’³⁷⁰ For almost all of the 1920s he lived

³⁶⁶ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 44-5.

³⁶⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 479.

³⁶⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 480.

³⁶⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 480.

³⁷⁰ Quoted in Penders, *Indonesia: Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism*, p. 275.

outside the Islamic world, in the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, China, and the Philippines. It is unclear if he was a practicing Muslim at all during these years. In *Madilog*, written much later in the 1940s, he claimed that Islam remained in his thoughts despite his preoccupation with politics: ‘[After 1917] my interest in Islam continued. What I remember of the interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Qur’an is not significant. Only a trace remains beneath the floor of my consciousness (the subconscious). But I have read the Dutch translation of the *Qur’an* many times.’

Tan Malaka, like all of his colleagues in the PKI, could not ignore Islam because it was so entangled with questions of morality and identity in Indonesia.³⁷¹ In order to present Communism as morally superior to capitalism, he used a vocabulary of good and evil that was religiously inflected. Capitalism was not just exploitative, it was sinful. Similarly, in order to present himself as being on the side of the ‘rakyat’, he had to demonstrate that his political doctrines were not antithetical to Islam.

In Tan Malaka’s early writings, he treated Islam as a universal set of values, which progressed seamlessly into Communism: Muslim holy war, like Communist revolution, was animated by the desire to resist tyranny and greed. The principles of Communism, like the tenets of Islamic religion, aimed at fostering justice, brotherhood and equality. This equation of Islam and Communism provided a rationale for his political strategy of allying the PKI with the Sarekat Islam. It also makes sense of his call for Pan-Islamic revolt at the Comintern Congress in 1922. Islam and Communism pointed in the same direction.

From the mid-1920s onwards, however, he came to see Islamic practices not as universal but as historically sensitive, being embedded within certain modes of production. In his view, Muslim religion, like Christianity, had historically been used to prop up feudal autocracy. Islamic authorities had preached doctrines of obedience and fatalism which made people passive and irrational. The Indonesian people, in his view, were still being held back by these regressive teachings in the twentieth century. Muslim traders, meanwhile, were proto-capitalists who sought

³⁷¹ On the everyday use of Islam to encourage moral behaviour in Indonesia, see Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960), p. 150.

to oppress workers for personal profit. By 1926 he had become sceptical of the utility of Islam in mobilizing the people for Communist insurrection, putting his faith instead in the secular politics of class struggle. Projects for regional integration in Southeast Asia now seemed more promising than Pan-Islamic schemes for Muslim liberation.

Islam, Socialism and 'Sinful Capitalism'

The first major political party to challenge the colonial government in Indonesia was the Sarekat Islam. The organization was begun by merchants in Central Java as a means to protect 'native' traders from Chinese competition. Initially it was loyalist in its attitude towards the colonial government, and laid stress on gradual reforms as the key to improving the welfare of Muslims. This reformist ethos echoed the message of the government's own Ethical Policy and won approval from the Governor General. Sarekat Islam rapidly became more radical, however, as its membership expanded to include not only respectable merchants, but also peasants and urban labourers.³⁷² At its 1916 Congress, held in Bandung, its leader Tjokroaminoto complained that the Dutch treated the Indies as 'a milk cow that only is fed in order to obtain milk. It is unbecoming to consider this country as a place where people travel to make profits'.³⁷³ At the same event, another speaker, Abdul Muis, contrasted the fine words of the government's Ethical Policy with the cruel treatment of labourers on private estates. The message being delivered was that the operation of foreign capital in the Indies was offensive to the ideals of Islam. This distaste for colonial capitalism, that was in fact shared by certain Dutch writers in the early twentieth century, and which was one of the motivations for the Ethical Policy itself, was re-presented as an affront to Islamic values.³⁷⁴

³⁷² At its peak in 1919, Sarekat Islam claimed a membership of two million, which made it by far the largest political party of the colonial period. See Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*, p. 66.

³⁷³ Quoted in Tienke Hellwig and Eric Tagliacozzo (eds.), *The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 267

³⁷⁴ The Ethical Policy was presented as a 'debt of honour' by the lawyer and politician Conrad Theodor van Deventer. Many of the proponents of the Ethical Policy saw it as recompense for the brutality of the 'culture system' of the nineteenth century, which was memorably attacked by Multatuli, the pen name of Eduard Douwes Dekker, in the famous novel *Max Havelaar* (1860). Ernest Douwes Dekker, a relative of Eduard's, who would later become a critic of the colonial government as the leader of the Indische Partij, initially supported the Ethical Policy as a way to make up for the earlier mistreatment of the people by the colonial government. See van der Veur, *The Lion and the Gadfly*, p. 108.

In opposition to colonial capitalism, a righteous Islamic political economy was promoted in Sarekat Islam circles. Followers of Islam, it was claimed, did not see the people of the Indies as mere labourers, but as fellow Muslims deserving of compassion. As Tjokroaminoto put it, ‘We [natives] must cooperate as much as we can to point into the right direction in order to improve the fate and the circumstances of the natives, to sustain the welfare of our race and our native soil, the Netherlands Indies.’³⁷⁵ Islam, after all, was the religion of the poor in the Indies. As R. Hasan Djajadiningrat put it in 1916, it was the ‘will of Allah’ that the condition of the ‘Wong Cilik’ (‘the little man’) be improved.³⁷⁶ To this end, Sarekat Islam opened a number of co-operatives and, eventually, schools.³⁷⁷ Members also offered mutual help in everyday tasks like house-building and sowing the fields.³⁷⁸

These calls for a new Islamic political economy sometimes drew directly on the language of socialism. At the 1916 Congress, Hasan Ali Soerati, a publisher from Surabaya, cited *zakat*, the Islamic institution of almsgiving, alongside the Muslim stress on equality among believers as proof that ‘the Prophet is the father of socialism and the trailblazer of democracy. Islam is the cornerstone of building solidarity in socialism.’³⁷⁹ Both Tjokroaminoto and his deputy, Haji Agus Salim, were happy to describe themselves as socialists.

It was the Sarekat Islam leadership’s apparent distaste for colonial capitalism, and their sympathy for socialism, that initially attracted Sneevliet and the partisans of the ISDV. Tjokroaminoto was seen as a man of the people who could link the almost exclusively Dutch ISDV to the Indonesian working masses. The 1917 Sarekat Islam Congress featured many denunciations of ‘sinful capitalism’ (*kapitalisme jang djahat*). The programme adopted that year by the party included demands for many socialist policies, such as new labour legislation, the nationalization of major industries, a tax on estates’ profits, and the ultimate abolition of ‘sinful capitalism’

³⁷⁵ Hellwig and Tagliacozzo, *The Indonesia Reader*, p. 266

³⁷⁶ *Sarekat Islam Congres (1e Nationaal Congres) 17-24 Juni 1916 te Bandung* (Batavia: n.p., 1916), p. 29.

³⁷⁷ Semaun, ‘An Early Account of the Independence Movement’, pp. 46-75, p. 54.

³⁷⁸ Kees Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 39.

³⁷⁹ *Sarekat Islam Congres (1e Nationaal Congres) 17-24 Juni 1916*, p. 27.

itself.³⁸⁰ It was through its links to the Sarekat Islam that the ISDV began to obtain ‘native’ members: Musso and Alimin, as well as Tan Malaka himself, came to the Communist Party this way. It was only because of the influence it was able to exercise over certain key Sarekat Islam branches, especially in Semarang, that the PKI could claim to have a mass following at all, since the party itself never had more than a few hundred members.

Sneevliet saw Sarekat Islam as essentially a protest movement of the Indonesian poor. Although it was organized under the banner of Islam, he believed that religion was secondary to its members’ concerns, which in his view stemmed primarily from their material grievances.³⁸¹ The Sarekat Islam’s denunciation of ‘sinful capitalism’ was interpreted as a disavowal of capitalism itself, rather than a call to reform capitalism in line with Islamic principles.³⁸² The role of the ISDV, for Sneevliet, was to channel Sarekat Islam’s mass following towards secular political goals oriented around class struggle rather than religious solidarity.

The ‘native’ Indonesian Communists, however, saw things quite differently. For them, religion *was* relevant to their politics. Islam could not simply be detached from Communism. Vernacular Communist papers referred to Islam as ‘our religion’ and published notices to celebrate Hari Raya.³⁸³ When expressing their ideas, Indonesian Communists frequently drew on Islamic terminology. Their publications routinely referred to capitalist greed as a kind of untamable ‘lust’ (‘nafsu’), which overrode all rational self-control.³⁸⁴ This echoed a familiar antithesis found in Islamic theology, which contrasted ‘lust’ (‘nafsu’) with ‘reason’ (‘akal’). A series of articles published in 1924 in the West Sumatran Communist paper *Djago! Djago!*, under the pen name ‘Ra’jat’, contrasted the norms of ‘the bygone age’ (‘masa jang telah lalu’), when people had traded goods only to obtain things that they lacked, with the ethos of the ‘present age’ (‘masa sekarang’) under capitalism, where the unrestrained ‘lust’ of the capitalists for profits determined all

³⁸⁰ Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942*, pp. 113-5.

³⁸¹ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 57-8.

³⁸² McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 45.

³⁸³ See ‘Igama kita Islam dan pan-Islamisme’, *Sinar Hindia*, 2 June 1921; Semaun and his wife wished the readers of *Si Tetap* a happy Hari Raya on 20 July 1919.

³⁸⁴ *Padoman Perserikatan Komunis India*, p. 19; ‘Mereboet Hak’, *Pemandangan Islam*, 5 December 1923; ‘Pemerintahan dan kapitalisme’, *Islam Bergerak*, 10 December 1922.

production and exchange, leading to a mad rush to increase output that resulted in periodic crises of overproduction and bouts of high unemployment.³⁸⁵ In *Penoentoen Kaoem Boeroeh* (1920), Semaun argued that it was the same ‘lust’ that led large firms to overwhelm small and middling ones in pursuit of monopoly profits. The large Western manufacturers had crushed the small-scale artisans of the Indies for this very reason.³⁸⁶ In Semaun’s view, Dutch colonialism could ultimately be traced back to the ‘lust’ for wealth, since this is what had brought European traders to Indonesia in the first place.³⁸⁷ The PKI’s critique of capitalism was thus premised on the idea that capitalists were lacking in reason and motivated by sinful desire, an idea which they expressed in religious terms.

While capitalism was driven by the lust for profits, the Communists made it clear that this desire was foreign to Indonesians themselves. Semaun characterized pre-capitalist Indonesians as a ‘patient and cultured’ people, who ‘did not join the other peoples in their race for greater riches’. This, he said, was why Indonesian traders had historically lagged behind Europeans and the Chinese.³⁸⁸ The arrival of capitalism, however, had awakened certain immoral desires in the Indonesian people. Once workers were separated from the means of production and became wage labourers, they began to see money as the sole source of value in the world. The old trades - tailor, artisan, weaver - were regarded as unworthy because they did not bring riches. According to *Islam Bergerak*, a Communist paper based in Surakarta, the correct moral order had been inverted: where once manual work had been seen as honourable, now ‘in this capitalist age, the majority of the beliefs and perspectives of the people are upside down because very many noble things have come to be seen as unworthy, and the unworthy is noble. This is because of the influence of money that is truly enormous, and dazzles the eyes of people.’³⁸⁹ The reason that Indonesians now sought money was because Europeans had introduced ‘various commercial goods’ that amazed the

³⁸⁵ *Djago! Djago!* and *Pemandangan Islam* were published from Padang Pandjang by Natar Zainuddin, a Minangkabau streetcar conductor who was converted to Communism by the transport workers’ union, the VSTP. See Abdullah, *Schools and Politics*, pp. 37-8. Ra’jat’, ‘Masa Jang Telah Lalu Masa Sekarang’, *Djago! Djago!*, 24 March and 4 April 1924.

³⁸⁶ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, pp. 15-17.

³⁸⁷ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 12.

³⁸⁸ Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, p. 12.

³⁸⁹ *Islam Bergerak*, 1 March 1923, ‘Doenia menjadi aman, setelah kapitalisme masoek koeboer’.

bumiputera, who ‘became unsteady in his thoughts’ and ‘desired to have those goods from Europe’.³⁹⁰ The uncomplicated pre-capitalist way of life, where independent producers could meet all their needs, and Muslims could live peaceful lives untroubled by greed, was replaced by a new economic regime where labourers worked for wages in order to buy an endless stream of new commodities.

According to the Communists, capitalism, as well as being dependent on sinful desires, had also damaged the general moral quality of Indonesian life. The ethic of mutual help, a central pillar of native Muslim society, had been undermined. As the PKI’s 1923 introduction to Communism put it: ‘The Javanese once helped others in need with delight, because they themselves did not lack. But today the Javanese, for example, are only concerned with themselves, because ... of poverty and want.’³⁹¹ Those who could not earn enough to satisfy their new desires turned to sin, becoming thieves, prostitutes, or opium addicts.³⁹² The PKI’s language of capitalist failure was not purely materialist, but also addressed itself to questions of family and gender roles. Darsono wrote in 1921 that ‘in the present age women are mere commercial goods, just as the coolies are also nothing but commodities in the eyes of the capitalists. The price of women and coolies is now only dependent on the number of people who buy them.’³⁹³ The 1918 and 1923 programmes of the PKI accordingly called for the outlawing of alcohol and opium. The PKI were just as concerned to stamp out sin as to eliminate capitalism.

Moreover, if capitalism was sinful, then as long as capitalism existed, Islam could never make any real progress. An article in *Sinar Hindia* on 8 September 1923 stated: ‘Religion does not like to see prostitutes, thieves and robbers etc. because these are sinful towards God, yet religion cannot do the slightest about the events and crimes in the world of capital, because there are indeed prostitutes, deprivation, robbery etc. - these come only from the misery of the destitute (unless indeed they are intrinsic), that is the proletariat created by the machines of capital.’³⁹⁴ Darsono

³⁹⁰ ‘Doenia Kapitalisme’, *Sinar Hindia*, 13 January 1921.

³⁹¹ *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 42.

³⁹² See ‘Islam sebagai dasar pergerakan Ra’jat dalam doenia kapitaal?’, *Sinar Hindia*, 8 September 1923; Semaoen, *The Story of Kadirun: A Novel*, trans. Ian Campbell (Jakarta: Lontar, 2014), p. 26.

³⁹³ Darsono, ‘Kommunisma dan Islamisma’, *Sinar Hindia*, 15 February 1921.

³⁹⁴ ‘Islam sebagai dasar pergerakan Ra’jat dalam doenia kapitaal’, *Sinar Hindia*, 8 September 1923.

similarly argued that ‘The rule of capital plants the seeds of sin.’ In the remnants of pre-capitalist ‘desa’ society, which was ‘still far from the influence of capital’, he observed that Islamic religion remained resolute, and the sins of the capitalist world were unknown: ‘In these villages, livelihood is very well ordered. The people of the village live in harmony and provide mutual help, so that there is truly real brotherhood, not brotherhood that is only superficial. Where in the hearts of man there is still a strong rope of brotherhood, then mankind also is holy and faith is firm. If man is struck by the influence of capital, then nearly all of humanity’s belief in God is “on the lips” only, because then man is forced to look for money and this wealth can only be found by harming his fellow man or taking their livelihood... Man in the present age does not indeed believe in the power of God, but man only believes in the power of wealth. Thus, at present the commandment reads: Money is Power. This is because the capitalist class does not feel towards their neighbours as they feel towards themselves.’³⁹⁵ Darsono equated virtuous communal living with devotion to Islam and claimed that capitalism undermined both. Communism, which was based on the same principle of common ownership found in the ‘desa’, would therefore regenerate Islam in Indonesia by driving out greed and individualism, the sins encouraged by capitalism. The coming Communist revolution would restore the godliness of the ‘desa’.

In order to persuade Muslims to embrace Communism, the partisans of the PKI needed not only to prove that capitalism was sinful, but also that resisting the existing capitalist order was a pious form of conduct. This required them to counter conventional arguments which stressed the duty of Muslims to obey their rulers. In 1898 the Arab Indonesian Sayyid ‘Uthman, a prominent and respected Muslim cleric, composed a prayer to mark the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina which praised the colonial government’s provision of freedom to worship, protection of the people, and administration of justice. He made it clear that Dutch rule was divinely ordained, stating ‘O God ... You have ordered and You have granted these blessings through this reign.’³⁹⁶ Tjokroaminoto, addressing a rally in Semarang, declared along the same lines, ‘As the book says people must obey the commands of their King. Who is it now that commands us Natives? Indeed

³⁹⁵ Darsono, ‘Kommunisma dan Islamisma’, *Sinar Hindia*, 15 February 1921.

³⁹⁶ Nico J.G. Kaptein, *Islam, Colonialism and the Modern Age in the Netherlands East Indies, A Biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman (1822-1914)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 145-6.

it is the kingdom of Ollanda. Thus according to the religious law of Islam we have to obey the Laws of the kingdom of Ollanda.’³⁹⁷ On this view, it was incumbent upon Muslims to obey their colonial masters.

According to the Communists, this Islamic stress on forbearance, which had the positive consequence of causing Indonesians to spurn greed, also led them to placidly accept the *status quo* and obey their rulers. A 1923 article in *Sinar Hindia* argued that the ‘Ulama in large countries have already been bought by the capitalist class so that they educate people to be patient’ and ‘not to think of worldly things’, with the result that Muslims tended not to actively fight against their own oppression.³⁹⁸ While the Communists praised the Islamic dismissal of worldly wealth in their criticism of capitalism, they also argued that Muslims could not ignore the temporal world entirely, because this would enable their subjugation to continue unchallenged. An article in *Djago! Djago!*, titled ‘The Word of Our Lord, the Prophet Moehamad S.A.W.’, began by proclaiming, ‘It is not good for a man to renounce the world because of the hereafter, nor for a man to renounce the hereafter because of the world so that he reaches the point where the world is like a droplet of water, compared to the afterlife.’³⁹⁹ Muslims needed to become engaged in worldly politics. They needed to seize the moment and fight their oppressors: ‘we must be ready, there cannot be another time for destroying the colonizer class so that we can make a good world’.⁴⁰⁰ The Communists were thus advancing an alternative vision of Islamic piety to Uthman and Tjokroaminoto, one which emphasized resistance rather than obedience.

In putting forward this argument, the Communists were not unaware of the extended history of Islamic rebellions against the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago. In *The Peasants Movement in Indonesia*, it was pointed out that peasant revolts in the Indies had frequently had an Islamic character and that the ‘ulama’ had often been key figures in organizing uprisings, as in the

³⁹⁷ Quoted in Hasnul Arifin Melayu, ‘Islam and Politics in the Thought of Tjokroaminoto (1882-1934)’, *Studia Islamika* 9, 3 (2003), pp. 35-81, at p. 43.

³⁹⁸ ‘Communisme dan Agama’, *Sinar Hindia*, 15 October 1923; the same point was made by Dingley in *The Peasants’ Movement in Indonesia*, at p. 53.

³⁹⁹ ‘Sabda Djoendjoengan Kita Nabi Moehamad S.A.W.’, *Djago! Djago!*, 20 October 1923.

⁴⁰⁰ ‘Sabda Djoendjoengan Kita Nabi Moehamad S.A.W.’, *Djago! Djago!*, 20 October 1923.

Padri War (1803-1837) and the Banten revolt of 1888.⁴⁰¹ It is worth noting that the PKI was itself strongest in Java and West Sumatra, regions where major revolts had been organized against the Dutch under the banner of Islam during the nineteenth century.

In this spirit, Semaun repeatedly made the case that Communist politics was a natural continuation of Islamic piety. His model political leader strongly resembled an Islamic ascetic and holy man: 'They must become an example of goodness, fidelity, strength and boldness in their actions. They must sacrifice themselves for the good of the oppressed, those exploited, and also always move towards dignified tasks. Although there are many obstacles, troubles and difficulties. All payment that is gained serves to help their members. Do not expect payment, praise and worldly things ... let them wear the maxim: "With Lord Allah for Lord Allah" ... A leader does not obtain worldly things, in the time he lives in the world, but must look to the afterlife (a later day), after he has died. This is testament to his strength as a leader.'⁴⁰² Semaun's ideal Communist combines an Islamic disdain for worldly goods with a powerful concern for improving the condition of the oppressed, the same combination of religious virtues which the Communists sought to promulgate among Muslims in Indonesia.

Semaun's novel *Hikayat Kadiroen*, which was serialized in *Sinar Hindia* in 1920 and published in 1922, made it clear, through its various characters, that Islamic piety led directly to Communism. Kadirun, a devout youth and junior civil servant, is converted to Communism after coming face to face with the moral degeneracy of Indonesian society, ruined by plantation capitalism and the corruption of native officials. During his work as a policeman in Java, Kadirun witnesses theft, domestic violence, and gambling. He observes that 'The big difference between former times and today was that people used to live off the land; now they depended on wages.' The result was that 'desa' society had become insecure and immoral: 'villages were no longer the safe places they once had been. Now there were thieves, swindlers, and other unsavory sorts. There were many kinds of ways to make a living now. One was by leasing one's land to a sugar mill;

⁴⁰¹ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, pp. 15-17.

⁴⁰² Semaun, *Penuntun Kaum Buruh*, pp. 105-6.

there were four factories in the Rejo district. Another was by working as a coolie or factory worker. Everyone worked: men, women, and children.’⁴⁰³

Kadirun is able to accept Communism because he is not beholden to the existing powers, and does not see obedience under all circumstances as correct Islamic behaviour. While he believes that it is incumbent on Muslims to obey laws ‘bestowed by Allah’ - that is, Islamic law - he sees no such duty to obey man-made laws. In his view, ‘man-made laws that negatively affect the majority of the people, only bad people will enforce ... Good men are forced to oppose them if they hope to fulfill the promises of God’s law’.⁴⁰⁴ Kadirun, therefore, was the model Islamic Communist as envisioned by the PKI, whose religious belief confirmed a Communist politics of social justice and active resistance.

Pemandangan Islam, another Islamic-Communist paper based in West Sumatra, offered another argument in favour of Islamic resistance. It claimed that Islam taught believers to remain resolute in pursuit of a just cause, following the example of the Prophet. A 1923 article, titled ‘The Command of Allah’ drew a parallel between the life of Muhammad and the struggle of the Communists: ‘Muhammad was sent by the Lord to all of mankind, many men denied him, people said he was mad, a sorcerer, a liar and so on. But the Prophet Muhammad’s faith was firm, he indeed knew truly that his goal was sacred, because the goals of prophet Muhammad were peace, prosperity, beauty for the world and eternity to be given to mankind... Indonesian people, this is an example for you. You need not be afraid of the dangers that come from your enemies to upset your progress’⁴⁰⁵

The Communists, then, were arguing that Muslims ought to overthrow capitalism because the existing order was sinful and the coming Communist revolution would create a society worthy of Islam. The very creation of a Communist polity would in itself be an act of holy struggle. Muslims ought not to wait for the world to improve or put their faith in gradual improvements.

⁴⁰³ Semaen, *The Story of Kadirun*, pp. 53-4.

⁴⁰⁴ Semaen, *The Story of Kadirun*, p. 23.

⁴⁰⁵ Seligi, ‘Perentahnja Allah’, *Pemandangan Islam*, 15 December 1923.

Class war, like a righteous *jihad*, would transform society and enable Islam to flourish. Some even compared Communist revolution to the coming of the Imam Mahdi, an event in Islamic eschatology that signaled the redemption of the world.⁴⁰⁶

Islam in Tan Malaka's Early Writings

When Tan Malaka arrived in Java in 1921, debate was raging over the relationship between Communism and Islam. The alliance between the Sarekat Islam and the PKI was unravelling. The Indonesian labour movement had split in two: some unions were dominated by the PKI-aligned Semarang branch of Sarekat Islam, which was led by Semaun; others were oriented to the Yogyakarta SI, led by Surjopranoto, which was closer to Hadji Agus Salim and the Central Sarekat Islam (CSI). Despite the PKI's declarations of Islamic piety, the leaders of the CSI were becoming sceptical over the degree to which the PKI leadership was committed to Islam. In 1920, the PKI had joined the Third International, an organization based on secular principles of class struggle and headquartered in the atheistic Soviet Union. Earlier in 1920 Comintern had condemned Pan-Islamism, and by extension all political organizations based around Islam, as reactionary, reversing their earlier attempts to win over Muslim support in Central Asia by advocating anti-imperialist *jihad*.⁴⁰⁷ The Sarekat Islam press viewed Soviet Communism with suspicion, circulating stories of persecution of Muslims and Christians in Russia. Personal animosity between the PKI and CSI leadership was also flaring up as they struggled for influence over the Sarekat Islam's mass membership. Darsono accused Tjokroaminoto of financial corruption in 1921, which further soured relations.

Nonetheless, the PKI was still operating as a bloc within the Sarekat Islam when Tan Malaka arrived in Yogyakarta in 1921, where he was introduced to Tjokroaminoto, Semaun and Darsono. It was in his capacity as chair of the Semarang branch of Sarekat Islam that Semaun enlisted Tan Malaka as a teacher.⁴⁰⁸ The 'people's school' which Tan Malaka opened in Semarang

⁴⁰⁶ 'Doenia Kapitalisme', *Sinar Hindia*, 13 January 1921.

⁴⁰⁷ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 54.

⁴⁰⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 63-4.

was a Sarekat Islam school, intended for local SI members' children. We should see Tan Malaka's early political writings, *Sovjet atau parlement?* (1921) and *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan, tetapi tidak toendoek kepada kebenaran* (1922) as emerging from this left Sarekat Islam context.

Several of the themes of Islamic Communism described above appear in these two texts. The sinful nature of capitalism is repeatedly condemned. In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, the capitalist class is accused of acting 'for the gratification of its lust [*nafsu*] for riches alone'. The root cause of the Great War, in Tan Malaka's view, was the unrestrained greed of capitalists, which led ultimately to violent competition over the world's wealth. The destruction caused by the war, which he described as being worse than anything 'in known history', could be attributed to 'the greed of the capitalist class in the present age.'⁴⁰⁹ In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, he contrasted the avarice of the capitalists with the lack of acquisitiveness found among Indonesian Muslims. He described the people of Java as having a 'hard working, patient and respectful character, which is highly esteemed by Javanese *adat* and Islamic religion.'⁴¹⁰ Yet, like his PKI comrades, Tan Malaka believed that the penetration of capitalism into the Indies was corrupting the old norms, specifically those relating to gender roles. In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan* he lamented that 'Young women no longer weave, as before, but are forced to wander up and down the high streets', an allusion to prostitution.⁴¹¹ In a 1921 letter to a Dutch friend he wrote of a plantation where 'Gambling, adultery, all the vices of man are encouraged [among the workers] ... This is the purest form of capitalism.'⁴¹²

Like Darsono, Tan Malaka argued not only that capitalism was sinful, but that Communist institutions were an extension of Islamic piety. In *Sovjet atau parlement?* he wrote: 'We know that the Prophet Muhammad SAW truly stated that the principal aspects of human nature that poison a society are the lust [*nafsu*] for power and the lust for riches. These two lusts would also be eliminated by Communism through the regulations of the state.'⁴¹³ In his view, Muhammad's early

⁴⁰⁹ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 146.

⁴¹⁰ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 35.

⁴¹¹ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 11.

⁴¹² Penders, *Indonesia: Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism, 1830-1942*, p. 280.

⁴¹³ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 125.

empire had been based on 'justice and brotherhood', rather than the pursuit of wealth, but as the Caliphate grew richer, the Caliph began to behave increasingly like a conventional ruler and the evil of greed re-emerged.⁴¹⁴ By abolishing capitalism, Communism would represent a kind of return to the religious purity of the early Caliphate, ruled by justice, rather than greed.

Tan Malaka, like Semaun, also saw Islamic holy figures as models for Communist leadership. In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he compared the Bolsheviks to religious prophets: 'the history of the world shows that something which contains the truth will inevitably rise, regardless of obstacles and enemies, no matter how much of the Bolsheviks' propaganda was suppressed during the reign of the Tsar, no matter how much suffering Trotsky and Lenin experienced, their sacred ideals inevitably radiated their light. Do we forget the misery and humiliation that was suffered by the Prophet Muhammad in the ten years before he came to Medina? Have we forgotten that 2000 years ago, the truth of the Christian religion had to be paid for by the Prophet Jesus with his blood and his life? Have not all prophets started out small, then after tens, even hundreds of years, became important?'⁴¹⁵ This line of thought implied that Communism, like Islam, shared a historical destiny which made its triumph inevitable. As such it was not comparable to other political revolutions. For all of his historical materialism, Tan Malaka at times conceived of Communism as a kind of transcendent ideal, which depended for its success on the righteousness of its principles rather than on any material contingency.

Tan Malaka's remarks on the continuity between Communism and Islam make sense of his attempts to preserve the PKI-Sarekat Islam alliance during his brief spell as party chair in 1921. As a delegate at the 1921 Sarekat Islam Congress, held just before he became PKI chair, he argued that Communism and Islam were natural allies, since they were both opposed to imperialism. He pointed out that Bolsheviks and Muslims were fighting side by side against British imperialism in the Caucasus, Persia and Afghanistan.⁴¹⁶ Despite his efforts, the Central Sarekat Islam imposed party discipline at the Congress and expelled all PKI members. Nonetheless, during his time as the

⁴¹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 126.

⁴¹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Parlemen Atau Soviet*, p. 111.

⁴¹⁶ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 103

PKI leader Tan Malaka sought to continue co-operating with Sarekat Islam branches. At a PKI meeting held on Christmas Day, 1921, which featured portraits of the Muslim rebels Diponegoro and Kyai Mojo, alongside those of Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Lenin and Trotsky, Tan Malaka repeated his call for unity in the national movement based on common opposition to the colonial government, citing the example of the Indian Congress as proof that coordinated action could unsettle imperial authority.⁴¹⁷ At the same meeting Kyai Hadji Bagus Hadikusumo, a member of CSI, argued that the PKI and Sarekat Islam should co-operate because they were both Muslim parties, opposed to the non-Muslim Dutch. Division would only benefit their enemies and undermine the cause of Islam.⁴¹⁸

The notion that Islam and Communism ought to be allies because they shared an enemy in the form of imperialism was articulated once more by Tan Malaka at the Comintern Congress in 1922. He began his speech by describing the alliance of Sarekat Islam and the PKI, calling the former ‘a big association, to which many poor peasants belonged’, which was ‘extremely revolutionary’ and ‘carried out the same propaganda as our Communist Party, except that often it was expressed in different terms.’⁴¹⁹ The partnership had been undermined, he said, by the false belief that Communism wanted to ‘annihilate’ Islam, a belief which was sustained by Comintern’s condemnation of Pan-Islamism: ‘The [Muslim] peasant said to himself: “I have lost everything in this world. Must I lose my place in heaven as well?”’⁴²⁰ Pan-Islamism, according to Tan Malaka, was nothing to be feared by Comintern. It no longer meant that ‘Islam should conquer the whole world sword in hand’. Instead, Pan-Islamism in the capitalist age stood for ‘the fraternity of all Muslim peoples, the liberation struggle not only of the Arab people, but of the Hindu and Javanese peoples, and of all the oppressed Muslim peoples. This fraternity now means a liberation struggle directed not only against Dutch capitalism, but against English, French, and Italian capitalism, against the capitalism of the whole world. That is what Pan-Islamism means today in the Indies, among the oppressed colonial peoples’.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, pp. 113-4.

⁴¹⁸ McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 114.

⁴¹⁹ Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, p. 188.

⁴²⁰ Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, p. 189.

⁴²¹ Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, p. 189.

In this analysis, however, the idea that Islam was itself anti-capitalist was dropped. This is unsurprising, given the audience that Tan Malaka was addressing would likely be suspicious of arguments made in favour of religion. Rather, Tan Malaka claimed that Muslims were natural allies for Communists because they suffered under capitalist oppression. By condemning Pan-Islamism, Comintern was losing the potential support of ‘250 millions of extremely active and extremely combative Muslims against the imperialist powers.’⁴²² This plea for Muslim-Communist solidarity was similar to the one offered by Zinoviev at the First Congress of the Peoples of the East, held at Baku in 1920, in which he stated: Comrades! Brothers! The time has now come when you can set about organizing a true people’s holy war against the robbers and oppressors. The Communist International turns today to the peoples of the East and says to them: “Brothers we summon you to a holy war, above all against British imperialism!” In this manner, jihad was dissolved into class struggle between oppressed Muslims and non-Muslim capitalists. Islam was subsumed into the secular politics of class.

Islamic Anti-Communism

Until 1922, Tan Malaka argued that Islam and Communism were mutually reinforcing, which, as we have seen, was a commonplace in PKI circles during the period of the alliance with Sarekat Islam. However, in his works published in the latter half of the 1920s, *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia*, *Semangat Muda*, and *Massa Actie*, he was generally more critical of Islam. In order to understand this shift, we need first to document how Indonesian politics changed after 1921. The most important development was Sarekat Islam’s turn towards an anti-Communist position, which split the party in two and eventually resulted in mutual violence. Ruth McVey has magisterially covered these events at a high political level in *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*. Yet, the substance of the Sarekat Islam critique of Communism has never received a full scholarly treatment.

⁴²² Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, p. 190.

At the heart of the ‘right’ Sarekat Islam’s attack on Communism was the charge that the Communists were devotees of a non-Islamic ideology. This made them guilty of ‘innovation’ (*bid’ah*). The originators of Communist doctrine, after all, were two non-Muslim Europeans, Marx and Engels, as the PKI itself acknowledged.⁴²³ Not only was Communism non-Islamic, it also carried anti-Islamic connotations. The only existing Communist state, the Soviet Union, which claimed direct inspiration from Marx’s ideals, was committed to atheism and the suppression of all religion, including Islam.

The PKI attempted to rebut these criticisms in two ways. First, they claimed that accusations of anti-religious violence in the Soviet Union were nothing but bourgeois slander. They argued that Communists were only against false religion, which taught the people to be passive while enriching the priesthood. Communism had nothing against religion *per se*.⁴²⁴ Second, the PKI claimed that while Marx and Engels were vitally important Communist theorists, the idea of Communism was ancient and widespread. In 1921 Darsono replied in *Sinar Hindia* to the charge of Kyai Fachrudin that ‘Communism is a science, that first originated with a European named Bakunin in Russia’. Darsono explained that Bakunin was an anarchist rather than a Communist, and that: ‘It is not Bakunin who is the author of this science; this science is several thousand years old. Plato, a wise and farsighted man, had already outlined the rules for a country that might be able to provide welfare to the general public before the Prophet Jesus. Communism and socialism have existed for thousands of years, as we read in the works of Professor Quack, who wrote a history of the progress of socialism or Communism.’ Darsono’s genealogy of Communism (which he elided with socialism), drew on H.P.G. Quack’s multi-volume Dutch-language history of socialism and the *Communist Manifesto*. The main touchstones of Communist history, in his account, were Plato and the Utopian socialists - Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon - who he said were succeeded by the ‘scientific’ socialists, Marx and Engels.⁴²⁵

⁴²³ The PKI’s 1923 Communist manual described Marx and Engels as ‘the two great teachers of the proletarian movement. They conceived of Communism based on science’; *Padoman Perserikatan Kommunist India*, p. 51.

⁴²⁴ ‘Communisme dan Agama’, *Sinar Hindia*, 15 October 1923.

⁴²⁵ Darsono, ‘Kommunisma dan Islamisma’, *Sinar Hindia*, 14 February 1921.

This response did not entirely refute the charge that Communism was un-Islamic, however, since the examples offered by the Darsono of pre-Marxist Communism all came from the West. It remained unclear where Islamic history stood in relation to Communism, if none of the key theorists of Communism were Muslims. The view that Islam was not central to the PKI's politics was further reinforced by the fact that the party was committed to the separation of church and state and therefore implicitly opposed to the notion that an independent Indonesia should be an Islamic polity. Revealingly, in publications aimed at European audiences, Indonesian Communists gave Islam much less centrality than in their Malay-language newspapers. S. Dingley, in *The Peasants Movement in Indonesia*, published in Berlin, saw the PKI's appeals to Islamic religion as an example of 'deviation', a mistake to be expected of a young and inexperienced party.⁴²⁶ More fundamentally, the PKI's commitment to Communist internationalism undermined their calls for a specifically Islamic Communism. Muslims were ultimately only one group within a global proletariat, struggling against the international bourgeoisie across national and religious boundaries. Muslims alone would never be able to defeat capitalism, so projects based exclusively on Islamic political mobilization, such as Pan-Islamism, would never be sufficient.⁴²⁷ The most that could be said for Muslim resistance was that it was not incompatible with Communism, because of the structural position of Muslims within the world economy as oppressed proletarians. This was the case for Pan-Islamism which Tan Malaka had made to Comintern in 1922.

Yet this vision of Islamic political mobilization could only harmonize with Communism if it was assumed that all Muslims were oppressed proletarians. In the eyes of the PKI, however, there also existed Muslims who were themselves capitalists, notably the Indonesian 'Hajji' bourgeoisie, which was associated with small business and moneylending.⁴²⁸ For the PKI, a national independence movement which sought to replace Western capitalists with a 'national' Islamic bourgeoisie would be insufficient. Communists had to strive to create a workers' state that would dissolve all the capitalist classes of Indonesia, regardless of faith. The PKI's 1923 Communist manual made it clear that ultimately class solidarity was more important than religious

⁴²⁶ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, p. 57

⁴²⁷ 'Kommunisme dan Agama', *Sinar Hindia*, 3 December 1923.

⁴²⁸ Dingley, *The Peasants' Movement in Indonesia*, pp. 25-6; *Protocol of a conference on Indonesia with written answers to questions raised during this conference* (n.p., n.d. [1925/6]), p. 1.

or national solidarity: 'In the Indies there is not only a Dutch capitalist class that takes profit from the labour of the Indies People, but also a Japanese, English, German, Chinese and American and ... a capitalist class from the *bumiputera* themselves. This capitalist class is not just the enemy of the workers here in the Indies, they are the enemies of the workers in their own countries too... Because of this the resistance of the proletariat against the capitalists must be global, must be "international", which means: cannot be limited by nation or religion. All of the oppressed classes from every nation and religion, whatever colour, must unite into a single class, the working class, to resist the capitalists across the world.' In the final analysis, the PKI looked to Moscow and the Third International for leadership and solidarity, rather than Cairo, Mecca or Istanbul, the centres of the Muslim *ummah*. The PKI's Communist manual ends by affirming the party's commitment to Moscow and Marxist Communism, calling on the workers of the world to unite.⁴²⁹

While the writings of the PKI sometimes flowed smoothly from a Communist idiom to an Islamic one, as when they condemned sinful greed, their arguments could also take the form of using Islam to *confirm* Communist doctrine rather than shape it, implying that Islam could be detached from their politics. They sought the support of Muslims, but, as they acknowledged, the main sources of their political thought were the texts of European Communists. Their highest 'gurus' were Marx and Engels. Their model was the Soviet Union. For some Muslim cadres, such as Semaun, Darsono, and Tan Malaka, this was unproblematic. It was more troubling for their critics, however, who believed that the Communists had failed to articulate a political vision 'purely based on Islam', which could be faithfully adopted by Indonesian Muslims. As a result, they were guilty of 'innovation' and so remained suspect.

There was an alternative source of left-wing politics, however, which was much more in accordance with Islamic doctrine than the works of Marx and Engels. This was the thought of by S. Mushir Hossain Kidwai, an Ahmadi Muslim and Pan-Islamist from the United Provinces of India, whose writings had a major reception in Indonesia.⁴³⁰ Hasan Ali Soerarti's comparison of

⁴²⁹ *Padoman Perserikatan Komunis India*, p. 51.

⁴³⁰ S. Tanvir Wasti, 'Mushir Hosain Kidwai and the Ottoman Cause', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30, 2 (1994), pp. 252-261, at p. 253.

Islam and socialism at the 1916 Sarekat Islam Congress drew directly on Kidwai's writings.⁴³¹ Kidwai's 1912 book *Islam and Socialism* seems to have circulated fairly widely in Indonesia. A 1918 article in *Islam Bergerak*, titled 'Social Democracy in Islam', took an example directly from that text.⁴³² Tjokroaminoto's 1924 book *Islam dan Sosialisme* is, with the exception of the introduction, a word for word copy of Kidwai's work, a fact that no historian seems to have yet noticed.⁴³³ What, then, was Kidwai's political thought, and why did it have such strong attraction for Tjokroaminoto and other Indonesian Muslims?

In the introduction of *Islam dan Sosialisme*, Tjokroaminoto set out to explain the meaning of socialism. He deliberately used a non-Marxist and ahistorical definition, which emphasized the centrality of brotherhood. In contrast to 'individualism, which only stressed the importance of the individual', socialism prioritized 'a sense of brotherhood as the element that binds society together.'⁴³⁴ In order for people to feel a collective bond and a responsibility towards one another, there needed first of all to be a levelling out social distinctions, so that all people could face one another as equals. For Tjokroaminoto, then, anything that promoted equality and brotherhood qualified as socialist. If he could demonstrate that both of these social virtues could be revealed within Islam, then he could justify his claim that 'the principles of socialism were known by the Islamic people in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and these principles were both more widely implemented and more simple than they have been in Europe in various ages.'⁴³⁵ If socialism could be found within Islam's original formulations then it could be presented in purely Islamic terms.

The appeal of Kidwai's text was that it could be used to show that equality and brotherhood *were* present within Islamic teachings and were entailed in the conventions of Muslim piety. Kidwai also provided the necessary Koranic citations to prove this argument, which were copied

⁴³¹ *Sarekat Islam Congres (1e Nationaal Congres) 17-24 Juni 1916 te Bandung* (n.p., 1916), pp. 27-8.

⁴³² *Islam Bergerak*, 19 June 1918, 'Sociaal Democratie, Dalam Agama Islam'.

⁴³³ Histories that mention the work include Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia*, p. 210 and Ruth McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, p. 142; neither question its originality.

⁴³⁴ H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme* [1924] (Jakarta: Lembaga Penggali dan Penghimpun Sedjarah Revolusi Indonesia, 1963), p. 9.

⁴³⁵ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 13.

exactly by Tjokroaminoto, who was not proficient in Arabic but could read English.⁴³⁶ Kidwai established that equality was enshrined in Islam and expressed in the Koranic maxim: 'Mankind forms a single unity.'⁴³⁷ The equality of Muslims was anchored in their religious rituals: 'According to the religious laws laid down by our Prophet, all Muslims, rich and poor, from all countries and races, every Friday must gather in the mosque to offer prayers, without any difference of place or degree'.⁴³⁸ The gathering of pilgrims from across the world to worship together at Mecca as a single, undifferentiated congregation was a further demonstration of 'Socialism in an Islamic manner, and a great example of equality and brotherhood.'⁴³⁹ The very practice of Islam, therefore, accomplished the socialist goal of drawing people together as equals and brothers.

Tjokroaminoto in his introduction noted that socialists historically had sought to ensure brotherhood through the equality of wealth, which was achieved by placing the economic order under various degrees of democratic or political control.⁴⁴⁰ Yet, Kidwai showed that the Islamic mechanism for maintaining economic equality was much simpler: the requirement that all Muslims give a share of their wealth each year to the poor, a principle known as 'zakat'. 'Zakat' prevented a gulf of wealth opening up between rich and poor, and was a persistent reminder for Muslims of their bond to the poorest.⁴⁴¹ Its overall effect was to encourage Muslims to 'put the interests of the group above their own' and so retain the brotherhood that was fundamental to Islam.⁴⁴²

What struck Tjokroaminoto was that while the Bolsheviks were struggling to establish a socialist order across the world, where divisions of race and wealth would be abolished, they were oblivious to the teachings of the Prophet, which had already legislated for brotherhood and equality

⁴³⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, 'Muslims of the Dutch East Indies and the Caliphate Question', *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 2, 3 (1995), pp. 115-140, at p. 133.

⁴³⁷ This is a translation from Tjokroaminoto's Indonesian rendering of the original English; Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 23. Kidwai's translation is 'Humanity forms one nation'; S. Mushir Hosain Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism* (Allahabad: Leader Press, 1912) p. xvii.

⁴³⁸ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 25. Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, p. 2.

⁴³⁹ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 25; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, p. 2.

⁴⁴⁰ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 12.

⁴⁴¹ Concentrations of wealth were also prevented by Islamic inheritance law, which divided inheritances among relatives. Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 48.

⁴⁴² Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 27; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, p. 4.

among Muslims and had successfully established ‘a true brotherhood that was practiced across many nations, whether red or yellow, white or black, rich or poor’.⁴⁴³ The success of socialism across the world, *pace* Marx, did not lie in the future, but in the Islamic present and, to an even greater extent, in the Islamic past, when Muslims had adhered most closely to the doctrines of the Prophet.

Tjokroaminoto remarked that while ancient Greece was recognized to be the cradle of democracy, in his view socialism had first been put into practice by Muhammad in Arabia.⁴⁴⁴ Kidwai’s text showed that before the advent of the Prophet, the Arabs were divided and vicious; their religion was cruel and their society was barbaric.⁴⁴⁵ The divinely-inspired Muhammad was able to transform their condition by uniting the Arabs under his leadership and giving them laws, such as ‘zakat’ and the injunction against usury, and prescribing religious rituals, like the Friday prayer, that secured an equal and fraternal society. He accomplished this while maintaining that he was ‘none other than a mere man, like you’, spurning wealth and living always among the people.⁴⁴⁶ The reign of Muhammad was thus a golden age, when the laws and example of the Prophet enabled the construction of a ‘brotherhood of Islam that was magnificent and most beautiful.’⁴⁴⁷ It was because of the ‘spirit of socialism’ that Muslim armies had been able to achieve their amazing military successes: the Muslim army, whose victories ‘were like an irresistible flood’, was a ‘citizen army’ that owed its triumphs to the bonds of loyalty that had been forged between its members by Muslim socialism: ‘The main characteristic of the Muslim citizen’s army was that each soldier had no thought of themselves. This is what gave them the will to sacrifice their lives for their Muslim comrades.’⁴⁴⁸

On the basis of the conquests of Muhammad and his successors, a ‘socialist’ Islamic Empire was built, where all citizens were equal, regardless of race or status, making it evidently

⁴⁴³ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, pp. 13, 27.

⁴⁴⁴ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 35.

⁴⁴⁵ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, pp. 36-7; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁴⁶ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 39. Tjokroaminoto gives several more examples of humble and virtuous conduct from the lives of Muhammad’s disciples, Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, pp. 51-6.

⁴⁴⁷ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, pp. 13, 27.

⁴⁴⁸ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 59; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, p. 38.

superior to the 'Liberal' empire of the twentieth century, whose laws were for the benefit of one group only.⁴⁴⁹ In India, although the Muslim rulers were different in 'nation, religion, language, customs and physical appearance from the people they conquered', their doctrine of equality enabled them to mix seamlessly into the indigenous population and unite its various groups under their rule.⁴⁵⁰ Socialist welfare institutions were even pioneered under the Islamic imperial dispensation, such as pensions for widows, orphans and the elderly.⁴⁵¹

We can see, therefore, that Tjokroaminoto took what he considered to be the salient characteristics of socialism - most importantly brotherhood and equality - and used Kidwai's work to reveal that these to be present in the teachings and history of Islam. As a result, he could claim that although 'socialism' appeared at first glance to be a foreign doctrine, pioneered by Western writers, it was in fact present within Islam. The political implications were clear: Sarekat Islam did not need the Marxist PKI in order to be socialist. It could strike out as an independent party, guided purely by Islamic principles.

Tjokroaminoto's attempt to recover a pristine Muslim socialism from Islamic history and Islamic institutions was a way of re-centring the Muslim world as the key source of Indonesian political thought. In the introduction to *Islam dan Sosialisme* he declared that his intention was to refute the view that 'Islam is incapable of advancing matters related to politics, society and the economy' - a statement likely targeted at the less religiously-inclined Communists.⁴⁵² The idea that Islam was dynamic and could be used as an instrument for progress was a commonplace of Islamic modernism, a Muslim reform movement begun in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century, which strongly influenced many members of the Sarekat Islam.⁴⁵³ There was a widespread anxiety in Sarekat Islam circles that the expansion of Western-style education in the archipelago, undertaken from around 1900 by the government as part of its Ethical Policy, was reducing the importance of Islam in native life, because they believed that graduates of these schools generally

⁴⁴⁹ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 63; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, p. 41.

⁴⁵⁰ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 64; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, p. 43.

⁴⁵¹ Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 67; Kidwai, *Islam and Socialism*, pp. 46-7.

⁴⁵² Tjokroaminoto, *Islam dan Sosialisme*, p. 7.

⁴⁵³ The first reception of modernism in Indonesia was on the West coast of Sumatra, which was connected to the Middle East through the linkages of the haj pilgrimage.

ceased to be devout Muslims, or converted to Christianity.⁴⁵⁴ The Indonesian Communists, despite their repeated denials of atheism, drew extensively on Western, non-Muslim political writings, which made their commitment to Islam seem questionable. They also wore suits and ties, which was generally seen as a sign of being a *kafir*, and, unlike the leadership of Sarekat Islam, none of them undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca (Tjokroaminoto was himself a *haji*) - though they were enthusiastic travellers to Moscow.⁴⁵⁵

The Islamic genealogy of socialism that Tjokroaminoto found in Kidwai made Western authors marginal, because all of the essentials for forming and maintaining a socialist society could be found in Islamic texts and history. A socialism 'purely based on Islam' had no need for supplementary non-Muslim sources. Thus, Indonesians did not need to look to the Western writers for their political ideas, as the Communists did, but could find sufficient guidance within the teachings of their own religion. Haji Agus Salim, who succeeded Tjokroaminoto as the leader of Sarekat Islam, could claim along these lines that Muhammad was the first great socialist, and had worked out the principles of socialism twelve hundred years before Marx.⁴⁵⁶ It would be more natural for the Indonesian 'rakyat' to favour Islamic political thought than any foreign doctrine, regardless of Communist claims to the contrary, because the 'people' were at bottom an Islamic congregation.⁴⁵⁷

The problem with these attempts to assimilate socialism to Islam, however, was that the initial stimulus for them was evidently an encounter with *Western* socialism. Kidwai's own sources on socialism were various Western socialists.⁴⁵⁸ The way that he structures his definition of socialism, as the attempt to build a society based on brotherhood and equality, is clearly taken from Western sources. In fact, there is a residual non-Islamic terminology that runs throughout

⁴⁵⁴ *Sarekat Islam Congres (1e Nationaal Congres) 17-24 Juni 1916 te Bandung*, p. 25; Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia*, p. 8.

⁴⁵⁵ Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia*, p. 8.

⁴⁵⁶ Justus M. Van Der Kroef, 'Communism and Communalism in Indonesia', *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 19, 12 (1950), pp. 117-121, p. 119.

⁴⁵⁷ Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia*, pp. 260-1.

⁴⁵⁸ Kidwai cites Saint Simon, Fourier, Owen, Marx and Lasalle in *Islam and Socialism*, at p. 75.

Islam and Socialism, from the ‘citizen army’ (‘tentara rakjat’, literally ‘people’s army’) to the ‘pension’ (‘pensiun’).

It is also true that Kidwai abandoned some terms and ideas altogether in the course of articulating his Islamic socialism. In the first place, there is no analysis of capitalism, because Muhammad’s socialism was clearly not a reaction to capitalist property relations. This, of course, is in sharp contrast to the Indonesian Communists, who argued that modern socialism was generated by capitalism.⁴⁵⁹ By the same token, ideas of class struggle and class war do not feature in Kidwai’s vision of socialism. On his account, socialism arose in Arabia not as a result of class antagonisms, but because Muhammad, through divine inspiration, was able to establish a set of laws that fostered a socialist society, which was then spread through Islamic imperialism. This also ran counter to the standard Indonesian Communist account, which followed Marx and Engels in arguing that class conflict would be the means by which socialism was brought about.

Tjokroaminoto’s, and so Kidwai’s, attempt to assimilate socialism to Islam was incomplete, therefore, because he had to fall back on non-Islamic terminology at key junctures and drop certain vital socialist concepts entirely. In some ways, this dilemma was a reprisal of earlier debates that had taken place in West Sumatra over the question of whether ‘adat’ was necessary to supplement Islam, or if Islam in itself was a sufficient guide to political life.⁴⁶⁰ The same problem would return in the 1930s, when Indonesian Islamists grappled with the idea of nationalism and argued that the slogan ‘Islam and nationalism’, which was taken up by various Muslim nationalist parties, was a non-Islamic formulation because it implied that Islam required an additional ideology.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ One PKI writer claimed that capitalism could no more dispel socialism than a person could get rid of their own shadow; ‘Kommunisme dan Agama’, *Sinar Hindia*, 3 December 1923.

⁴⁶⁰ See Taufik Abdullah, ‘Adat and Islam: An Examination of Conflict in Minangkabau’, pp. 1-24.

⁴⁶¹ Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia*, p. 264.

Islam and History

In his early writings, as we have seen, Tan Malaka argued that Islam was continuous with Communism because they shared an antipathy for capitalist greed and oppression. When he considered the historical manifestations of Islam, however, as opposed to its principles, he came to very different conclusions to Tjokroaminoto about the influence of Islam in the past. Although he did suggest in *Sovjet atau parlement?* that the early Caliphate was a kind of quasi-Communist polity, based on justice and brotherhood rather than the pursuit of personal wealth, he also claimed that the Communist phase of the Caliphate had been brief, and that it had soon degraded into despotism. He categorized the Islamic Empire as a variety of feudal regime, ruled by kings and aristocrats, much like the Chinese Empire, 'Hindustan' and *ancien regime* Europe. If the Caliphate was feudal, then it represented a step backwards for capitalist Indonesia. Unlike Tjokroaminoto, he could not see the Arabia of Muhammad as a model polity, because it was separated from present conditions by an unbridgeable gulf of history. In *Semangat Muda* he declared that the age of the Prophet offered no lessons for industrial Indonesia, stating 'we cannot dig out ideas from more than 1300 years ago, as Haji Agus Salim believes, because society at the time had no factories, banks or railroads and was quite different from the state of our country today.'⁴⁶² The path forward for Indonesia was not imitation of the Muslim past, but emulation of the atheist Soviet Union. It was the Russian 'Bolshevists', in Tan Malaka's view, who were striving hardest 'to create the conditions for the soul to be free and royal.'⁴⁶³ Islam had no monopoly over virtuous political institutions.

Besides the fact that the Caliphate had existed in pre-capitalist conditions, and so could not be imitated in the modern world, Tan Malaka also argued that Islamic religion had not had a uniformly positive influence on societies throughout history. In *Semangat Muda*, he claimed that Islam, like Christianity, had played a vital role in sustaining feudal tyranny: 'In order for the workers and peasants to be subject to the King and the Nobility, they must have religion, education and customs that teach of castes and servility. Churches or mosques are used by the Nobility, so

⁴⁶² Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 35.

⁴⁶³ Penders, *Indonesia: Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism*, p. 280.

that the children of the common people are taught to kneel and pray, while the children of the King and Nobles are taught to beat, curse and push aside. So it was in the Age of the Nobility in India, Java, China and Japan.⁴⁶⁴ In *Massa Actie*, he argued that in capitalist societies too religion was used to keep the people passive: 'In order to oppress the large working class, the small capitalist class uses its "magic weapon", schools, churches or mosques, and newspapers, alongside class weapons like the police, army, prisons and courts. Parliaments, mosques, churches, schools and newspapers work as opiates and weaken the hearts of the worker through their poisonous teachings.'⁴⁶⁵ Rather than casting Islam as a quasi-Communist doctrine, Tan Malaka here repeated the Marxist argument that religion was an opiate of the masses. The 'backward mentality' that continued to predominate in Indonesia, which prevented the formation of a 'rational' politics of class struggle, was an inheritance of centuries of 'poisonous' religious teaching.

In *Massa Actie*, Tan Malaka accused Sarekat Islam of wanting to keep the 'rakyat' in a state of passive dependency, so that the Muslim ruling class could replace the Dutch one. He cast Tjokroaminoto and Agus Salim as members of the 'hadji' bourgeoisie, recalling the Sarekat Islam's origins as an organization of 'small merchants'. The CSI, he said, had 'no knowledge of class conflict, revolutionary tactics and leadership.' They turned to 'feudal methods like mystics, charms and incantations that have long been buried'. With their useless and superstitious approach, they would 'surely' be 'smashed to pieces' just like all the other 'rebellions and religious riots that have often occurred in Indonesia'. When Sarekat Islam split from the PKI, and so renounced the politics of class, it was effectively 'dead'.⁴⁶⁶

These remarks make it clear that Tan Malaka, by 1926, viewed Islam as one religion among many, not as a unique and sacred revelation. He now took the view that the social function of Islam, in supporting feudal and bourgeois hierarchies and propagating doctrines of obedience, was identical to that of Christianity in medieval and modern Europe. He used 'mosque' and 'church' interchangeably. Similarly, for Tan Malaka the Islamic Empire was one feudal polity among many.

⁴⁶⁴ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, p. 3.

⁴⁶⁵ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 71-2.

⁴⁶⁶ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, pp. 120-2.

He had no trouble bracketing it with the Chinese Empire, pre-colonial India and *ancien regime* Europe. For Tjokroaminoto this would have been unthinkable. In his view, the Islamic Empire was a divinely ordained state and so different from, and superior to, every other political order in history. While Tan Malaka shared the Islamic-Communist rhetoric of the 1920s, he was too committed to a historical materialist view to give any special privilege to Islam and Islamic institutions. For him, the emergence of capitalism was the central event in world history, not the life of the Prophet. His vision for a post-colonial Southeast Asia, outlined first in *Massa Actie*, was for a regional federation of nations that crossed religious lines: the Catholic Philippines would be grouped with Muslim Malaya and Indonesia; no mention is made of connections to the broader Muslim *ummah*. Thus, despite his preference for alliances between Communist and Islamic parties, and his belief that Muslims across the world would be best served by Communist revolution, he was not ultimately an Islamic Communist because Islam was never the primary source of his political ideas and never had a central place in his political thought. Like his PKI comrades, he recognized Marx, first and foremost, as the author of his political doctrine. As such, he is best described as a Marxist seeking to interpret Islam with a Marxist framework, into which some Islamic concepts could be integrated, but others could not. The moral teachings of Islam, which denounced sinful desire and promoted justice and equality, flowed easily into a Marxist language of exploitation and Communism, but the other aspects of the Islamic creed, which Tan Malaka came to see as upholding tyrannical authority and encouraging fantasies and religious enthusiasm in place of ‘rational’ political organization, did not.

Logic and Superstition

After the failure of the Communist uprisings in Java and Sumatra in 1926-7, Tan Malaka's life entered a new phase. His attempts to prevent the rebellion caused him to break with the leadership of the PKI, which henceforth regarded him as a traitor.⁴⁶⁷ He attempted to keep his political cause alive by founding a new party, the Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI), in Bangkok on 1 June 1927. PARI was founded with two other ex-PKI members then in exile, Djamaluddin Tamin and Subakat. The party described itself as 'proletarian-revolutionary' but distanced itself from Comintern, stating in its statutes that it acted solely in the 'Indonesian interest'.⁴⁶⁸ This move suggests that by 1927 Tan Malaka gave priority to the liberation of the Indonesian 'bangsa', rather than to the international workers' revolution, as had been implied by his remarks at the close of *Massa Actie*, discussed in Chapter Three. PARI was intended to be structured along the lines of a Leninist Communist party, with a core of disciplined cadres, supplemented by supporting organizations to propagandize among workers, peasants, intellectuals, women and youths, readying them for future 'mass actions'.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ His former comrade Alimin, who had withheld his reservations about the 1926 uprising from the party committee, still nursed a grudge against Tan Malaka for the rebellion's failure in 1947, when he gave a critique of Tan Malaka's politics in his book *Analysis* (Yogyakarta: Agitprop CC. Partai Komunis Indonesia, 1947).

⁴⁶⁸ Jarvis, *Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI)*, p.8.

⁴⁶⁹ Jarvis, *Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI)*, p. 7.

Although PARI established agents in Java and the Outer Islands, it was stymied from the beginning by colonial police. Its correspondence was intercepted by Dutch intelligence officers, while its leading cadres were all identified and arrested by 1932.⁴⁷⁰ Tan Malaka himself was arrested in August 1927, just two months after the foundation of PARI. His crime was entering the country under the false name of Elias Fuentes, a play on the word ‘alias’.⁴⁷¹ His arrest caused a sensation in the country: the police argued that he should be deported, while Philippine nationalists claimed that he was a political refugee deserving of asylum.⁴⁷² His case became a *cause célèbre*, and he was flooded with gifts from local sympathizers. After a trial, however, he was found guilty of falsifying public documents and deported to Amoy.⁴⁷³

Certain that he would be arrested as soon as he arrived, Tan Malaka hatched a plan with the captain of the ship he was travelling on, who had radical sympathies, to hide him onboard and mislead the authorities as to his whereabouts. When this plan miraculously succeeded – the police having searched every room but his – he was smuggled into Amoy where he was sheltered by local Communists. While there he had some contact with PARI members, meeting Mardjono and Sarosan in 1929.⁴⁷⁴ Fearing discovery, however, he was taken into a village in the Chinese interior to lie low.⁴⁷⁵ He remained in this village, Sionching, for three years, recovering from the accumulated mental and physical strain of the last few years. Though grateful for the hospitality of his Chinese hosts, he felt very much alone. He reflected that despite hailing from a ‘society of real wanderers’, the Minangkabau, he nonetheless found ‘living in the midst of a Chinese village, particularly in the winter when the cold wind howled, had quite an impact on me.’ Thinking of his PKI comrades, imprisoned on the penal colony of Boven Digul, he could not help feel a touch of envy: ‘even the most cheerful of exiles to Digul would not long he been able to stand such isolation.

⁴⁷⁰ Jarvis, *Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI)*, pp. 11-13.

⁴⁷¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 143.

⁴⁷² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 147.

⁴⁷³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 148-50.

⁴⁷⁴ Jarvis, *Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI)*, p. 13.

⁴⁷⁵ For Tan Malaka’s own account of this remarkable series of events see *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 153-61.

At least at Digul they were near comrades in the struggle who shared the same ideology, outlook, hopes, and language. These are all crucial to the life of a human being as a *social animal*.⁴⁷⁶

After several years in Sionching, he made his way to Shanghai, where he adopted a new identity, taking the Chinese name Ong Soong Lee. Again, he made some efforts to connect with PARI members operating underground, meeting Djaos there in 1932.⁴⁷⁷ That year, he left Shanghai for Hong Kong, where he attempted to make contact with other Indonesian anti-colonial activists. When he arrived at the agreed meeting-place, however, he was arrested by British secret police, who identified him as Tan Malaka and subjected him to interrogation, probing him on his activities and links to anti-colonial movements in India, Thailand and China. He impressed his interrogators, one of whom told him that ‘your people will remember you after hundreds of years’, but he was nonetheless imprisoned, without charge, then deported to Shanghai.⁴⁷⁸

While en route to Shanghai, he changed boats and made his way into the Chinese interior, before returning to Amoy, where he found work as an English teacher.⁴⁷⁹ The sudden arrival of the Japanese army in 1937, however, forced him to flee the city, travelling to Singapore via Rangoon, where he again took up a job teaching English to Chinese pupils.⁴⁸⁰ The relative quiet of his time in Singapore was shattered, once again, by the entrance of Japanese troops in 1942. The brutal occupation of the city was an extremely traumatic experience for him. His students, who had volunteered to join the makeshift army put together to resist the Japanese, were ‘loaded, after scarcely any interrogation, into six trucks and taken out of the city. On a lonely hill they were ordered to dig their own graves and line up on the edge. Their eyes were bound with cloth and they were gunned down.’ He remembered that ‘Some of them sang the Chinese national anthem as they fell.’⁴⁸¹ Deciding that he could no longer stay in Singapore, he made arrangements to travel on a boat back to Indonesia in April 1942, this time under the pseudonym ‘Ilyas Hussein’ (another play on the world ‘alias’).

⁴⁷⁶ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, pp. 167-8.

⁴⁷⁷ Jarvis, PARI, p. 13.

⁴⁷⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, pp. 41, 52.

⁴⁷⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 78.

⁴⁸⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 111.

⁴⁸¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 118.

While in China and Singapore, Tan Malaka observed many of the same things that he had seen in the Philippines. In Shanghai, as in Manila, he noted that all the wealthiest people were Westerners, while the lowest labour was done entirely by impoverished locals. As he put it, ‘The British always brag that they built Shanghai on the mud some hundred years ago. They deliberately forget, or pretend to forget, that that “mud” was the land and water of China and that the labor used to build the city was also Chinese.’⁴⁸² The inequality he witnessed in Shanghai was even more severe than in Canton: the European part of the city boasted ‘multistoried houses and buildings equipped with elevators, telephones, and electric lighting, while nearby in the Chinese quarter the ordinary Chinese lived in tiny, dark, and dirty dwellings.’⁴⁸³ In the Malay peninsula, the same uneven distribution of wealth and resources prevailed. Foreign capitalists owned the mines and plantations, and had imported vast armies of Indian and Chinese workers to labour on them. The result was that the indigenous inhabitants, the ‘Malay Indonesians’, had been ‘pushed into the abyss of poverty and racial destruction.’⁴⁸⁴ It was a parting insult on the part of the British that they had failed to defend Singapore from the ravages of the Japanese. The defence that they had mounted put the Malays in the front line, ‘followed in order by the Gurkhas, Sikhs, Punjabis, Australians, and then the British.’⁴⁸⁵

His years in China and Singapore were the loneliest and most isolated period of Tan Malaka’s life. Following the debacle of the 1926-7 uprisings, his cause seemed to have failed. The PKI had been broken, and his old comrades were almost all either dead, in exile, or in prison. Colonial authority was more firmly entrenched than before, underpinned by an intensification of policing, which he found himself on the receiving end of in Manila and Hong Kong. In China, too, the Communists had failed following Chiang Kai-Shek’s massacre of the members of the Chinese Communist Party in 1927. The only advancing power in the region was Japan, which was committed to a ruthless policy of anti-Communism.

⁴⁸² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 6.

⁴⁸³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 5.

⁴⁸⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 96.

⁴⁸⁵ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 114.

In addition to the despondency caused by the apparent failure of his cause, Tan Malaka was acutely unwell for much of his time in China. In *Madilog*, he recounted that from 1925 to 1935 his mind was almost paralyzed by illness. The two texts published in 1926, *Semangat Muda* and *Massa Actie*, were written in spite of his bad health, necessitated by the urgency of preventing the impending PKI uprising. Most of the time he could not read for more than an hour a day. Nonetheless, he continued to collect books in China, on economics, politics, history and science. Fear of being discovered by the police, however, meant that he had to repeatedly abandon his library. He threw his collection of books into the sea in Amoy in 1937. In 1942, he dropped his copy of Marx's *Capital* (on loan from the local library) into a pond on Upper Serangoon Road in Singapore, in advance of the arrival of the Japanese. To get around the problem of having no reliable access to books, he devised various mnemonics to memorize important sections of key texts. Although extended scholarly activity was impossible under these conditions, he retained the core of what he had read: '[A political fugitive] cannot be burdened by physical objects like books or clothing... although my books are scattered, rotted or lost in Europe, China, the Indian Ocean, or in front of Mr. Tan King Cang's house on the Upper Serangoon Road, it does not mean that I have lost the "contents" of those valuable books.'⁴⁸⁶

Throughout the 1930s, Tan Malaka continued to meditate on two themes that he had raised in *Massa Actie*. First, the possible future of Southeast Asia as a united federation of nations and, second, the problem of the 'backward' mentality of the Indonesian people.⁴⁸⁷ When he arrived in Java in 1942, he found he had the time and energy to begin writing on these themes again. For the first time in twenty years he was among the 'rakyat' and could observe Indonesian conditions first-hand. While he respected the hard work and thrift of the Indonesian poor, he was shocked by their ignorance. Renting a room on the outskirts of Jakarta, located near a factory, and making trips to a nearby library, he began composing a book to be titled *Gabungan Aslia* ('The Federation of Aslia'). Although this was abandoned halfway through in 1943, for fear of police searches, he resumed writing, and, after a fevered month-long spell of non-stop work, completed a new book

⁴⁸⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 26.

⁴⁸⁷ He also considered writing a memoir, which he would later do from prison between 1946 and 1948.

titled *Madilog*, a portmanteau of materialism, dialectics and logic.⁴⁸⁸ The declared aim of this book was to educate the Indonesian people in correct methods of thought. As he put it, ‘My “Madilog” is intended above all as a way of thinking.’⁴⁸⁹ This is also how it was understood by Indonesians. One contemporary, Mohammed Ali, wrote that *Madilog* offered ‘an outlook on life, so that Indonesian man could free himself from a cosmocentric world.’⁴⁹⁰

The book is many things at once: an introductory textbook to logic and dialectical materialism, a history of philosophy and religion, and a work of speculative political thought. It is unlike any other book composed by an Indonesian in the first half of the twentieth century, containing discussions of Egyptian religion, Einstein’s theory of relativity, and Gandhi’s politics. There are sections on the laws of motion, the potential for space travel, and the soul. The structure of the work is also highly unusual. The progression of the chapters through ‘mystical logic’, philosophy, science, dialectics, logic, and ‘the Madilog view’ entails frequent repetitions and digressions, which may be a result of the book’s rapid composition. This chapter assesses the aims and arguments of *Madilog*, and seeks to contextualize Tan Malaka’s writings on philosophy within the broader sweep of attempts to reform Indonesian culture in the early twentieth century.

Reforming Indonesian Culture

The years of Tan Malaka’s life overlapped with a series of movements aimed at reshaping Indonesian intellectual life. Several of these movements converged in the West Sumatra of his youth: the Islamic modernism of the ‘kaum muda’, the ‘adat’ renewal movement of the ‘kaum tua’ (literally the ‘old group’, the opponents of the reformist ‘kaum muda’), and the ‘Association’ project of the ‘ethici’. The ‘kaum muda’, initially made up of returning students and pilgrims from the Middle East, argued that in order for West Sumatra to make progress, there needed first of all to be a purification of Islamic practices, away from the accumulated ‘innovations’ of local tradition, towards the original sources of Muslim religion. To this end, they opened private

⁴⁸⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, pp. 145-6.

⁴⁸⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 30.

⁴⁹⁰ Quoted in Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 1, p. 1.

religious schools to provide what they viewed as correct Islamic instruction. They also claimed that for Minangkabau to flourish in the contemporary world, students needed to master modern learning. Thus, their schools imitated much of the curriculum of government schools, and spurned the traditional pedagogic methods of the ‘pesantren’ in favour of Western-style classrooms and grades.⁴⁹¹ The goal of the ‘kaum muda’ was to equip Indonesians with ‘reason’ (‘aql’), to enable them to understand the essential truths of Islamic religion for themselves, rather than having religious knowledge filtered through what they considered to be the false and ‘mystical’ teachings of local, traditional authorities. In theological terms, they argued that ‘ijtihad’, the independent exercise of reason, was a necessary undertaking. Adhering to the authority of the established Islamic experts would only lead to the decay of Islamic civilization.⁴⁹²

In response to the ‘kaum muda’, a group seeking to defend the ‘traditional’ values of West Sumatra was formed in Padang in 1916, the Sarekat Adat Alam Minangkabau (SAAM - the ‘Adat Association of the Minangkabau World’). Its founder was Datuk Sutan Maharadja (1860-1921), a magistrate-turned-journalist. Its initial membership was comprised of various ‘native’ officials and local aristocrats. The organization’s stated aim was to develop Minangkabau in accordance with its traditional values.⁴⁹³ This meant a commitment to ‘adat’, the mutable body of Minangkabau customary law, that embodied its tradition. The purpose of ‘adat’ was to ensure a harmonious society. In order to accomplish this, however, it was understood that new elements had to be continually incorporated into ‘adat’ to allow for a changing world (though these new elements were thought to be in some sense present in the original formulations of ‘adat’). The progress of ‘adat’ towards perfection mirrored the individual’s journey towards essential harmony with God and Creation that was a central tenet of Islamic mysticism. ‘Adat’ was the work of humans and as such complemented Islamic law, which derived from God via the Prophet. The law of religion and the law of ‘adat’ were thought to be mutually dependent: the three kings of Minangkabau included one for ‘adat’, one for religion and one for the alam Minangkabau (‘Minangkabau realm’) as a whole. The SAAM perceived that ‘adat’ was threatened by the Islamic modernists, who sought to

⁴⁹¹ Abdullah, *Schools and Politics*, p. 55.

⁴⁹² Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia*, pp. 120-1.

⁴⁹³ Abdullah, *Schools and Politics*, p. 28.

abolish those aspects of 'adat' which did not accord with the essentials of Islamic teaching. In their view, this would upset the historic balance of Minangkabau society. The modernists' primary target was matrilineal inheritance, an institution guaranteed by 'adat', the status of which was dubious under Islamic law.⁴⁹⁴ Because of their opposition to the 'kaum muda' (the 'young group'), Maharadja's followers came to be known as the 'kaum tua' (the 'old group'). Like the 'kaum muda', however, the 'kaum tua' also valued 'reason' ('akal' in Malay), which they believed was the instrument by which 'adat' was improved over time. They too founded schools (as well as newspapers) to educate the Minangkabau public in the lessons of 'adat'.

A third group, the Dutch civil servants enacting the 'Ethical Policy' instituted at the turn of the twentieth century, also sought to impart their own methods of thinking on the people of West Sumatra. As conceived by Snouck Hurgronje, the expansion of Western-style schooling entailed in the Ethical Policy was designed to enable Indonesians to drop the 'dead weight' of Islamic education and local tradition and instead embrace the fruitful and productive learning of the West. In Snouck's view, this would provide the basis for long-term stability and good government in the East Indies and might ultimately even create the conditions for the union of the Netherlands and its Southeast Asian Empire into a single polity, a dual kingdom of the 'Eastern and Western Netherlands'.⁴⁹⁵ The 'ethici' implicitly contrasted the 'reason' of civilized European education with the irrationality of Islamic and indigenous styles of learning. Snouck's approach was called 'Association' because it was hoped that through prolonged association with Europeans, Indonesians might assimilate to Western styles of thinking and behaviour. These Westernized Indonesians would then be the 'conduits' through which Western technology and expertise could be applied to the Indies, creating a contented, fruitful and 'ethically' governed colony.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ Wild and Carey (eds.), *Born in Fire*, p. 34.

⁴⁹⁵ Penders, *Indonesia: Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism*, p. 150.

⁴⁹⁶ Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism*, p. 2.

Methods of Thought in Tan Malaka's Early Writings

Tan Malaka would have been familiar with each of these reformist currents in West Sumatra during his youth. He came from a 'datuk' family, which signified seniority within his home village, and he grew up surrounded by the institutions of 'adat', including democratic village government.⁴⁹⁷ Tan Malaka is itself an 'adat' title. He was also, of course, familiar with the *ethos* of the Ethical Policy as a graduate of a government school. He attended the most advanced Western-style school in West Sumatra, the 'Sekolah Radja'. Students were required to wear European clothing and the school's highly Europeanized curriculum consisted of Dutch, Dutch history, natural science, agricultural science, pedagogy, music, handwriting, arithmetic, geometry, the geography and history of the Indies, surveying, drawing, physical education and Malay. This was in sharp contrast to the education offered by the traditional madrasahs of West Sumatra, which specialized in Islamic jurisprudence ('fikh'), theology ('tawhid') and Sufi mysticism ('tasawwuf').⁴⁹⁸

Tan Malaka's early writings from the 1920s reprised many of the themes of the reform movements he first encountered during his youth. His criticism of the Indonesian people's 'superstitious' belief in charms and religious magic echoes the Islamic modernists' critique of local religious practices. His praise for the indigenous institutions of democratic government and communal ownership at the village level reprises themes of the 'kaum tua', since both of these were embedded within 'adat'. His admiration of Western knowledge in general, and Western science in particular, repeats the claims of the 'ethici' concerning the superiority of European learning.

The opposition of reason ('rasionalisme') and superstition ('takhayul') runs through Tan Malaka's early writings. In accordance with Marx's notion that material conditions determined prevailing ideologies, superstition is presented as being a legacy of pre-capitalist times, to be eroded by the progress of capitalism, which plants the seeds of reason. The clearest statement of this is in *Massa Actie*, where he wrote 'Where capitalism arises, and lays down roots, there a

⁴⁹⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 49.

⁴⁹⁸ Abdullah, 'Modernization in the Minangkabau World', p. 201.

healthy mind and rationalism begins to grow, and superstitious beliefs begin gradually to disappear. So, the psychology and ideology and reason of the Indonesian people moves in step with the fickle cunning of capitalism. The old vanishes, and the new grows wise.' Indonesian examples abounded: 'Look only at the difference in the progress of thought between the Javanese and our brothers in Halmahera, or between our comrades in Surabaya and Semarang, who are [politically] conscious, and the people of the unindustrialized villages.'⁴⁹⁹

Tan Malaka, although he had grown up in one such 'unindustrialized village', had lived in the capitalist West and in post-capitalist Russia, and so saw himself as in possession of the modern rationality that accompanied economic development. He believed the success of his own political programme was guaranteed by its fidelity to reason. He derived his political conclusions from a 'scientific' Marxist analysis of Indonesian history. His view that history was working to create the conditions for an Indonesian Communist revolution was itself underpinned by the notion that historical materialism was based on sound logic. He viewed his Communism as an extension of his mastery of reason. As he wrote in *Semangat Muda*, 'We Communists do not get this image of Communism from the passions of dreamers or astrologers. We are not commanded by Karl Marx to memorize the nature of Communism and keep praying for Heaven to come to Earth. Instead we have a clear explanation from Marx, that the progress of feudalism gave rise to capitalism, and the present progress of capitalism is bringing about Communism. Just as the nobles were overthrown by the capitalists, so the capitalists will be defeated by the workers. This defeat does not arise from mystical or magical causes but for tangible reasons, that can be seen and perceived.'⁵⁰⁰ What is striking about this passage is how Tan Malaka used Marxism to criticize traditional methods of religious education, which taught through rote memorization and believed in the utility of prayer. The science of Marx, by contrast, was a series of logical propositions which could be grasped through reason and could deliver concrete results. This mirrored the argument of the Islamic modernists, who claimed that Islam should be open to rational understanding and interpretation ('*itjihad*'), rather than depending on the authority of the traditional religious experts, the '*ulama*'.

⁴⁹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 96.

⁵⁰⁰ Tan Malaka, *Semangat Moeda*, pp. 10-11.

When Tan Malaka considered the course which his PKI colleagues were taking in 1926, his primary objection was that they were letting their passions get the better of their reason. The PKI partisans who believed that a spontaneous ‘putsch’ against the government could succeed were little better than the astrologers. Their plans were like ‘the dreams of a man beset by fever’, that is, the product of an irrational mind.⁵⁰¹ The PKI was slipping into the irrational world of the Indonesian hinterland. If the party was to succeed, it needed to stick to modern, scientific methods, taking care understand the facts of Indonesia’s situation and develop its strategy accordingly. Likewise, the party could not make progress if its followers themselves lacked reason and were unable to understand their objective interests. The party, in his view, therefore had to abandon its irrational hope in immediate victory and educate the working masses in the principles of class struggle before it could succeed. Reason had to triumph over superstition at the level of the party and the masses. This, as we saw in Chapter Two, was the position which Tan Malaka adopted in 1926, a position which echoed the Islamic modernists and the advocates of the Ethical Policy in its dismissal of indigenous ways of thinking and promotion of ‘modern’ rationality.

The Purpose of Madilog

At the opening of *Madilog*, Tan Malaka repeated his view that the Indonesian workers were lacking in reason, and that this was the fundamental fact which prevented them from taking power. He retained his belief that the Indonesian proletariat was unusually strong, and objectively able to overwhelm its opponents. If anything, its strength had increased in the twenty years he had been away. Indonesia still exhibited many of the features of an advanced industrial economy: the oil industry had expanded in Sumatra and Kalimantan; there were extensive mine works in Bangka Belitung; factories turned out steel, chemicals, sugar, tea, cloth and soap; the colossal infrastructure of trains, trams, cars, ships, planes, post, phones, telegraphs and radios had expanded. The proletariat employed by these industries was vast: ‘When I left more than 20 years ago, the number of workers was already two to three million. Now it is certainly higher than that.’⁵⁰²

⁵⁰¹ Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 98.

⁵⁰² Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 35.

The potential power of the Indonesian workers was not in doubt. As he wrote, ‘There is a large industrial and rural proletariat in Indonesia and its potential strength is already certainly enough to seize power from the Dutch imperialists.’⁵⁰³ Yet the old problem persisted: ‘its education is still very sparse and is not matched to the future needs and duties of that class. They lack a world view (*Weltanschauung*). They lack Philosophy. They are still filled with ideas about the afterlife and jumbled superstitions. They are not conscious of the power of their class. They do not yet realize that without the help of the industrial proletariat, all attempts to seize power and create an independent Indonesia will be futile. Twenty years ago I was already convinced of the potential power of the proletariat. Now I am even more certain than before.’⁵⁰⁴ In other words, the fundamental problem of Indonesian politics, in his view, had not changed. The objective conditions for a workers’ revolution were favourable, but what was lacking was a politically educated proletariat, capable of acting in its interests. The fact that he used the term ‘*Weltanschauung*’ only further underlined his view that a ‘philosophy of life’ was lacking in Indonesia.

In *Massa Actie* and *Semangat Muda*, Tan Malaka had argued that the PKI was the instrument through which the workers would attain class consciousness and cast off their old superstitions. When he composed *Madilog*, however, he had long since broken from the PKI, which in any case had ceased to be an active political party after the crackdown of 1927. He therefore had to put his faith in new followers. His chosen conduits for his doctrine were the youth conscripted by the Japanese into military training, known as the ‘pemuda’, who emerged during the years of occupation after 1942. The manuscript of *Madilog* was circulated among these youths between 1943 and 1946, when the first published edition was released.⁵⁰⁵

But what exactly was the ‘superstition’ which Tan Malaka aimed to purge? And what qualified as ‘reason’? These categories had been used in his early writings, but had never been fully explained. *Madilog* set out to unpack these terms, giving an in-depth account of what

⁵⁰³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 17.

⁵⁰⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 17.

⁵⁰⁵ See Rudolf Mrazek, *A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta through the Memory of Its Intellectuals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 3-6.

constituted reason and superstition, and how these modes of thought had arisen over time. As with his analysis of Indonesian politics, his view of Indonesian patterns of thought was essentially *historical*. Mentalities, he claimed, developed over time and interacted with one another. Both reason and superstition had genealogies, and one could not understand either phenomenon without tracing their pasts. These genealogies took Tan Malaka across time and space, ranging across the world as he detailed the history of philosophy and science for an Indonesian audience he assumed was ignorant of both.

Mysticism, Philosophy and Science

The term ‘mystika’ or ‘mistik’ was rarely used in Tan Malaka’s early writings.⁵⁰⁶ In *Madilog*, however, ‘mystical logic’ (‘logika mystica’) was taken to be emblematic of incorrect styles of thought. Chapter Two opens with an example of mystical logic. The ancient Egyptians’ belief that their god Ra was the supreme power who created the material world at a stroke, out of nothing, gave ‘an image of MYSTICAL LOGIC or logic based on the spiritual [rohani].’⁵⁰⁷ Tan Malaka claimed that this belief in divine creation, which dated from the Egypt of 6000 BC, had also dominated Europe ‘in the Middle Ages (478-1492)’ and persisted in Asia into the ‘present time’.⁵⁰⁸

Running parallel with this ‘mystical’ manner of thinking was the development of philosophy (‘filsafat’). Tan Malaka’s genealogy of philosophy was drawn from Engels and so repeated the division of philosophers into idealists and materialists.⁵⁰⁹ He summarized the distinction as follows: ‘Objects or thoughts, matter or ideas. Those who say ideas come first are followers of idealism, that is to say idealists. Those who follow materialism, are materialists.’⁵¹⁰ Philosophy, he claimed, had begun in ancient Greece, where the basic division between idealists, such as Plato, and materialists, like Heraclitus and Democritus, had arisen. This division continued

⁵⁰⁶ Each term is used only once in *Aksi Massa* and *Semangat Moeda*.

⁵⁰⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 38.

⁵⁰⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 50.

⁵⁰⁹ Tan Malaka cites Engels’s *Anti-Duhring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach* in *Madilog*, as well as Lenin’s *Empirical Criticism*, which repeats the idealist/materialist division of philosophers.

⁵¹⁰ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 53.

into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Hume, Berkeley and Hegel standing for idealism, while Diderot, Marx and Engels continued the materialist tradition.⁵¹¹

For Tan Malaka, idealism was ultimately based on the same principles as ‘mystical logic’, since idealists conjectured that there existed some spiritual entity prior to the material world, just as the Egyptians had believed in Ra. As he put it, ‘[Hegel’s] Absolute Idea is ultimately the same as metaphysics, that is an unseen beyond the science of nature, a spirituality, what the ancient Egyptians called Ammon, the God Ra.’⁵¹² Materialists, in contrast, saw the material world as primary and argued that all ideas were derived from material causes. Tan Malaka illustrated this difference by comparing Marx and Hegel: ‘Marx, who for some time admired and was influenced by Hegel ... finally put Hegelianism on its feet... It is not ideas that determine society, but society that determines ideas.’⁵¹³

In Tan Malaka’s schema, the history of ‘science’ (sometimes transliterated as ‘sians’, in other places rendered as ‘ilmu pengetahuan’) overlapped with that of philosophy. Yet, while he categorized philosophers by their assumptions on the priority of ideas or matter, he defined science by its *method*. The scientific ‘way of thinking’ stressed the importance of empirical observation and the testing of hypotheses against evidence.⁵¹⁴ This method had first arisen in ancient Greece, but had received its fullest statement in the logic of Francis Bacon.⁵¹⁵ In addition to its empirical grounding, science also required the use of mathematics. In Tan Malaka’s account, mathematics had originated in Greece, before being further refined by Indians and Arabs, through the introduction of new numerical systems and algebra.⁵¹⁶ The greatest scientific breakthroughs, however, came in Europe: Newton’s law of gravity and Darwin’s theory of evolution were the crowning achievements of scientific learning.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 52.

⁵¹² Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 57.

⁵¹³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 58.

⁵¹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 69.

⁵¹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 122, 131.

⁵¹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 80-2.

⁵¹⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 115, 138.

While science, based on inductive logic, had resulted in wondrous discoveries, Tan Malaka argued that mystical logic led only to intellectual stagnation. The Indians, for example, had no scientific achievements comparable to those of Europe because they remained in thrall to mystical reasoning: ‘Outside of mathematics, which is more or less abstract, in true empirical science, it can be said that there has been no scientific creator or law that came from ancient India.’⁵¹⁸ Not only did Western science outpace Eastern learning, it also revealed the falsity of the ‘mystical’ account of divine creation. The Egyptians believed that Ra had created all of nature instantly, but Darwin’s theory of evolution showed that species of plants and animals evolved over millions of years.⁵¹⁹ Ra was thought to have created the universe out of nothing, but according to Joule’s theory of the conservation of energy, this was impossible.⁵²⁰ Just as the materialist philosophers had revealed the inadequacy of idealism, scientific discoveries exposed the flaws of mysticism.

Tan Malaka saw a kind of continuity between science and materialist philosophy, since both placed an emphasis on the observation of the material world, rather than purely abstract speculation. He placed Marx alongside Newton and Darwin as the discoverer of a great ‘law’, the law of the historical evolution of societies.⁵²¹ Because Marxism had these scientific qualities, it was a surer guide to political action than the mystical alternatives. He illustrated this by comparing the strategies of Lenin and Gandhi. Lenin operated with the clarity of a political scientist, observing the world before acting: ‘Lenin, shortly before October 1917, after he took note of dialectical materialism and considered the class conflict in world history and Russian history, urged his followers to seize power for the following reasons: 1. The atmosphere, economically and politically, was sufficiently revolutionary. 2. The party was well disciplined. 3. All of the Russian people had come under the influence of the Communist party. 4. Enemies within and outside Russia were divided. He set out reasons that were right and proper, and as a result his experiment was a success. The theory ... proved correct.’⁵²² The Bolsheviks had shown that scientific reasoning could be effectively applied to political problems.

⁵¹⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 119.

⁵¹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 136-7.

⁵²⁰ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 42-3.

⁵²¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 59.

⁵²² Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 95.

Gandhi, in contrast, was suspicious of science, just as he distrusted modern technology. He believed that ‘machines are demons and towns, where machines are concentrated, are like hell.’⁵²³ If he had his way, ‘The devilish machines would no longer be used. So textile mills, railways, chemical plants, and machine works would be worthless. Coal mines, iron mines etc. would have to be closed. What would be the point of natural science, chemistry, mathematics etc.?’⁵²⁴ Gandhi spurned material possessions, giving priority to the ‘spiritual’ instead. Yet if Gandhi succeeded, India would be racked with disease and shortages, hunger and unemployment.⁵²⁵ By holding to a superstitious distrust of technology, and refusing to consider the material consequences of his politics, Gandhi was leading India towards disaster. ‘Mystical’ political analysis was useless as a tool for social progress and liberation. The implication was that anti-colonial activists should be wary of Gandhi and look instead to the pure political science of Lenin.

In addition to providing a ‘scientific’ perspective on politics, Marxism also taught a specific variety of logic, namely dialectics. In Tan Malaka’s view, while most logic dealt with static ‘black and white’ questions, where outcomes were either true or false, dialectics was required to understand phenomena that evolved over time, and could change in nature.⁵²⁶ Dialectical logic had been wielded by both idealists, like Hegel, and materialists, like Marx.⁵²⁷ Tan Malaka’s account of dialectical materialism was drawn entirely from Engels and so repeated his ‘laws’ of dialectical materialism: the ‘law of the unity and conflict of opposites’, the ‘law of the negation of the negation’, and ‘the law of the passage of quantitative changes into qualitative changes’. These laws, he claimed, enabled one to understand how complex phenomena developed. The first law explained how two groups which were opposed at one time might later be unified. Under capitalism, for example, the workers and the bourgeoisie were enemies, but in the classless society of Communism they would be united.⁵²⁸ The second law illuminated *how* phenomena changed. For example, one Egyptian soldier was the equal of a French soldier, but one thousand French

⁵²³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 96.

⁵²⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 96.

⁵²⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 96-7.

⁵²⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 145.

⁵²⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 159-66.

⁵²⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 223.

soldiers could defeat an Egyptian army ten times as large, because as the number of French soldiers increased, they changed into something different and more formidable. A change in quantity led to a change in quality.⁵²⁹ The third law revealed a pattern of change observable in societies: a feudal society might transform into a capitalist one (thus negating it), before that capitalist society in turn transformed into a Communist one (the negation of the negation).⁵³⁰

This summary of dialectical logic was provided by Tan Malaka because he believed that it would equip Indonesians to understand certain important social phenomena. Indeed, he believed that Indonesians were starved of knowledge of logic in general.⁵³¹ This was in spite of the fact that scientific reasoning and dialectical materialism had, in his view, entirely transformed the world. Science had made extraordinary new discoveries possible, while dialectics had provided analytical tools which enabled unparalleled political transformations, like the Bolshevik revolution. These ideas, however, had passed Indonesia by. The Indonesian mind remained trapped in ‘mystical’ patterns of thought. This is what made *Madilog* necessary, as a textbook to provide the Indonesian people with a training in formal logic and dialectics, giving them reason and so allowing them to overcome their superstitions. Philosophy and science were not esoteric subjects, but the necessary prerequisites of effective political action.

Religion in Madilog

Tan Malaka’s intention to stamp out irrationality and impress upon Indonesians the importance of reason could be read as a continuation of the project of the ‘kaum muda’, who sought to reconcile rationality and Islam, opening the door to ‘ijtihad’ and enabling a renaissance of Islamic civilization. This is what the prominent modernist Hamka believed Tan Malaka was doing, and endorsed one section of *Madilog* as a result.⁵³² But where did religion stand in *Madilog*? At numerous points in the text, religious belief is presented as being inherently illogical. Although he

⁵²⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 224; This example is taken directly from Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*, see Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), pp. 5-312, at p. 119.

⁵³⁰ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 224-5.

⁵³¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 27.

⁵³² Mrazek, ‘Tan Malaka: A Political Personality’s Structure of Experience’, p. 29.

used the example of the ancient Egyptian god Ra to spell out the problems with ‘mystical logic’, Tan Malaka’s complaints could be applied equally well to the Islamic narrative of divine creation. When illustrating illogical reasoning, he offered the example of the question of whether all non-Muslims go to hell:

No Muslims are *kafirs*.

All those who may be considered for heaven are Muslims.

No *kafirs* may be considered for heaven.

No *kafir* can enter heaven.

1,800,000,000 people now alive now are *kafirs*.

1,800,000,000 people now alive are going to hell.

Before Islam came to Indonesia, all Indonesians were *kafirs*.

Billions of Indonesians, over more than 500,000 years, were *kafirs*. Billions of Indonesians before Islam arrived went to hell.

Thousands, millions, billions of people on earth before and after the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW were counted as *kafirs*. So billions of people went to Hell. Lord Allah is almighty, exalted, omnipotent, omniscient, and present in all places at all times. So every second and every place He can adjust the heart and behaviour of his creations, and He is all-loving.

Ergo.

Lord Allah, who is All-Loving, in all His Wisdom, will for centuries see billions of his servants, who are weak and mortal, burned by the infernos of hell, which are as wide as mountains! Allahu Akbar!⁵³³

This passage, despite employing a terminology that was outwardly respectful towards Allah and the Prophet, suggests a strong scepticism towards the claims of Islamic religion, at least regarding the doctrine that all non-Muslims are bound to go to hell. It also implies that the doctrines of Islam

⁵³³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 244-5.

do not stand up to logical scrutiny, because the belief in the omnipotence and benevolence of Allah cannot be reconciled with the notion that all ‘kafirs’ go to hell.

Tan Malaka addressed the subject of religious truth directly in his discussion of science. Here he argued that because heaven and hell were unobservable, they were beyond the reach of empirical study, putting them outside the province of science.⁵³⁴ Nonetheless, he did affirm that there was no proof that the soul survived the body, since the body’s energy was entirely converted into something else.⁵³⁵ He also disputed the existence of angels, since none had ever been reliably observed, and expressed a general scepticism about all reports of miracles.⁵³⁶ This implied that certain central Islamic beliefs, such as the immortality of the soul and the historical intervention of divine agents, ought not to be believed. At points in *Madilog*, Tan Malaka thus appeared to endorse an atheist position.

In the end, however, he refused to comment directly on the truth or falsity of religion, stating that everyone must be free to reach their own conclusions: ‘In relation to the almighty soul, separate from the body, heaven and hell beyond Great Nature [Alam Raya], these are not known by science, and all are outside the province of Madilog. All of them are down to belief alone. Their presence or absence, in the last analysis, is determined by the inclinations of each person. Everyone is free to decide in their own heart. In this matter I know that the freedom of thought of others is an affirmation of the freedom that I demand for myself to decide my own beliefs.’⁵³⁷ In this way, he avoided the atheistic implications of his earlier arguments, by stating that religion was a private matter, which every person ought to decide for themselves.

Even though he did not pronounce of the truth of religion, Tan Malaka did comment on some of its effects. When listing various common logical ‘mistakes’, he attributed many of them to religion. He claimed, for example, that in India and Indonesia, where there was a general faith in the ‘mystical’ the power of prayer, there was also a neglect of the careful analysis of evidence.

⁵³⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 392.

⁵³⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 399.

⁵³⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 74, 517.

⁵³⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 491-2.

This was the ultimate reason, in his view, that these countries had been colonized: '[There is] One reason that both Hindustan and Indonesia could be conquered by countries ten times smaller. The attitude of the Indonesian people and the *gurus* of Hindustan towards evidence was at least ten times more muddled than the countries of the West today.'⁵³⁸ Although Europeans had once also been in thrall to religion, during the Middle Ages, they had escaped this trap through the efforts of scientists like Copernicus, Galileo and Bacon, who had challenged the authority of the church and established the importance of evidence and proof in Western intellectual culture. The superior rationality of the West was the real cause of their geopolitical supremacy.⁵³⁹

A related 'error' was the propensity of religious people to put their faith in unreliable prophecies. Both Christians and Muslims, he said, were prone to believe in proclamations of the end of the world, even though these inevitably turned out to be false.⁵⁴⁰ He offered the example of the Javanese soothsayer Pak Belalang, who was believed to have prophetic powers, but in fact worked through simple trickery, to illustrate the credulous nature of Indonesians.⁵⁴¹

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Tan Malaka saw religion solely as a source of 'mystical' superstition and muddled thinking. In the first place, he argued that religious prophets had historically been motivated by noble causes. Religions were, at their core, attempts to instill certain moral values and make people behave well.⁵⁴² In *Madilog* Jesus is portrayed as a champion of the poor, who preached primitive Communism amongst his followers.⁵⁴³ Muhammad is depicted as a great leader of peoples, who united the Arab tribes and led them to spectacular military success.⁵⁴⁴ Tan Malaka also heralded Muhammad's genius as a thinker and compared his imaginative powers to those of Newton and Edison.⁵⁴⁵ Significantly, he credited Islamic learned men with preserving classical learning during the era of 'scholasticism', when Europeans were

⁵³⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 272-3.

⁵³⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 273.

⁵⁴⁰ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 274-5.

⁵⁴¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 275.

⁵⁴² Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 534.

⁵⁴³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 478-9.

⁵⁴⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 482-6.

⁵⁴⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 485.

preoccupied with religious debate and so neglected the philosophy and science of the Greeks. In this way, he implied that there was no necessary opposition between Islam and scientific rationality.

In *Madilog*, Tan Malaka presented the prophets as being exceptional individuals who achieved great feats of leadership. Their doctrines, in his view, were really shaped by the needs of their historical circumstances. This historical approach to assessing religions was derived from Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* (1908), which Tan Malaka had read and admired.⁵⁴⁶ Like Kautsky, he attempted to explain the emergence of religion through material contexts of the places of their origin, rather than through Providential narratives. He argued that Jesus, for example, had preached the coming of the millennium because he lived in pre-industrial times, when there was no realistic prospect of the poor being liberated from conditions of material scarcity. In biblical times, there was not yet any 'industry, machines, factories that could join the have-nots into a single chain ... The Prophet Jesus made use of the common people's dreams in that time! The ideal of Judaism was the belief in the coming of the sacred "1000 year kingdom", which is the same as the coming of the Messiah, Mahdi. There is no difference in the belief of the Jewish people of that time and the belief of our own people in Central Java in the coming of the Ratu Adil. The deeper the poverty, the greater the influence of these beliefs on the People... A leader like the Prophet Jesus, in my opinion, fulfilled the dreams of the common people of his time.'⁵⁴⁷ In the same manner, the teachings of Muhammad could also be explained historically. Islam's stress on the oneness of God was a reaction against the division of Arab society at the time of the Prophet: 'It is not surprising that Muhammad son of Abdullah was attracted by the One God, of the Prophets Abraham, Moses and David ... One God was needed by Arabia.'⁵⁴⁸

Yet historicizing religion in this manner made religious doctrines seem outmoded in the contemporary world. If the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad had been suited to their times, then surely modernity required a different outlook. The example of Soviet Russia was proof that

⁵⁴⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 470-2.

⁵⁴⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 478.

⁵⁴⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 486.

societies could exist in the twentieth century without any religion at all: ‘Since the Communist Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the notion of good and evil and faith ... is no longer based on the law of divine punishment and reward in the afterlife.’⁵⁴⁹ And without the ‘fear of the fires of Hell and hope of Heaven’, Russia had ‘for almost two years withstood the onslaught of Nazi Germany, the most powerful country in the world today.’⁵⁵⁰

When discussing India’s likely future, Tan Malaka lamented that the country was being held back by backward practices endorsed by religion, such as child marriage, the burning of widows, and the caste system.⁵⁵¹ The latter was a particularly damaging legacy because it held back class solidarity. In order to make progress, India would have to shed much of its Hinduism, which was tainted by idealism and superstition, and embrace dialectical materialism.⁵⁵² The implication of this - though it was not stated in so many words - was that religion, though it had historically served a purpose of enabling political mobilization, could now be disposed of, since a scientific materialism was the only outlook necessary for progress in the modern world. Soviet Russia was proof of this. Any residual religious practice would be a matter of personal preference. This was a radical view, which went beyond the statements of other Indonesian Muslim advocates of modern science and reason, like Hamka or Mohammad Hatta, who believed that Islam remained indispensable as a moral guide and a spur to learning. In 1955 Hatta claimed that ‘The objective of religion is to give man, both as an individual and a member of society, a basis for existence and to enable him to do what is true, good, just, honest and pure’. The importance of Islam lay not only in its moral teaching, but also in ‘its exhortations to its followers to acquire knowledge as much as possible and wherever possible and from whomsoever possible.’⁵⁵³ In contrast with these Islamic modernists, Tan Malaka was suggesting that reason would ultimately topple religion, rather than reinforcing it.

⁵⁴⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 536.

⁵⁵⁰ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 537.

⁵⁵¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 419, 440-1,

⁵⁵² Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 454-5.

⁵⁵³ Noer (ed.), *Mohammad Hatta, Portrait of a Patriot*, pp. 594, 596.

Indonesian History in Madilog

The extended discussions of logic, dialectics and religion in *Madilog* have no equivalents in Tan Malaka's early writings. He did return, however, to a theme that featured prominently in his works from the 1920s, the application of historical materialism to Indonesia's past. In *Madilog*, he argued that the 'primitive' animism of ancient or 'original Indonesia' ('Indonesia Asli') was a result of its low level of productive development. Fear of ghosts abounded in a society prone to scarcity, danger and natural disasters.⁵⁵⁴ The Minangkabau believed that the world rested on buffalo horns because buffalo were important to their everyday life as farmers.⁵⁵⁵ Despite its backward beliefs, Tan Malaka did not characterize 'Indonesia Asli' as an uncultured society. It had produced fine sculptures, dances and poems.⁵⁵⁶ The areas of the archipelago that remained more or less unchanged since early times, like the lands of the Bataks, Dayaks and Toraja, demonstrated great skill in metalwork.⁵⁵⁷ The original Indonesians had been an adventurous, nomadic and maritime people, who had instituted democratic government. In language highly reminiscent of the 'kaum tua', he celebrated the wisdom and courage of the 'datuks', the chiefs elected by the early Indonesians.⁵⁵⁸

As in *Massa Actie*, he argued in *Madilog* that the freedom and dynamism of Indonesia's early history had been ended by the arrival of Hinduism. The 'Hindu colonizers' brought their caste system and their religion which worked as 'parasites', transforming the nature of the Indonesian people.⁵⁵⁹ The Javanese shifted from being travellers to being a nation of sedentary villagers. The Indonesians became fatalistic, dependent on outsiders for their cultural life and inclined to believe that their futures would be determined by mystical prophecies, even though these were inevitably proven false.⁵⁶⁰ The overall effect of Hinduism on Indonesia had been to

⁵⁵⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 398.

⁵⁵⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 185.

⁵⁵⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, 192.

⁵⁵⁷ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 195-6.

⁵⁵⁸ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 405.

⁵⁵⁹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 196.

⁵⁶⁰ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 190-1, 197.

make the people believe in ‘nonsense’ and ‘fairy tales’.⁵⁶¹ This was the primary source of the ‘backward mentality’ of the Indonesian ‘rakyat’.

Rudolf Mrázek has argued that Tan Malaka presented ‘Madilog thinking’ as a kind of return to the patterns of thought of ‘Indonesia Asli’. This argument seems implausible, since although he praised aspects of Indonesia’s ancient culture, and saw it as in some sense superior to Hinduism, which led only to fatalism and servility, he nonetheless considered it ‘primitive’ and entirely lacking in the logical robustness which distinguished Western science. Mrázek, who seeks to understand Tan Malaka within the intellectual context of West Sumatra, does not acknowledge how closely *Madilog* sticks to orthodox Marxist categories, up to the point of replicating Engels’s examples of dialectical materialism. Mrázek points out that Tan Malaka seems to foreground ideas, rather than modes of production, in his discussion of history, which calls into question his commitment to historical materialism, but, as we have seen, Tan Malaka always provided an account of how these ideas emerged from their specific material contexts.⁵⁶² It seems more straightforward to see Tan Malaka as attempting to understand Asian and Indonesian history through Marxist terms.

At the close of *Madilog*, Tan Malaka considered the possible future of Indonesia as an independent socialist republic. Here he extended the argument which he had first raised in *Massa Actie*, that there existed a basic continuity of ‘bangsa’ across Southeast Asia. While in *Massa Actie* he saw ‘Indonesia Raya’ as consisting of the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaya, in *Madilog* this was expanded to include Burma, Siam, Annam and equatorial Australia.⁵⁶³ In *Thesis*, written in 1946, he advanced various reasons for this expansion: a shared climate, a common history under the Sriwijaya and Majapahit empires, and a similar ‘psychology’ (he used the English word, offering the parallel Malay term ‘kejiwaan’).⁵⁶⁴ He also offered justifications for the expansion on racial grounds. In *Madilog* he claimed that the ‘science’ of ‘kebangsaan’ had revealed that in ‘height, the shape of the head and face, skin colour, eyes, and hair, and the shape of hair, the people

⁵⁶¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 522.

⁵⁶² Mrázek, ‘Tan Malaka: A Political Personality’s Structure of Experience’, p. 18.

⁵⁶³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 549.

⁵⁶⁴ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 87

of Burma, Siam and Annam are 100% the same as the Indonesian people and almost 100% different from the people of India.⁵⁶⁵ The researches of the British ethnographer Alfred Haddon, whose works he described as essays in ‘*Race Theory*’ (he used the English term, adding the Malay translation ‘ilmu kebangsaan’ afterwards), had ‘fully acknowledged the oneness of the Indonesian *bangsa* of today with the population of Burma, Siam, Annam’.⁵⁶⁶ In *Thesis* he wrote that the ‘theory of *bangsa* (by Haddon, Smith, Bastian, C.R. Logan (sic) etc.) proves the unity of the *bangsa* in Aslia.’⁵⁶⁷ These quotations make it clear that by the 1940s, Tan Malaka conceived of ‘bangsa’ as being connected to common facial features, which he believed stemmed from common ancestry, as proven by ethnographers such as Haddon, Bastian and Logan.⁵⁶⁸ He did not hesitate to translate ‘bangsa’ as ‘race’.

This contrasts with the image of ‘Indonesia Raya’ presented in *Massa Actie*, where the reach of the Malay language was central to his definition of a greater Indonesia. The constituents of Indonesia Asli had no single language, meaning that he had to use the alternative justifications of shared ‘psychology’ and common ancestry. *Madilog* is shot through with racialised language of a kind that does not feature in *Massa Actie*. In *Madilog*, for example, he describes the ancestry of European peoples as a mixture of ‘Nords’, ‘Tartars’ and ‘Negros’.⁵⁶⁹ This terminology suggests he was influenced by racial thinking, which he may have encountered in China in the 1930s. Social Darwinism and the notion of a world divided into racial groups had a major reception in China from the late-nineteenth century.⁵⁷⁰ During the 1930s, as Andrew F. Jones has shown, this style of thinking was highly prevalent in Chinese newspapers, cartoons and films, all of which Tan Malaka might have been exposed to.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 394.

⁵⁶⁶ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 395.

⁵⁶⁷ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 87.

⁵⁶⁸ Adolf Bastian was an early user of the term ‘Indonesia’. He argued in *Die Volker des ostlichen Asien* (five vols, 1866-69) and *Indonesia oder die Inseln des Malayischen Archipels* (1884-94) that the Philippines was a part of Indonesia. J.R. Logan claimed in his 1850 work *The Ethnology of the India Archipelago* that Indonesia had been populated by peoples from Siam and Burma.

⁵⁶⁹ *Madilog*, p. 279.

⁵⁷⁰ See Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁷¹ Andrew F. Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 8.

A racialized view of the world led Tan Malaka to see the ‘Hindus’ as a foreign people, like the Dutch or the Chinese. As a result, he viewed the Hindu period of Indonesian history a time of colonial submission. The creation of a Southeast Asian federation was appealing because it would reunite the authentic, ‘original’ Indonesia, which had been separated by millennia of foreign domination. This federation of Aslia would be in a strong geopolitical position and would command enormous natural resources.⁵⁷² The progress of industrialization in Sumatra would provide a base from which to expand, through further electrification and mechanization.⁵⁷³ Advancing productive efficiency, combined with socially benevolent planning, would eliminate all scarcity. There would be enough housing schools and leisure time for all.⁵⁷⁴ In this respect, Aslia resembled the socialist land of plenty depicted in *Naar De ‘Republiek Indonesia’*, and had the same millenarian overtones.

Madilog finishes with an account of the ‘heroes’ who will be memorialized in independent Indonesia. In terms of Indonesian history, Tan Malaka envisioned special honour being given to those who had resisted colonialism such as Diponegoro and Imam Bonjol, as well as Cipto Mangunkusumo, and his old comrades Subakat, Dahlan, Aliarcham, Hadji Misbach and Sugono. The highest honour would be accorded to Jose Rizal, who would stand with the other ‘universal geniuses’ Aristotle and Descartes, so as to dispel the Indonesian inferiority complex. The other figures listed in Tan Malaka’s pantheon are a mixture of philosophers (Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu, the enemies of feudalism, and Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, the Utopian socialists), generals and statesmen (Alexander, Robespierre, Danton, Blanqui, Napoleon, Bismarck and Lincoln), Communists (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg), and religious leaders (Zarathustra, Moses, Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad).⁵⁷⁵ The fact that he placed the Prophets within this pantheon suggests again that he saw them as political liberators, rather than divinely inspired individuals or profound philosophers.

⁵⁷² Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 549.

⁵⁷³ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 555.

⁵⁷⁴ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 551-2.

⁵⁷⁵ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, pp. 559-67.

What is striking about this pantheon is its international nature. The combination of philosophers, prophets and political leaders from East and West points to a future where distinctions of race and nation would cease to matter, and a unified world culture would emerge. This fit with the prophecy of Marx and Engels, recorded in the *Communist Manifesto*, that the progress of history was working so that ‘the intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.’⁵⁷⁶ This notion is in tension, however, with Tan Malaka’s insistence that Aslia be a racially constituted state, anchored in the common ‘bangsa’ of the Indonesian people, which implied that race would be the primary criterion for political organization in the post-capitalist future. Aristotle is to be celebrated as a ‘universal genius’, but Rizal is lauded specifically as an Indonesian hero, a member of the ‘*Malay Race*’ (he used the English phrase), who apparently cannot shed his particular racial identity, even in a socialist future where all racial hierarchies have been abolished. As with his survey of world history, Tan Malaka’s history of science and philosophy in the end brought him back to a particular place, his imagined homeland of Aslia. He hoped that teaching Western methods of thought to the Indonesian *rakyat* would allow them to overcome the division and superstition that had held them back for millennia, and claim their ancestral homeland for themselves. He valued enlightenment not as a means of purifying religion, like the Islamic modernists, or of reviving traditional Minangkabau culture, like the ‘kaum tua’, but as a way to liberate his people. As with his studies in history, Tan Malaka’s writings on religion, philosophy and science were instrumental, a means of bringing about revolution and a new state for the Indonesian ‘bangsa’.

⁵⁷⁶ Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 488.

Tan Malaka and the Indonesian Revolution

During the Japanese occupation, Tan Malaka turned to philosophical subjects, writing *Madilog* in the hope of passing on some of his insights to the Indonesian people, and so laying the foundations for political change. His ambition was to transform their way of thinking in order to allow them to shake off their 'backward' mentality and so understand their political predicament more clearly. This was presumably intended to be a gradual process, though he did not doubt that it would end in the eventual independence of Indonesia. After completing *Madilog*, he applied for a job at the social welfare department and was assigned a role at a coal mine in Banten, West Java, to work as a clerk, supervising the labourers at the mine. While there, he began educating the workers and local youths in politics and encouraging them to help the neighbourhood's poor.⁵⁷⁷ His efforts may have been less successful than he believed, however, since one observer noted that 'his Indonesian was a bit bookish, intellectual . . . his talks were rather like lectures.... The local workers couldn't understand his ideas at all. He liked to take long walks by himself and you could see he was a man

⁵⁷⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, pp. 171-2.

who talked and thought a lot, unlike the rest of us Indonesians.’⁵⁷⁸ Better received were the plays he organized, about the heroes of Indonesia’s past, the legendary Malay warrior from the fifteenth century, Hang Tuah, and Prince Diponegoro, the rebel against Dutch rule and leading force behind the Java War of 1825-30.⁵⁷⁹ Tan Malaka himself, who wrote the plays, was always cast as the holy man.⁵⁸⁰ The anti-colonial thrust of these dramas, though officially directed against the Dutch, had obvious undertones criticising Japanese rule. By 1945, the Japanese had become suspicious of Ilyas Hussein, but no one at the mine was able to identify him.⁵⁸¹

In early August 1945, he applied for permission to leave his job and attend the Pemuda Congress in Jakarta, where various Japanese-sponsored youth groups would be addressed by Sukarno, who the Japanese had made their chief adviser in 1942.⁵⁸² The Japanese military government in Indonesia, aware that the war was being lost, had in early 1945 promised to grant Indonesia independence in the near future, and in April of that year had created a committee tasked with preparing for independence, chaired by Sukarno. The ‘pemuda’ were attempting to push Sukarno and the committee in a more radical direction, in particular insisting that the new Indonesian state must be a Republic. Tan Malaka made contact with certain ‘pemuda’ leaders when he reached Jakarta in August 1945, in the same week that the atom bomb fell and Japan surrendered.⁵⁸³ It was these ‘pemuda’ who then kidnapped Sukarno and Hatta and forced them to declare independence, on 17 August 1945.

These events, which Tan Malaka hailed as the birth of the Indonesian Republic he had first imagined in 1925, pushed him into a new burst of writing. His task, as he saw it, was to use his political expertise to guide the nascent revolution onto the correct path, so that the country did not squander its historic opportunity to attain and preserve its freedom. The new Republic was quickly embattled following Sukarno’s proclamation, as British troops arrived in September 1945, officially to disarm the Japanese and free European prisoners of war, but in fact to prepare the

⁵⁷⁸ Mrazek, ‘Tan Malaka: A Political Personality’s Structure of Experience’, p. 16.

⁵⁷⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 180.

⁵⁸⁰ Mrazek, ‘Tan Malaka: A Political Personality’s Structure of Experience’, p. 16.

⁵⁸¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 195.

⁵⁸² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 196.

⁵⁸³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 88.

ground for the return of Dutch troops, who began arriving in early 1946. Following the evaporation of Japanese power, there was now total freedom of the press. At liberty to publish what he wished, he undertook the most intense spell of writing of his life, composing five new works in quick succession between November 1945 and June 1946:

1. *Politik* ('Politics', November 1945)
2. *Rentjana Ekonomi* ('The Economic Plan', November 1945)
3. *Moeslihat* ('Strategy', December 1945)
4. *Sitoeasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri* ('The International and National Political Situation', January 1946, published August 1946)
5. *Thesis* ('Thesis', June 1946, published 1947)

The first three of these were written in Surabaya, during the British occupation of the city, at a time when Tan Malaka had still not publicly revealed his identity. At the close of 1945, he decided to re-emerge as a public figure, disturbed by the drift of the revolution under the leadership of Sukarno, Hatta and Sjahrir, who had signaled their willingness to negotiate with the British and Dutch. In January 1946, he formed a new grouping, the Persatuan Perjuangan ('The Union of Struggle'). This organization was committed to armed resistance, rather than diplomacy, as the means of securing Indonesian independence. It demanded a radical independence settlement, one which would include the confiscation and nationalization of all 'enemy-owned' industry and the redistribution of plantation land. *Sitoeasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri* ('The National and International Political Situation') was first delivered as a speech at the Persatuan Perjuangan Congress, held on 4-5 January 1946 in Purwokerto. *Thesis* was completed in June in Lawu, Central Java.

Tan Malaka, when he made his presence in Indonesia known to certain figures in late 1945, was initially welcomed as a useful ally by Sukarno and Hatta. He was older than either of these men, and brought an experience and knowledge of revolutionary politics which Sukarno in

particular admired, having read *Massa Actie* in his youth.⁵⁸⁴ When Tan Malaka met Sukarno in September 1945, a testament was made promising that in the event of Sukarno's death, Tan Malaka would assume the leadership of the revolution.⁵⁸⁵ From January 1946, however, when Tan Malaka began to voice his loud and public opposition to Sukarno's government, which he accused of lacking the courage to seek '100% merdeka' ('100% independence'), he fell out with Republican authorities. On 17 March 1946, he was arrested by Republican soldiers in Madiun. He spent the next two years in prison, without trial, accused of plotting to overthrow the government (though the formal charge of 'illegal opposition' was not brought until February 1948). While in prison he composed the three volumes of his autobiography, *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* ('From Jail to Jail'), which were finished in 1948. His last major publication was *Gerpolek* (1948), which was written while still in Madiun prison in 1948. On his release in September 1948 he formed a new party, the Partai Murba, but following a new Dutch offensive he was forced to flee into the hinterlands of East Java. On 21 February 1949, he was killed by Republican troops in circumstances that remain unclear.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the content and intentions of Tan Malaka's revolutionary writings. These have generally been given only cursory treatment in accounts of Tan Malaka's role in the revolution, but it is impossible to understand his actions between 1945-9 without first grasping his view of the causes and goals of the revolution itself. The question that this chapter seeks to answer is why Tan Malaka adopted such a radical stance after 1945, which brought him into conflict with Sukarno, Hatta and Sjahrir, and which ultimately cost him his life. He had, after all, been the leading voice for political caution in the 1920s. He still believed that the 'rakyat' were quite unprepared for political action in 1943. What had altered between then and 1945 that made him change his mind? As we shall see, his volte-face was a result not only of a new assessment of Indonesia's social dynamics, but also of certain theoretical innovations on his part.

⁵⁸⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 78-9.

⁵⁸⁵ For Tan Malaka's account of this event see *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 82.

The 'Pemuda' and Indonesia's Revolutionary Hour

A central theme of Tan Malaka's revolutionary writings was that after August 1945, Indonesia had entered a new, revolutionary situation. The proclamation of independence in August, the vast independence rallies held in Jakarta in September, and the spirited resistance to British troops in Surabaya in November, which Tan Malaka witnessed first-hand, all appeared to confirm that a new spirit was at work.⁵⁸⁶ As he wrote in *Politik*, 'For twenty years I have been anticipating the events that are now occurring at tremendous speed in Indonesia. I feel blessed to have been able to witness the week-long struggle in Surabaya (17-24 November 1945).'⁵⁸⁷ He had good reasons to be pleased, since these events were partially inspired by his own writings. The organizers of the Ikada rally in Jakarta on 19 September 1945 viewed it explicitly as a 'mass action', of the kind advocated by Tan Malaka in *Massa Actie*.⁵⁸⁸ What gave him special cause for optimism was the broad basis of the emerging revolution. This was entirely unlike the failed 'putsch' of 1926-7, when popular support had failed to materialize. The surge of political activism occurring after August 1945 had, to his eyes, all the hallmarks of a revolution of the working masses, of the kind that he had first predicted in *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia*. In his view, 'The attitude and spirit of the Indonesian proletariat, peasants, and "pemuda" has soared, in line with all my writings and hopes during my time overseas. In Shanghai or Berlin, Egypt or Moscow, I have not encountered an outlook or spirit that is more steadfast, swift and robust.'⁵⁸⁹ Despite their vastly inferior equipment, Indonesian paramilitaries had driven back British soldiers in Surabaya and in a number of other cities in Java.⁵⁹⁰ In *Thesis*, Tan Malaka went so far as to declare that the unfolding events in Indonesia resembled those in France in 1789 and Russia in 1917, that is to say they constituted a fully-fledged revolution.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁶ On the importance of the Jakarta rallies see Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 8.

⁵⁸⁷ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, in Tan Malaka, *Muslihat, Politik, & Rencana Ekonomi Berjuang*, pp. 73-128, at p. 73.

⁵⁸⁸ Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution*, p. 33.

⁵⁸⁹ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 73. Unlike the other places mentioned, there is no record that Tan Malaka ever went to Egypt.

⁵⁹⁰ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, in Tan Malaka, *Muslihat, Politik, & Rencana Ekonomi Berjuang*, pp. 3-72, at p. 4.

⁵⁹¹ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 80.

Tan Malaka took this as a vindication of the political strategy he had outlined in *Massa Actie*.⁵⁹² The demonstrations and resistance of 1945 were exactly the sort of ‘mass action’ he had called for in 1926.⁵⁹³ These were the kinds of broad-based and active forms of political opposition which he believed would spread revolutionary consciousness among the people and allow Indonesians to gain much needed experience in the field of political struggle.⁵⁹⁴

But what had induced this new revolutionary spirit in Indonesia? As recently as 1943, in *Madilog*, Tan Malaka had complained that Indonesian workers lacked the necessary ‘worldview’ to take advantage of their relatively strong position and overthrow their oppressors. Despite favourable ‘objective’ conditions - a large proletariat and a numerically weak foreign bourgeoisie - the ‘subjective’ factor was lacking in them. They were superstitious and poorly educated. This, as we have seen, was a repetition of the arguments of he had made in his 1920s writings, which lamented the ‘backward’ mentality of the Indonesian people as the primary factor preventing them from organizing in their class interests and fighting their colonial rulers. Yet this is precisely what they seemed to be doing, very suddenly, after August 1945.

In *Massa Actie*, Tan Malaka had claimed that the Indonesian people could be *made* politically aware and active through a series of mass actions, including strikes, boycotts, and protests. The instrument for organizing these mass actions, he imagined, would be the PKI and its associated bodies, such as the Sarekat Rakyat. In 1945-6, however, the PKI was not a serious political force.⁵⁹⁵ Indeed, there was no political party as such that was available to take the lead, following Dutch and Japanese repression of independent political organizations. In this situation, Tan Malaka perceived that it was the youth, the ‘pemuda’, who had seized the initiative and who were in the vanguard of inspiring and leading revolutionary activity. It was ‘pemuda’ who had

⁵⁹² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 101.

⁵⁹³ In fact, he had not explicitly called for military resistance in *Massa Actie*, only for strikes, demonstrations and boycotts.

⁵⁹⁴ In *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, he describes the first phase of the revolution (August 1945 to March 1946) as the ‘mass action phase’, p. 132.

⁵⁹⁵ The PKI had operated underground after 1927, but had been seriously undermined during the Japanese occupation. See Lucas (ed.), *Local Opposition and Underground Resistance to the Japanese in Java, 1942-1945*.

effectively forced Sukarno and Hatta to declare independence on 17 August 1945, and it was the 'pemuda' who were doing most of the fighting against the British.⁵⁹⁶

In his revolutionary writings, Tan Malaka offered two explanations for the recent 'pemuda'-led political awakening of Indonesia. First, he pointed out that the country was undergoing an extremely severe economic crisis, which was working to radicalize the general population. The war, he claimed, had shown capitalism in its undisguised, most brutal form: the Japanese had exploited Indonesian labour and resources to the utmost for the sole purpose of extracting the maximum profit.⁵⁹⁷ He had witnessed this at close quarters during his time as coal mine clerk at Banten. The war had also resulted in years of shortages, leading to widespread hunger.⁵⁹⁸ In *Moeslihat* he estimated that two to three million Indonesians had died as a result of the Japanese occupation.⁵⁹⁹

As a Marxist, he naturally believed that economic crises led to increased political discontent, because they immiserated the poor to the point where they became revolutionary, having nothing further to lose. They also revealed the bankruptcy of the capitalist economic system, which was shown to be unequal to the task of providing basic necessities. One reason that he thought the 1926-7 revolts had failed was because they took place at the height of an economic boom. As he wrote in *Thesis*, in 1926 the 'revolutionary spirit of the whole people was knocked by temporary prosperity. Compared with 1945, after five and a half years of world war and oppression of the Indonesian people, the plunder of machines, gold, diamonds, rice and young women: crushed, slapped and killed by the thieving soldiers of the Tenno Heika [the Japanese emperor], the difference between the prosperity and tranquility of 1926 and the situation in 1946, is truly like the difference between the earth and the sky.'⁶⁰⁰ As he had done in the 1920s, Tan Malaka here associated capitalism with the reduction of women to commercial goods, using even more dramatic language than in his earlier writings.⁶⁰¹ While Indonesians were suffering under the

⁵⁹⁶ On Sukarno being forced into proclamation, see *From Jail to Jail*, 3, p. 63; Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 10.

⁵⁹⁷ Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi, Muslihat, Politik, & Rencana Ekonomi Berjuang*, pp. 129-235, at p. 137.

⁵⁹⁸ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 75.

⁵⁹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 67.

⁶⁰⁰ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 75.

⁶⁰¹ See page 130 above.

oppression of capitalism in 1926, the relative prosperity of the time made it an inopportune moment to launch a revolution. In 1945 the catastrophic economic impact of the Japanese occupation had made the national mood highly revolutionary.

The second reason he gave for the new revolutionary spirit was the training offered to Indonesian youth by the Japanese themselves. This, in his view, was a classic example of ‘Marx’s saying: Capitalism digs its own grave’.⁶⁰² The Japanese had trained ‘perhaps two million pemuda ([in the] Keibodan, Seinendan, Pelopor Heiho, Peta, Jibakutai) to expand the empire of Dai Nippon.’⁶⁰³ The result was that Indonesian youth were now better soldiers than their Dutch, British or American counterparts. The proof could be found in the battle for Surabaya, where Indonesian soldiers had been able to ‘seize rifles, tanks, planes and warships’ armed only with ‘sharpened bamboo’.⁶⁰⁴ The Japanese had reawakened the old Indonesian ‘warrior spirit’ (‘Semangat Prajurit’), drained by centuries of Dutch oppression, which had once made Indonesians ‘the bravest sailors in the world’. In a few short years, Indonesians had rediscovered their martial essence.⁶⁰⁵ The difference, as he wrote in *Moeslihat*, was ‘like day and night. The defeated soul is now dynamic and rebellious. The spirit that was subdued and trusted in foreign leadership, has now turned into a fighting spirit that believes in its own leaders, and in itself, and is even armed with its own sharpened bamboo and machetes. Who would have thought ... so great a transformation could happen in so short a time.’⁶⁰⁶ Again, the contrast with 1926 was stark. Then, virtually none of the Indonesian ‘rakyat’ that the PKI had sought to mobilize had any military experience. Now, there were thousands of armed and radicalized youths roaming the land.⁶⁰⁷

Tan Malaka hailed the emergence of the ‘pemuda’ as a highly positive development for the Indonesian revolution. The youths brought the missing ‘subjective’ factor which had, in his

⁶⁰² Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 81.

⁶⁰³ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 80.

⁶⁰⁴ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 81.

⁶⁰⁵ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 80. Tan Malaka was not the only figure to remark on this transformation. For other contemporary accounts, see Frances Gouda, ‘Gender and “Hyper-Masculinity” as Post-Colonial Modernity during Indonesia’s Struggle for Independence, 1945 to 1949’, in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 161-74.

⁶⁰⁶ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 7-8.

⁶⁰⁷ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 71-2.

judgment, prevented Indonesians from freeing themselves from colonial domination. Once the people discovered the will to fight, they would very likely prevail, he thought, given their overwhelming strength of numbers. Yet he did not believe that spontaneous revolutionary violence, of the kind witnessed in Surabaya, would be sufficient in itself to guarantee a successful transition to independence. He remained wedded to the Leninist principle that a disciplined party, led by those with a correct understanding of revolutionary dynamics, was vital to ensuring political success. As he wrote in the Preface to *Politik*, ‘there still seems to be a lack of good judgment regarding ideology and organization.’⁶⁰⁸ Any successful revolutionary movement needed leadership that could ‘assess the present and the future’, hold its nerve in the face of adversity, and keep the people disciplined and united.⁶⁰⁹ A pedagogical influence from above was still required.

Tan Malaka’s three 1945 tracts - *Politik*, *Rentjana Ekonomi*, and *Moeslihat* - were intended to fill this deficit of ‘ideology and organization’, and, implicitly, to demonstrate that Tan Malaka had the necessary expertise to lead the revolution. These texts were didactic in nature, structured as dialogues between representatives of various groups within Indonesian society: the intelligentsia, the merchants, the nobility, the peasantry, and the workers. This was a novel attempt to render Marxist class terminology in an Indonesian idiom: the peasantry were personified by ‘Pacul’ (‘hoe’), the proletariat by ‘Godam’ (‘hammer’), the nobility by ‘Denmas’ (short for the noble title ‘Raden Mas’), the merchants by ‘Toke’ (a derogatory word for a Chinese businessman), and the intelligentsia by ‘Mr Apal’ (‘Mr’ signifying training in law, while ‘apal’ means ‘to learn by rote’, demonstrating Tan Malaka contempt for the Indonesian intellectual class).⁶¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, it was the voice of ‘Godam’ which dominated and which triumphed in each of the dialogues.

Politik was written as a primer on political science, to instruct the insurrectionaries what they were fighting for. As he noted in *Moeslihat*, it was unhelpful to see the revolution as a ‘perang sabil’ (‘holy war’).⁶¹¹ Rather, it was a struggle to bring about a new form of political and economic

⁶⁰⁸ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 73.

⁶⁰⁹ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 107.

⁶¹⁰ Anderson, *Java in A Time of Revolution*, P. 284, n. 41.

⁶¹¹ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 34.

organization. But what kind of new set-up was desirable? *Politik* repeated the arguments of *Sovjet atau parlement?* regarding the inadequacy of monarchy and ‘bourgeois’ parliamentary democracy as systems of government. Tan Malaka once again claimed that monarchy was an unreliable because the ‘raja’ was not always just or wise.⁶¹² The Srivijaya and Majapahit Empires, he said, had been ruled mainly by tyrants, who could be removed only through civil war or popular uprising.⁶¹³ It was better to have rulers restrained by law, as the historic kings of Minangkabau had been.⁶¹⁴ Best of all was to have a republic, where the people themselves were sovereign and self-governing, as in the United States or the Minangkabau villages.⁶¹⁵ Yet the outward ‘form’ of a democratic Republic was insufficient, he claimed, because so long as a Republic remained capitalist, the capitalists would be able to undermine the freedom of citizens through the influence that their wealth exerted on the media, the bureaucracy, religious institutions, the army and police, and the politicians themselves.⁶¹⁶ Democracy, in his view, was hollow so long as capitalism remained. Even if the people wanted socialism, and elected socialist governments, the capitalists would find a way to block effective change.⁶¹⁷

Tan Malaka, however, did add a new element to his critique of capitalist democracy in *Politik*. He drew a distinction, not present in his earlier works, between the ‘form’ of freedom - by which he meant essential liberties such as freedom of speech and assembly - and the ‘content’ of freedom - which stood for the right to basic necessities such as food, clothing and housing.⁶¹⁸ Democratic Republics like the United States had the ‘form’ of freedom, but not the ‘content’, because their capitalist economic system prevented the emergence of socialism which could provide basic goods to the people.⁶¹⁹ In order to achieve ‘100% kemerdekaan’, the workers or ‘murba’, his new term, meaning essentially ‘the poor’, would have to overthrow the state through mass action, as they had done in Russia in 1917, and create a new workers’ government capable

⁶¹² Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 79-83.

⁶¹³ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 81.

⁶¹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 85.

⁶¹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 86, 91.

⁶¹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 92-101.

⁶¹⁷ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 103.

⁶¹⁸ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 92, 109.

⁶¹⁹ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 103-5.

of enacting socialist measures.⁶²⁰ The implications for the Indonesian revolution were spelled out at the end of the work: the Indonesian ‘murba’ would have to lead the revolution in order to gain freedom in its entirety, to create a true Republic that would be independent of both foreign rule and the pernicious influence of capital. Anything less would relegate Indonesia to the status of a semi-colony, much like Latin America or China before the war.⁶²¹ The national revolution and the social revolution would have to be rolled into one.

Tan Malaka’s remarks on the inadequacy of Western-style individual liberty echo the comments of other Asian anti-imperialists. Sun Yat-Sen’s *San Min Chu I (Three Principles of the People)*, which Tan Malaka had read, criticized ‘excessive individual liberty’, which he believed undermined a sense of community and collective identity.⁶²² Tan Malaka, however, did not argue that individual liberty was insufficient because it undermined community or was culturally foreign to Indonesia, but rather that it needed to be supplemented by collective action, delivered through the state, in order to distribute the basic necessities that a capitalist free market was unable to provide. In his view, citizens were not ‘free’ so long as they lacked material security, which ‘bourgeois’ society, in spite of its apparent freedoms, denied them. Tan Malaka did not see collective provision of welfare as peculiarly Asian, to be contrasted with Western individualism. Rather, he believed the Soviet Union had gone furthest in achieving the fullest form of freedom, which combined individual rights with collective welfare. This suggests that he took his ideas about the inadequacy of individual liberties more from Marx and Lenin than Sun Yat-Sen.

In *Moeslihat*, Tan Malaka outlined his strategy for securing ‘100% merdeka’. The basic thrust of his argument was that a prolonged and broad-based guerilla struggle of the working masses (the ‘murba’) was the key to victory.⁶²³ The ‘murba’ were now animated by the ‘spirit of merdeka’.⁶²⁴ The size and climate of Indonesia favoured them over foreign forces.⁶²⁵ What they

⁶²⁰ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 109.

⁶²¹ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 114-5.

⁶²² Quoted in A. James Gregor, ‘Confucianism and the political thought of Sun Yat-Sen’, *Philosophy East and West*, 31, 1 (1981), pp. 55-70, at p. 65.

⁶²³ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 3, 60-9

⁶²⁴ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 58-9.

⁶²⁵ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 17, 20.

needed was discipline and, above all, unity.⁶²⁶ In his view, the revolts of Diponegoro and Imam Bonjol, as well as the Acehnese resistance to the Dutch, had failed because they had remained purely local.⁶²⁷ To enable broad cooperation, there needed first to be a basic programme of immediate goals to which all parties could agree. The programme would have to appeal to both workers and peasants, who made up the overwhelming majority of the population and so would be vital to any national-scale resistance. *Moeslihat* contained proposals for land redistribution designed to win over peasants, and pledged turn the ownership of the factories, mines and railways over to the labourers who worked in them.⁶²⁸ These measures were intended to show the industrial and rural proletariat that they were not being ‘used as mules’ in the revolution, to be later ‘cast beneath the feet of national or foreign capitalists’.⁶²⁹ This would be a revolution of the people and for the people.⁶³⁰

Tan Malaka also highlighted the need to avoid compromise with imperialist power in *Moeslihat*. He stressed that negotiations could be undertaken with the British or the Dutch only on the basis of prior acknowledgement of the Indonesian Republic’s right to ‘100% merdeka’.⁶³¹ What had to be avoided at all costs was a deal that permitted the re-entry of foreign capital into Indonesia. The British, he said, were imperialists who ultimately wanted to ‘enslave’ Indonesians and restore foreign domination of the mines, factories and plantations.⁶³² Employing highly gendered language, he claimed that the British spoke with ‘the voice of a whore’ and so could not be trusted.⁶³³ Struggle (‘perjuangan’) was thus the only realistic course that was likely to expel them and allow Indonesians to secure their freedom and establish a socialist state. Diplomacy and compromise would only result in selling out the new Republic to the interests of foreign businesses.

⁶²⁶ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 69.

⁶²⁷ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 8.

⁶²⁸ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 40-5.

⁶²⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 137.

⁶³⁰ Tan Malaka’s programme of land reform and social revolution resembles Mao’s revolutionary strategy, though he did not acknowledge Mao as a source in his writings.

⁶³¹ At this point the British were refusing to recognize the Republic and the Dutch were proposing a federated Indonesia under the Dutch crown. Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 65.

⁶³² Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 61.

⁶³³ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 62.

In Tan Malaka's view, the Sjahrir government was falling into exactly this trap. Sjahrir and Amir Sjarifuddin, his foreign minister, were negotiating with the British and the Dutch, when they ought to be organizing the struggle of the people. They were unduly pessimistic about the strength of the 'murba', who had shown their power and willingness to fight in Surabaya. The Persatuan Perjuangan was formed not only to unite those fighting capitalism and imperialism, but also to put pressure on the government and move them away from 'diplomasi' and towards 'perjuangan'. The demands for the confiscation of plantation land and industrial facilities contained in the Minimum Programme were effectively a call for the government to harden its negotiating position, which at the time committed the Republic to protecting and restoring foreign-owned property.⁶³⁴ For Tan Malaka, the Republican leaders were dithering when they ought to be decisive. They were seeking compromise with their enemies when struggle was the only path to conclusive victory.

In his memoir he accused Sukarno, Hatta and Sjahrir of being overly-intellectual, too culturally close to the Dutch and too distant from the 'murba' to understand the situation on the ground. They wanted the easy road of diplomacy, not the hard road of struggle. This was fitting, he thought, given their comfortable, middle-class backgrounds.⁶³⁵ Tan Malaka, who had lived among the working poor since 1942, and suffered many privations during his years in exile, believed he understood the 'murba' better.

The International Situation

In Chapter Three, we saw how Tan Malaka's assessment of world events shifted in the mid-1920s from a mood of optimism to a general pessimism about the progress of world revolution. In *Sitoeasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*, he recounted how this shift had come about: 'From 1918-23, for around five years, the political, social and economic situation of the capitalist world seemed to be damaged beyond repair. It was as if world capitalism was about to collapse. But from 1924-9, also a period of around five years, the capitalist world began to recover. At first slowly.

⁶³⁴ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*; Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, pp. 307-8.

⁶³⁵ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 124-6.

Then increasingly fast until production reached a peak.’ The 1926-7 revolts had taken place at the height of the boom, when the imperialist powers were in a relatively strong position. The onset of the great depression, however, had destroyed the new equilibrium, plunging all the major capitalist economies into crisis. Tan Malaka saw the depression was a classic example of capitalist overproduction, a natural result of the ‘anarchy of production’ that prevailed in unplanned capitalist economies.⁶³⁶ He noted in *Rentjana Ekonomi* that virtually all the affected countries had responded to the crisis by implementing some form of economic planning, whether on the model of Roosevelt’s New Deal or Hitler’s more militaristic ‘Fascist economic planning’.⁶³⁷ Yet he argued that the only country which had been able to weather the crisis was the Soviet Union, which he took as a vindication of socialist principles of economic organization.⁶³⁸

The depression, he believed, had entirely destabilized world affairs by bringing to power expansionist Fascist governments in Germany and Japan.⁶³⁹ These regimes could not be contained by rival powers like Britain and France, or by the ineffective League of Nations. The result was a second world war. He characterized this war, like the First World War, as a competition between imperialist powers for markets and resources. Japan, Germany and Italy had gone to war to expand their territory and seize valuable materials. Because the war was essentially a struggle between imperial powers, when the Dutch colonial government fell to the Japanese, Indonesia simply exchanged one set of exploiters for another. As he put it, ‘The Japanese inherited and strengthened the instrument of oppression left behind by the Dutch.’⁶⁴⁰

Tan Malaka did observe a number of differences between the Japanese approach to imperialism and the old Dutch style of colonial rule, however. If anything, the Japanese were even more brutal in their methods of extraction than the Dutch.⁶⁴¹ While Tan Malaka characterized the Dutch as a nation of ‘pirates’ and ‘small traders’ who sought quick profits, he saw the Japanese as

⁶³⁶ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

⁶³⁷ Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi*, pp. 187-202.

⁶³⁸ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

⁶³⁹ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

⁶⁴⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 72.

⁶⁴¹ Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi*, p. 152.

being motivated not only by capitalist greed but also by a religious devotion to their emperor.⁶⁴² For all of their military and economic sophistication, the Japanese mentality was, he asserted, extremely backward. As he put it, 'The Japanese people, except for a few, still believe in fairy tales that equal the myths of pre-Islamic Indonesia... the Japanese Maharaja is considered to be a God.'⁶⁴³ In *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, he described Japan as 'theocratic'.⁶⁴⁴ This was a far cry from his characterization of the country in *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, where he depicted it as an advanced capitalist society on the road to Communism.⁶⁴⁵

The cultish zeal of Japanese imperialists made them much more ambitious than the Dutch had ever been. While the Dutch were content to milk the Indies for easy profits, the Japanese had aspirations to rule all of Asia, and even America.⁶⁴⁶ The Japanese had made no effort to industrialize Indonesia, but they did arm and organize a section of the Indonesian people, the 'pemuda', a step the Dutch had never taken. They also did the anti-colonial movement a great service, in Tan Malaka's eyes, by revealing the emptiness of Dutch power. The Dutch had always claimed that they were able to defend the Indies from external threats, but this claim had been rendered absurd overnight by the Japanese conquest. As he wrote, 'Does a leader not above all have to have the quality of "verzienheid", that is the ability to look ahead. To be able to take an umbrella before the rain. 8 March 1942 provided clear proof that this quality is entirely lacking in Dutch leadership.'⁶⁴⁷ The knowledge that the Dutch were not invulnerable - a fact that had already been demonstrated by their rapid capitulation to German arms in 1940 - gave belief to the Indonesian people that they could successfully defend the Republic from any attempt at imperial reoccupation.⁶⁴⁸

For Tan Malaka, the Japanese surrender, and the end of the war more generally, marked a new watershed in international relations. In the first place, he believed that the great cost of the

⁶⁴² Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa*, p. 43.

⁶⁴³ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

⁶⁴⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 76.

⁶⁴⁵ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, p. 30.

⁶⁴⁶ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

⁶⁴⁷ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

⁶⁴⁸ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*.

war had fundamentally weakened the power of Britain, the imperialist nation *par excellence*. In *Thesis* he claimed that British imperialism was on the defensive everywhere: ‘English imperialism is increasingly tenuous in the Irish Free State, South Africa, Australia and Canada and also faces great troubles in places that have been its pillars until now, in India and Egypt.’⁶⁴⁹ As the grip of the British weakened, anti-colonial movements in the colonies were gaining ground. In *Gerpolek*, he reported that Burma, Malaya and India were all now in revolutionary situations.⁶⁵⁰ The second change brought about by the war was a decisive shift in Western public opinion away from imperialism. In *Sitoeasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*, he declared that the Indonesian revolution had support from British, Dutch and Australian labourers, as well as from its more natural allies in India, Ceylon, Burma, the Philippines and the Arab world.⁶⁵¹ The fact that the workers in the West had decisively turned against imperialism would make it much harder for wars of colonial conquest to be sustained.

A third consequence of the war was to strengthen the forces of socialism. After defeating Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union had gained territory in Eastern Europe, and now commanded vast natural and industrial resources.⁶⁵² In *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* he wrote that ‘The base of socialism is more firmly established in a wider area than before, as it now covers Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Albania, and Bulgaria as well as the Soviet Union itself.’⁶⁵³ Communist revolutionaries were also making progress in the colonial world, and in China and Korea.⁶⁵⁴ The outcome of this socialist advance was a realignment of the global geopolitical order. In *Thesis*, Tan Malaka stated that world politics now consisted of ‘the opposition of two systems’, socialism and capitalism.⁶⁵⁵ The socialist camp was centred on Russia, while capitalism was strongest in Britain and the United States. These two sides faced each other as enemies, because their political systems were fundamentally opposed. Their enmity was an

⁶⁴⁹ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 7.

⁶⁵⁰ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 93.

⁶⁵¹ Tan Malaka, *Situasi Politik Loear Dan Dalam Negeri*. See also Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁵² Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁵³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 121.

⁶⁵⁴ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 7; Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 51.

⁶⁵⁵ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 7.

extension of the class struggle to the international dimensions: Russia was a proletarian dictatorship, while Britain and the United States were ruled by the bourgeoisie.⁶⁵⁶

In Tan Malaka's judgment, socialism was likely to triumph over capitalism in the long term. The capitalist world, he argued, remained bedeviled by periodic economic crises, while socialist states had liberated themselves from this problem through economic planning.⁶⁵⁷ There was also an ineluctable historical process underway that was moving the world from capitalism to socialism. The force of this process was impossible to resist. The eventual demise of capitalism, he believed, was as certain as the fall of feudalism or slavery.⁶⁵⁸ As he put it, 'over hundreds of years the economy of slave society ... gradually changed until reaching a level from which it was transformed into a feudal economy. And gradually, according to the law of the dialectic, that feudal economy changed into a capitalist economy, which has, as of now (November 1947), given way to a socialist economy for more than three hundred million people in Soviet Russia and neighbouring countries, but not yet for those of China or Korea.'⁶⁵⁹ Even so, Tan Malaka did not state whether the Indonesian Republic should declare its support for the socialist camp, even if his sympathies were in that direction, and he believed Indonesia would become socialist in the end.⁶⁶⁰

What were the implications of the decline of British colonial authority and the rise of socialism for the Indonesian revolution? For Tan Malaka, it was clear that these trends strengthened the case for 'perjuangan' over 'diplomasi'. Unlike in 1926, when Russia had been relatively weak and the colonial powers relatively strong, the developments since 1945 showed that it was the imperial powers which were declining, while the anti-imperialist socialist world was gaining in strength. Indonesia had much more potential support to draw on this time.⁶⁶¹ Britain and the Netherlands, the revolution's antagonists, were in a weaker position than ever, because their colonial subjects had become more restive, and anti-imperialism was increasingly pervasive within

⁶⁵⁶ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 12

⁶⁵⁷ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 20-1.

⁶⁵⁸ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 22.

⁶⁵⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 51.

⁶⁶⁰ See Harry A. Poeze, 'The Cold War in Indonesia, 1948', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 40, 3 (2009), pp. 497-517, at p. 499.

⁶⁶¹ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 81-3.

their own societies. Most important of all, Britain and the Netherlands were on the wrong side of history. They were going against the grain of historical change by attempting to restore colonial institutions in a world that was rapidly moving on towards a new socialist future. For a devotee of historical materialism like Tan Malaka, it was folly to strike a deal with declining powers, since these would only decline further as the dialectical process worked itself out. The time had come for Indonesians to seize their moment and secure their freedom. History was on their side.

Beyond its implications for the Indonesian revolution, Tan Malaka also imagined that the decline of imperialism and the rise of socialism had consequences for Southeast Asia more generally. In *Thesis*, he argued that the transformation of world geopolitics was creating the conditions for a Southeast Asian federation of nations, 'Aslia', something which he had first conceived of in *Massa Actie* in 1926 and returned to in *Madilog*. In *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, he wrote that the Republic of Indonesia was 'merely a stepping stone to ASLIA.'⁶⁶² As we have seen, *Thesis* repeated the claim that the Malay peninsula, the Philippines, and Indonesia constituted a single 'bangsa' ('nation') with a shared climate, though this was now extended to include Burma, Siam, Annam, and Australia.⁶⁶³ The geopolitical importance of a bloc centred on Singapore was appreciated by the British and by the Japanese, Tan Malaka claimed, since both tried to dominate the lands of 'Aslia'.⁶⁶⁴ Singapore had also been the pivot of the Majapahit and Srivijaya empires, which he saw as forerunners of 'Aslia'.⁶⁶⁵ A Southeast Asian federation of nations would not only have a strong strategic position, he argued, but would also benefit from economic coordination, since the economies of the region were basically alike.⁶⁶⁶

The model for a regional federation of nations already existed in the form of the Soviet Union. In Tan Malaka's view, 'National conflicts disappeared entirely' in the Soviet Union, which was itself more racially diverse than Aslia would be, because 'Soviet Russia is able to concentrate entirely on the equality of all groups of people with one another, for example in the necessities of

⁶⁶² Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 122.

⁶⁶³ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 87.

⁶⁶⁴ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 37-8.

⁶⁶⁵ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 37-8.

⁶⁶⁶ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 39

life (political and economic).⁶⁶⁷ There would be no danger of ethnic conflict within ‘Aslia’, because socialism made such conflicts evaporate. It was in capitalist societies, he claimed, that racial tension was greatest, because class differences exacerbated racial ones. The United States was one example: ‘In the United States, which boasts of “democracy” and “freedom”, there is a place in trains, for example, that is not accessible to the Niger [sic] race (black people). This unfortunate race often suffers cruel attacks, that are known all around the world by the word “lynching”, which means “beating to death”, if a black person violates or is accused of violating the (female) honour of a white person.’⁶⁶⁸ South Africa was much the same: ‘Coloured people in South Africa are segregated from white people in the economy, politics and in everyday life. In the trains it is often written “for white men only”’.⁶⁶⁹ One could find the same discrimination in the capitalist enclaves in China: ‘Still fresh in my memory is the inscription on the Shanghai public gardens “Chinese and dogs are not allowed.”’⁶⁷⁰ Capitalism and racism went hand in hand; socialism would usher in an age of racial unity, of which Aslia would be one example.

In *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, Tan Malaka made it clear that he believed every region of the world was moving towards federation as socialism gathered momentum. The example of the Soviet Union would be replicated on every continent. As he put it in *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, ‘Just as the countries now joined together in the Cominform have much in common regarding geography, climate, race, and nationality as well as economic, social, and cultural factors, so in our view such similarities among the countries of Southeast Asia will lead them in the future to unite as ASLIA, a *unit* that from the economic angle more or less meets the requirements for an independent socialist state, existing alongside a socialist America, a socialist China, a socialist India, Soviet Russia, and so on. We will organize these giant socialist states into a world federation on the basis of equality among nations.’⁶⁷¹ Socialism would thus enable a new era of regional and global co-operation, which would replace the old order of competing capitalist states that had resulted in two catastrophic world wars. The racial antagonism of colonial societies, divided into

⁶⁶⁷ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 15.

⁶⁶⁸ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 15.

⁶⁶⁹ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 15.

⁶⁷⁰ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 15.

⁶⁷¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 122.

indigenous subjects and foreign ruling elites, would be exchanged for a world tided into racially homogenous super-states. Again, this was presented as an irresistible process of historical change. Like the independence of Indonesia, the formation of Aslia was a historical necessity that was bound to occur sooner or later.

As in *Massa Actie*, Tan Malaka's vision for regional unification in *Thesis* and *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* ran counter to the Marxist argument that Communism would dissolve all national borders and allow people to flourish as individuals. Although he came close to arguing this when he claimed that socialism led to the evaporation of ethnic conflict, in Tan Malaka's imagined socialist future, 'bangsa' remained a vital source of political identity, whether in Aslia, China or India.

Tan Malaka was not the only voice calling for an expansion of Indonesia's borders beyond those of the Dutch East Indies in the 1940s. At a meeting of the committee tasked by the Japanese with preparing Indonesia for independence, held on 11 July 1945, Muhammad Yamin called for a 'greater Indonesia' to include all of Papua and the Malay peninsula. Hatta, also present, rejected this proposal on the grounds that would give the prospective Indonesian Republic the appearance of an imperialistic nation. In his view, even if it was in Indonesia's geopolitical interests to assume control of the Malay peninsula, it would mean encroaching on territories currently held by other powers, which would create great difficulties for the new state. He cautioned against expansionism in general, pointing to the fate of Hitler's project to integrate the 'German' populations of Austria and Czechoslovakia into a greater German state as a cautionary tale.⁶⁷²

Tan Malaka's vision of 'Aslia' was even more ambitious than Yamin's concept of 'greater Indonesia'. Unlike Hatta, he was unconcerned with the present state of geopolitics. As with class struggle, what mattered in international affairs was the direction of travel, the dynamics of change. In his view, the forces of history were destroying imperial power and empowering socialism, thus creating the conditions for the emergence of 'Aslia'. To settle for the present borders of the Dutch

⁶⁷² Feith and Castles, *Indonesian Political Thinking 1945-1965*, pp. 441-2.

East Indies as the limits of Indonesia, as Hatta did, was for Tan Malaka a failing of political imagination, caused by an inability to appreciate the large-scale processes underway in the world.

Tan Malaka's Opponents

Tan Malaka's burst of revolutionary writing was in large part a response to the policies of the first Sjahrir government (November 1945-February 1946). Tan Malaka was initially well-disposed towards Sjahrir, since they shared a record of non-collaboration and both had links to the 'pemuda'.⁶⁷³ But Sjahrir's decision to open negotiations with the British and Dutch almost immediately after coming to office was considered a grave error by Tan Malaka. Sjahrir set out his reasons for 'diplomasi' most fully in his text *Perdjoeangan Kita* ('Our Struggle'), published on 10 November 1945. There he argued that the Indonesian Republic existed within the sphere of influence of Anglo-American capitalism and imperialism, and so its fate was ultimately dependent on those powers. As a result, negotiation would be necessary to secure independence. In order to win the confidence of the international community, revolutionaries would have to demonstrate their moderation and restraint. This meant reining in the violence of the 'pemuda', whom Sjahrir regarded as quasi-Fascist xenophobic fanatics, trained by the Japanese in their own image. The revolution, he claimed, ought to be led by those with political experience, who understood the world situation. Unionized labourers and peasants were useful allies. Self-organizing 'pemuda' radicals were not.⁶⁷⁴

The contrast between Sjahrir's position and Tan Malaka's was stark. Whereas Tan Malaka saw the 'pemuda' as essential to the progress of the revolution - indeed, the spark which had set the revolution alight - Sjahrir saw them as a hindrance, an unruly and racist mob who risked jeopardizing the entire struggle for Indonesian independence. Benedict Anderson has observed that Sjahrir and Tan Malaka had opposite reactions to the battle for Surabaya. Sjahrir focused on the great loss of life and 'anarchic violence' of the battle, which convinced him of the need to contain the 'pemuda' and negotiate. Tan Malaka, meanwhile, gloried in the violence and

⁶⁷³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 124-6.

⁶⁷⁴ Sjahrir, *Our Struggle*, pp. 17-37.

revolutionary enthusiasm that he witnessed in Surabaya, and saw in the ‘pemuda’ the basis for a revolutionary army, requiring only organization and discipline to succeed.⁶⁷⁵ Sjahrir feared that permitting armed groups to engage in violence against foreigners would soon cause the revolution to spiral into intra-ethnic conflict among Indonesians themselves, not least between Christians and Muslims. Tan Malaka had no such fear, believing that the process of revolutionary resistance would itself forge bonds among the people, as they fought for a common objective against an oppressive foreign power.

We have also seen that Tan Malaka’s conception of the international situation was very different from Sjahrir’s. He did not believe that Indonesia existed within the sphere of Anglo-American hegemony. In his view, imperial power was declining everywhere, creating room for anti-colonial struggles like the Indonesian one. He stated in his revolutionary writings that the fate of the Indonesian Republic was *not* ultimately dependent on other powers, only on the Indonesian people themselves: so long as the ‘rakyat’ were united in their will to fight, they would win.⁶⁷⁶ No amount of international pressure or intervention could contain the Republic once the people had been convinced it was worth struggling for, especially in a country like Indonesia, whose size and climate favoured guerilla fighters over foreign troops.

Tan Malaka’s complaint against the policy of ‘diplomasi’ had two elements. The first was that it was less likely to secure independence than ‘perjuangan’, because he believed negotiators would settle on a compromise, like the ‘autonomy’ under the Dutch crown being offered by van Mook, the chief Dutch negotiator.⁶⁷⁷ The second issue was that a deal struck with the Dutch would likely permit the re-entry of foreign capital into Indonesia.⁶⁷⁸ Partially Tan Malaka feared this outcome because of his socialism, which made him hostile to any private ownership of industry. But he also had a more fundamental complaint, which was that Indonesia would never be able to industrialize if it did not have total control over its economic policy. If foreign capital was too

⁶⁷⁵ Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, pp. 283-4.

⁶⁷⁶ Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, pp. 68-9.

⁶⁷⁷ Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, p. 46.

⁶⁷⁸ The political manifesto of 1945 committed the Republic’s government to respecting foreign property. Tan Malaka, *Thesis*, pp. 48-9.

strong, then it would create a powerful interest that would suppress any attempts to set-up heavy industry, since these would constitute a threat to producers in advanced economies.⁶⁷⁹ Foreign owners would also use their influence to prevent the levying of export or import duties, which would in turn hamper the government's ability to raise revenue and so limit its ability to invest in manufacturing.⁶⁸⁰ All industrial profits, meanwhile, would be drained overseas.⁶⁸¹ In *Rentjana Ekonomi* and *Moeslihat*, he argued that heavy industry was necessary both to develop the Indonesian economy beyond its one-sided agricultural base and to produce the armaments needed to defend the Republic.⁶⁸² Domination by foreign capital risked reproducing the situation of colonialism, where Indonesia would remain a poor, agricultural country unable to determine its own fate. It is worth noting that any criticisms of industrial civilization as a threat to the life of the village, like those found in Tan Malaka's early works, had been dropped by this point in his life. By 1945 it seemed clear to him that the only future for Indonesia was as an industrial country.

Tan Malaka characterized the advocates of 'diplomasi' - Hatta and Sukarno, as well as Sjahrir - as typical of the Indonesian 'bourgeoisie', who capitulated all too easily to foreign capitalists. Hatta, he claimed, was a suspiciously bourgeois 'expert' in economics, who had been willing to see Indonesia reduced to the status of an agricultural colony of Japan as part of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.⁶⁸³ In his view, the Republican leadership wanted Indonesian independence but lacked the courage to create a new form of socialist, industrial society. The road of 'diplomasi', he believed, would likely leave Indonesia as a 'semi-colony' of British, Dutch and American capital.⁶⁸⁴ Tan Malaka's experiences in China in the 1920s and 1930s may have influenced his position regarding the necessity of keeping out foreign capital, since China had retained formal independence but lacked economic autonomy, which he saw as tantamount to being a colony. Thus, he stressed the importance of combining national liberation with a social revolution, entailing the nationalization of industry. The former would be meaningless without the latter.

⁶⁷⁹ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 114-5.

⁶⁸⁰ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 118.

⁶⁸¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 161

⁶⁸² Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi*, pp. 224-5; Tan Malaka, *Muslihat*, p. 29.

⁶⁸³ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 154.

⁶⁸⁴ Tan Malaka, *Politik*, pp. 114-5.

Tan Malaka's critique of the exponents of 'diplomasi' was not entirely fair. Hatta and Sukarno all shared his socialist distaste for foreign capital, which they too believed had siphoned wealth from the Indies and prevented industrialization.⁶⁸⁵ Sukarno and Hatta had been arguing this since the 1920s. Sjahrir was, like Tan Malaka, committed to the state-led industrialization of Indonesia, and said as much in *Perdjoeangan Kita*. Where they diverged from Tan Malaka was their refusal to endorse the view that no industrialization would ever be possible if any concession was granted to foreign capital. For Hatta and Sukarno, achieving independence was the priority. The immediate nationalization of industry would be counterproductive if it prevented Indonesia becoming a sovereign nation at all, which it could do by making foreign powers more determined to crush the Republic. The social revolution would be impossible if the national revolution failed, so all 'social' measures that jeopardized independence ought to be avoided, or postponed until after the Republic was secure.

Tan Malaka responded to these counter-arguments in his prison writings after 1946. Keeping informed while in prison, he was able to observe the progress, or lack thereof, of the revolution that he was no longer involved in. In these works, he denied that 'diplomasi' was necessary to secure national independence. In his view, the prioritization of negotiation had resulted only in losses of territory and resources. The Republic's leaders had sacrificed the social revolution for no gain at all. In *Gerpolek*, written in 1948, he distinguished two 'seasons' of the revolution: the first phase had begun in August 1945 and ended with his arrest in March 1946; the second phase ran from then until the present (1948).⁶⁸⁶ The first phase, he said, had been a period of 'mass action', when the 'murba' had mobilized to pursue total 'kemerdekaan'.⁶⁸⁷ The second phase was characterized by 'diplomasi', when the professional politicians had taken over and attempted to negotiate a settlement with the Dutch.⁶⁸⁸ In the early part of the revolution there had

⁶⁸⁵ See Mohammad Hatta, 'Drainage', first published in *Hindia Poetra*, 6 (1923), reprinted in Noer (ed.), *Mohammad Hatta, Portrait of a Patriot*, pp. 27-35, at pp. 27-8; Sukarno condemned Indonesia's domination by foreign capital in 'Nationalism, Islamism and Marxism' (1926), reprinted in Sukarno, *Under the Banner of Revolution*, Vol. 1 (Jakarta: Publication Committee, 1966), pp. 1-22, at p. 19.

⁶⁸⁶ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 11; This chronology is repeated in *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 132.

⁶⁸⁷ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 11.

⁶⁸⁸ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 12.

been an astonishingly high revolutionary spirit among the people, and Republican forces had rapidly seized several cities. Workers had gained control of the mines, factories and plantations.⁶⁸⁹ Since 'diplomasi' had begun, however, the Republic had lost most of its territory and had returned the means of production to foreign owners, as part of the Linggajati and Renville agreements, agreed in November 1946 and January 1948 respectively.⁶⁹⁰ While the Persatuan Perjuangan had united the bulk of revolutionary forces in early 1946, the various parties now stood divided.⁶⁹¹

This only proved, to his mind, the folly of negotiation. The revolution needed to return to its roots and recommence a strategy of broad-based resistance through guerilla warfare. The precedent of the American War of Independence showed that such a strategy, in the long run, could overcome a distant colonial power.⁶⁹² The successes of Diponegoro, Tuanku Imam and Tengku Umar were proof that Indonesians could defeat Dutch troops.⁶⁹³ In a 'people's war' the Indonesians had decisive advantages: a larger population and knowledge of the terrain; Dutch soldiers, meanwhile, were demoralized and far from home.⁶⁹⁴ The Netherlands itself was facing bankruptcy.⁶⁹⁵ *Gerpolek* ended with a renewed call for the nationalization of industry and a restatement of the view that struggle was the only means to '100% merdeka'.⁶⁹⁶

In the third volume of *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, completed in October 1948, Tan Malaka observed further signs of revolutionary decay. The anti-colonial movement was now dangerously divided, as demonstrated by the PKI's recent uprising at Madiun. Tan Malaka condemned this, because he believed the PKI ought to be fighting the Dutch rather than the government, and because Madiun was evidently a poor choice of place to begin a Communist uprising, lacking a strong proletarian presence. Musso, the PKI leader, had repeated his folly of 1926 by launching another 'putsch'.⁶⁹⁷ Tan Malaka also asserted in his memoir that the revolution continued to suffer

⁶⁸⁹ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, pp. 16-17.

⁶⁹⁰ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁹¹ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁹² Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 25.

⁶⁹³ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 33.

⁶⁹⁴ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, p. 71.

⁶⁹⁵ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, pp. 71-2.

⁶⁹⁶ Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek*, pp. 133-8.

⁶⁹⁷ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 10.

from bad leadership. Sukarno wanted the support of the people, but was not fighting on their behalf. His strategy of negotiation suited a small circle of Indonesian elites, who stood to gain political power, but entirely failed the 'murba' class, who would continue to be exploited by foreign capitalists under the government's plans. Tan Malaka saw his own arrest as proof that the government was anti-mass action and effectively anti-revolutionary.⁶⁹⁸ Sukarno and Hatta had been forced into proclaiming independence by the 'pemuda'. They had shown no belief in the project for Indonesian 'merdeka' since. They were 'intellectuals' rather than revolutionaries, who had betrayed the early promise of the revolution through their disastrous policy of negotiation.⁶⁹⁹

In his most damning passages, Tan Malaka declared that the kind of independence settlement being sought by Sukarno and Hatta was identical to allowing the Netherlands to re-colonize Indonesia, because the country would be divided under the federal structure being proposed by the Dutch, and the influence of foreign capital would prevent the operation of government in Indonesia's national interest. He lamented that Sukarno had not sided with the Persatuan Perjuangan when he had the chance in 1946, a course which might have resulted in '100% merdeka'.⁷⁰⁰ The decision to arrest the strongest advocates of 'perjuangan', himself included, had been a tragedy for the revolution.

Ultimately, Tan Malaka's condemnation of 'diplomasi' was a repetition of his arguments made in the 1920s against a 'reformist' path to Indonesian independence. During the revolution, as in his early writings, he argued that Indonesia's polarized class structure, which lacked a large indigenous bourgeoisie, meant that only the working masses could lead a revolution. Because the revolution would be a 'mass action' revolution of the workers and peasants, it would naturally entail various socialist policies, including the nationalization of industry and the redistribution of land. These were consistent points of Tan Malaka's revolutionary programmes from 1926 to 1948. In the third volume of *Dari Penjara ke Penjara* he highlighted this consistency, claiming that his politics had not fundamentally changed since *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'*. He still believed

⁶⁹⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 77-9.

⁶⁹⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 85, 94-5, 124-6.

⁷⁰⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 210.

the Dutch were a weak colonial power who could be defeated by a popular revolution.⁷⁰¹ The failure of the Republican leaders was that they did not understand the strength of the Indonesian ‘murba’ and overestimated the power of the imperialists.

Characterizing Tan Malaka’s Revolutionary Writings

The scholarship on Tan Malaka has cast his 1945-8 works in two ways. One characterization, first put forward in detail by Benedict Anderson in *Java in a Time of Revolution* (1972), has been to see Tan Malaka as the figure most in sympathy with the spirit of the ‘pemuda revolution’ of 1945-6. For Anderson, Tan Malaka’s Marxist politics, which emphasised the necessity of social revolution, allowed him to channel the radicalism of the ‘pemuda’ for a few brief months of 1946. The Sjahrir government, by contrast, was wary of the ‘pemuda’ and failed to articulate a politics that appealed to them.⁷⁰² A second line of argument, proposed by Rudolf Mrázek, has seen Tan Malaka as a ‘Minangkabau’ thinker, who polemicized during the revolution against the ‘Hindu-Javanese’ and ‘mystical’ style of Sukarno.⁷⁰³

The second interpretation, given the survey of Tan Malaka’s revolutionary writings offered in this chapter, seems implausible. Tan Malaka did not criticise Sukarno as a bearer of Javanese culture or as an exemplar of ‘backward’ Indonesian thinking more generally. Rather, he saw him as a member of the Indonesian bourgeoisie, a class created by Dutch colonial power. In his view, Sukarno’s revolutionary timidity was not a legacy of Hindu-Javanese servility, but a result of his proximity to imperial power. He attacked Sukarno as ‘Engineer Sukarno’, that is as an educated and so elite member of colonial society.⁷⁰⁴ Sukarno’s capitulation to Japanese imperialism was proof of his ‘bourgeois’ nature. He could talk, but he lacked the courage to fight. The proof that Tan Malaka’s attacks on Sukarno were not intended as slurs on Javanese culture is that he dismissed Mohammad Hatta, who was Minangkabau, in exactly the same terms. In his eyes, Hatta was also an over-educated middle-class Indonesian who was too impressed with

⁷⁰¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 151.

⁷⁰² Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, pp. 281-3.

⁷⁰³ Mrázek, ‘Tan Malaka: A Political Personality’s Structure of Experience’, pp. 28, 39.

⁷⁰⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 75-8.

colonial power. Both he and Sukarno were too far from the 'murba' to appreciate their strength. 'Dr Hatta' shared the same flaws as 'Engineer Sukarno'.

This line of criticism of Sukarno and Hatta, however, to some extent falsified arguments Tan Malaka himself had made in *Massa Actie* about the weakness, or non-existence, of the Indonesian bourgeoisie. In that work, he had claimed that Dutch colonialism was so primitive that it had failed to create a class of indigenous intermediaries, with whom it could strike some kind of bargain, granting formal independence but retaining power through the influence of its capital. In this regard, he saw the Dutch as being much like the Spanish in the Philippines, who had been violently overthrown at the end of the nineteenth century, because there was no indigenous 'moderate' class to whom they could transfer a degree of power while retaining a hegemonic influence, as the British had done in India. But the events after 1945, according to Tan Malaka's own analysis, showed that the Indonesian revolution *was* taking a reformist path. It was being led by the Indonesian bourgeoisie that he claimed didn't exist. Indonesian society was evidently more complex than he had presumed, because according to his own arguments the politics of 'diplomasi' ought to have been impossible. There should have been no social basis for it. In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, written much earlier in 1922, he had confidently asserted that all revolutions became more radical the longer they went on. Cromwell had taken the lead of the English Revolution from more moderate critics of the king; the Jacobins had seized authority in the French Revolution from the Girondists; the Bolsheviks had overtaken the social revolutionaries in 1917.⁷⁰⁵ The Indonesian revolution was failing to conform to this pattern. It had begun radically, then became more moderate as it went on. History had stopped making sense. This, in part, explains the perplexed anger of his prison writings. Indonesia had all the prerequisites for a radical national revolution - and the events of 1945-6 had shown that there was the appetite for it - but it was inexplicably pursuing a 'moderate' and bourgeois path that was entirely unsuitable, and would produce what he considered a disastrous outcome. His gift of prophecy, supposedly guaranteed by his mastery of Marxism, seemed to have failed.

⁷⁰⁵ Tan Malaka, *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, pp. 50-1.

If Tan Malaka's class-based analysis of Indonesia could not explain the emergence of 'diplomasi', it also struggled to make sense of the 'pemuda'. How could he account for the fact that the 'pemuda' were igniting revolution in Indonesia, when they were not even an orthodox social class in Marx's terms? 'Youth', like 'the people', did not refer to any relationship to the means of production. Until at least 1943, when he composed *Madilog*, Tan Malaka had believed the industrial labourers would form the core of Indonesia's revolutionary army. The initial stimulus to political consciousness would come from above, through education in dialectical materialism by learned Marxist cadres, not from below, through spontaneous acts of political insurrection.

At times Tan Malaka ascribed a 'proletarian' outlook to the 'pemuda', and he clearly assumed that they would favour a socialist revolution, but there was no Marxian basis for this belief.⁷⁰⁶ They could equally, as Sjahrir argued, be anarchistic or Fascistic in their political inclinations, like the paramilitary youth in Nazi Germany or Japan. At other points, Tan Malaka dropped any pretense of seeing the 'pemuda' in a materialist vein, and compared them to the old *satria* warrior caste of pre-colonial Indonesia.⁷⁰⁷

Just as he slipped from 'kaum proletar' to 'Rakyat' in his early writings, in his revolutionary texts Tan Malaka frequently elided 'pemuda' with 'murba'. The last term, which was an invention of his, simply meant poor workers, and could describe both industrial labourers and peasants. The 'murba' were not a product of specific developments of the forces and relations of production, but were presented as an entirely ahistorical class. In the third volume of *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*, he spoke of a foreign class of Hindus exploiting the indigenous Indonesian 'murba' around the first century AD.⁷⁰⁸ The all-embracing nature of the 'murba' meant that class struggle in the Indonesian case was near identical with anti-colonial resistance, since the 'murba' (plus the numerically insignificant petty bourgeoisie) made up 99% of the Indonesian population.⁷⁰⁹ This fact, however, only made it more implausible that the vast masses of the Indonesian 'murba' could have submitted so meekly to the leadership of a handful of bourgeois

⁷⁰⁶ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, pp. 117-9.

⁷⁰⁷ Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi*, p. 232.

⁷⁰⁸ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 69.

⁷⁰⁹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 152

politicians, who were acting against the interests of the masses. Yet, this is what Tan Malaka believed had happened after 1946.

If Tan Malaka was able to channel the enthusiasm of the ‘pemuda’, as Anderson argued, it was only because he already had a vision of Indonesian society as highly polarized and so ready for a radical revolutionary upsurge. In the 1920s he believed the proletariat, once properly educated, would be the trigger of this uprising. After 1945, he simply exchanged the role of the labourers for that of the ‘youth’. But he did this without developing any convincing theory of why the ‘pemuda’ should be in the vanguard of revolution, or how they had appeared so rapidly. The proletarians were a class that had been developing in Indonesia since the nineteenth century, who had material reasons for opposing colonialism, because the operation of Dutch imperialism denied them the rewards of their labour. The ‘pemuda’ had no such material basis for their struggle, and no obvious reason for acting collectively at all. The only way out of this problem was to imagine that the ‘pemuda’ were in fact proletarians, but they had evidently not emerged from industrial forms of organization and struggle. They had been created by the military training of the Japanese. As Tan Malaka himself admitted, the ‘pemuda’ based in the Javanese interior had the greatest success, not those active in the industrial cities like Surabaya. This made them seem more like peasant guerillas than a workers’ army.

The fact that Tan Malaka lent so heavily on terms like ‘pemuda’ and ‘murba’ during the revolution suggests that he had to some extent distanced himself from formal Marxist terminology. At no point did he describe the Indonesian revolution as a ‘Communist’ one. Instead he spoke of the ‘revolusi sosial’ (‘social revolution’) and ‘100% merdeka’, never of a ‘proletarian dictatorship’ or an Indonesian Soviet Republic. He expressed sympathy with revolutions overseas which were not explicitly Communist, like those in India and Burma.

He was, of course, no longer a member of the PKI during the revolution, and so the creation of his own political vocabulary was part of his attempt to build a new movement around himself.⁷¹⁰

⁷¹⁰ Harry Poeze points out that Tan Malaka downplayed his Communism during the revolution, see Poeze, ‘The Cold War in Indonesia’, p. 499.

The end-point of this process was the formation of the Partai Murba in 1948. Yet he nonetheless retained many of the trappings of Marxist analysis. He continued to talk of the 'kaum proletar', the 'kaum tani' (the peasantry) and the 'bourgeoisie'. He relied on class analysis to explain 'diplomasi' and his belief that the 'murba' were a class explained his confidence in the revolution's likely success, due to their numerical preponderance. His conviction in historical materialism remained undiminished during the revolution and underpinned his certainty that the Indonesian revolution would triumph, and that socialism would overcome capitalism globally.

Tan Malaka, though, had always been a somewhat idiosyncratic Marxist. His loose application of Marxist terms and his invention of new, non-materialist ones during the revolution only extended the innovations of his early writings. What is striking about his 1945-9 texts is how easily he moved from Western, orthodox Marxist examples to Indonesian ones in the course of making his arguments. When looking for models for the Indonesian revolution, he reached not only for the paradigmatic Western revolutions of 1789 and 1917, but also on the struggle of Diponegoro. 'Aslia', he imagined, would be an imitation of the Soviet Union, but also a regeneration of the Majapahit and Srivijaya Empires. His projected communal property relations of socialist Indonesia were in part be a response to the needs of modern industrial production, the benefits of which he believed had been demonstrated in Russia, but also represented a regeneration of historical patterns of ownership in the 'desa'.⁷¹¹ The principle of popular sovereignty embodied in an Indonesian Republic was a rejection of the arbitrary rule of colonial government, but also a repetition of the Minangkabau principle that all rulers derived their authority from the people and were bound by the law.⁷¹² Thus, he saw no essential conflict between 'Indonesia Asli' and the Indonesian Republic, or 'Aslia'. The operation of historical materialism was destroying the negative legacies of Indonesian history, such as feudalism and colonialism, but restoring the positive aspects of indigenous Indonesian civilization. The future would combine the best of the old and the new.

⁷¹¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 3, p. 48.

⁷¹² Tan Malaka, *Politik*, p. 84.

In the same vein, Tan Malaka increasingly came to see himself as both a modernist political scientist and a kind of revolutionary prophet. He is supposed to have said to one supporter, ‘Jesus Christ left the Bible behind, Mohamad the Koran, and I leave only *Madilog*. This is no work of propaganda, but sets down a way of thinking, an approach to and analysis of all questions. *Madilog* is a guide; my death is not a serious matter, for *Madilog* exists.’⁷¹³ In the second volume of *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara* he described an interview with a British police interrogator in Hong Kong, where he declared ‘My voice will be louder from the grave than it ever was while I walked the earth.’⁷¹⁴ Tan Malaka seemed to see himself in the same way that he saw the religious prophets, that is as a political liberator who could lead the masses against injustice and oppression. His own persecution only added to the sense of similarity. Despite his faith in the inexorable dynamics of historical materialism, he nonetheless believed that heroic leaders were necessary instruments of historical change: Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Cromwell, Diponegoro, Rizal, Lenin. Tan Malaka believed he was the inheritor of this great and varied tradition. His follower Muhammad Yamin agreed. In his text *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, Yamin compared him to Rousseau, Voltaire, Lenin, Rizal, Washington, Jefferson, Kemal and Sun-Yat Sen.⁷¹⁵ For Tan Malaka, the tragedy of the Indonesian revolution was that it was being led by figures who had no grasp of history, while the leader who was best able to realize Indonesia’s historical destiny languished in jail. Ruth McVey’s summary seems apt: he was ‘a revolutionary exile whose train to the Finland Station never departed.’⁷¹⁶

⁷¹³ This quotation was remembered by Bujung Siregar, who was interviewed by Harry Poeze in 1980. See Harry A. Poeze, *Verguisd en vergeten. Tan Malaka, de linkse beweging en de Indonesische revolutie, 1945-1949* (Leiden: KITLV, 2007), vol. 2, p. 1046.

⁷¹⁴ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 49.

⁷¹⁵ Yamin, *Tan Malaka: Bapak Republik Indonesia*, pp. 2, 9.

⁷¹⁶ Ruth McVey, ‘*Verguisd en vergeten: Tan Malaka, de linkse beweging en de Indonesische Revolutie, 1945-1949* (*Reviled and Forgotten. Tan Malaka, the Leftist Movement, and the Indonesian Revolution, 1945-1949*) by Harry A. Poeze’, *Indonesia* No. 86 (October 2008), pp. 171-4, at p. 173.

Conclusion

To many of his followers, Muhammad Yamin among them, Tan Malaka was a dazzling figure, a person so unlike anyone they had met that he could be compared only to figures from the past: the heroes and wise men of Indonesian folklore, or the vaunted revolutionaries and philosophers of the West. He appeared to combine the romance of a ‘scarlet pimpernel’ with the intellectual rigour and organizational discipline of a hardened revolutionary. When he returned to Indonesian public life in 1946, he seemed like a man entirely out of place and time, an astonishing new arrival, a ‘stranger and a legend’ in Anderson’s phrase.⁷¹⁷ In contemporary Indonesia, the legend of Tan Malaka has re-emerged in recent years, after its long suppression during the Suharto era. The face and quotations of Tan Malaka now adorn T-shirts and there has been a flurry of republications of his writings. When Harry Poeze claimed to have discovered his grave in 2012, it was a major national news event, triggering a round of debate over whether Tan Malaka ought to be honoured as a national hero or condemned for his Communism.⁷¹⁸ What has not been disputed is his

⁷¹⁷ Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, p. 277.

⁷¹⁸ In 2014 Harry Poeze was prevented from giving a talk on Tan Malaka in Surabaya after protests organized by local Islamist groups, see Kennial Caroline Laia, ‘Time for Indonesia to Face PKI Past’, *Jakarta Globe*, 16 February 2014, accessed at jakartaglobe.id/news/time-for-indonesia-to-face-pki-past/ on 1 September 2017. See also Mardani,

importance as a figure in Indonesian political and intellectual history. The ongoing controversy around his legacy only underlines his continued significance. In 2016, Tan Malaka's extended family sought the return of his remains to West Sumatra, citing the necessity of keeping alive 'Tan Malaka's thinking, experience, ideas, mission and vision'.⁷¹⁹

This thesis has been an attempt to see past the legend of Tan Malaka and to understand his political thought by contextualizing it within the debates of his own time: on the nature of the Indonesian past and the country's potential for revolution; on imperialism and the post-colonial future of Asia; on the relationship between Islam, capitalism, and Communism; on the reformation of Indonesian thinking; and on the appropriate strategy and goals for the Indonesian revolution. By applying a methodology of contextualizing ideas, the chapters above have enabled a fuller understanding of Tan Malaka's political thought, revealing where he engaged with and deviated from his contemporaries, and how he used and adapted various ideas that were then in circulation. This conclusion will develop further the central arguments of the thesis and point to its implications.

Tan Malaka's Political Language

Tan Malaka's style of political writing, his language of politics, has been an object of analysis in the chapters above. This thesis began with the claim that Tan Malaka embodied the globalization of ideas which characterized Indonesian political thought during the 'national awakening' period. A study of any aspect of his thought – on history, religion, or revolution – reveals the combination of ideas from varied sources, from Marxist materialism to Islamic morality, sometimes in tension, sometimes run together without any apparent strain. In places, he treated Western political thought as a body of ideas outside of and in opposition to Indonesian and Islamic thought, that is as a standard against which to judge all other ideas. His engagement with Marxism, for example, led

'Tan Malaka, seorang komunis atau nasionalis', *Merdeka.com*, 28 March 2017, accessed at <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/tan-malaka-seorang-komunis-atau-nasionalis.html> on 1 September 2017.

⁷¹⁹ 'Tan Malaka's family want to move hero's body to W. Sumatra', *The Jakarta Post*, 23 December 2016, accessed at www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/12/23/tan-malakas-family-want-to-move-heros-body-to-w-sumatra.html on 1 September 2017.

him to dissociate himself from certain ‘indigenous’ or Islamic concepts, such as the institution of kingship or the respect for priestly authority, which came to seem backward and oppressive to him when judged by the ‘universal’ Marxist criteria of class conflict and class oppression. His readings in formal logic and materialist philosophy made him similarly critical of what he came to see as the ‘mystical’ and irrational aspects of ‘Eastern’ philosophy and religion.

Just as often, however, he moved from a Western register to an indigenous or Islamic one without any obvious difficulty. In *Semangat Moeda* he employed the terms ‘klassen’ (‘class’) and ‘kasta’ (‘caste’) side by side. In *Toendoek kepada kekoeasaan*, he used the words ‘proletar’, ‘kromo’ and ‘rakyat’ interchangeably. In *Sovjet atau parlement?*, he openly compared the Bolsheviks to the Prophet Muhammad, and spoke of the sinful lust (‘nafsu’) of the capitalists. This syncretism was also visible in the manner in which he presented himself. He saw himself as both a latter-day prophet and a political scientist, an enlightened critic of Indonesian culture and the man determined to restore the best of the country’s original ways of life, and reinstate the primordial borders of ‘Indonesia Asli’. He believed he had sufficient expertise in Western learning to reform the deficiencies of Indonesian methods of thought, but did not consider himself an ‘intellectual’, in the style of Sukarno or Hatta, cut off from indigenous life. He imagined that he could channel Diponegoro and Marx simultaneously.

Proof of how smoothly he moved between idioms was the speech he gave when Sukarno visited the coalmine he was working at in Bayah in 1945. Intent on proving that it would be better for Indonesia to fight for independence than to receive it as a gift from the Japanese, he began by conjuring an image ‘a cowardly village herdsman who gained fame for his bravery after slaying a tiger with only his machete. His courage developed when he saw the king of the jungle attacking his buffalo. It was the defense of his rights, of something he already held, that changed his cowardice into bravery.’ Then, without pause, he turned to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which he claimed showed ‘that the principal cause of the decline of the Roman empire was that most of the workers in Rome were slaves. These slaves had no interest in the livestock, tools, and work, and production fell as a consequence. The decline in production brought a corresponding decline in the defense of the state. From these two examples I drew the conclusion

that we human beings have a greater will to defend our rights when they are real, tangible, and in our hands. Possessed of the right to independence, we would struggle to the death in its defense.’⁷²⁰ This was not intended to be a high-brow reference: he was addressing an audience of coal miners and using language he believed would resonate with them. Gibbon was just as apposite as the parable of the villager and the tiger.

He alternated languages in a similarly untroubled manner. In *Madilog*, when describing the scientific method, he wrote that ‘Sains itu ialah *organization of facts*, penyusunan segala bukti dan *simplification by generalisation*, penyederhanaan dengan generalisasi bukti’, giving the English phrase first before offering the parallel words in Malay, without any pause or formal marker of translation.⁷²¹

Tan Malaka believed his synthetic political language had enormous potential. The goals which he set for himself were extremely ambitious. He believed he could use his analysis to advance the cause of Indonesian liberation, help create a socialist society, and promote the formation of a new Southeast Asian regional state. These were bold political goals in themselves, but at times his imagination reached an almost Utopian level of optimism, as when he foresaw a future of ‘independence, culture, and happiness for all the nations of the earth’ in *Naar de ‘Republiek Indonesia’*, or when he dreamed of a world composed of peaceful socialist super-states in *Dari Pendjara ke Pendjara*. It is tempting to write these off as idle fantasies. Anthony Reid, in this vein, has described Aslia as a ‘fantastic pre-war dream’, which only proved how out of touch Tan Malaka was with public opinion during the revolution.⁷²² But the fact that Tan Malaka held these ambitions reveals something about what was thought to be possible during the 1920s and 1940s, when he composed his political writings. The tumultuous decade following the First World War and the explosive years of the Japanese occupation and its aftermath were times of expansive political visions, when the future of Asia, and the world itself, seemed to be open and waiting to be reshaped. The titles chosen by contemporary authors reflect this sense of motion and

⁷²⁰ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, Vol. 2, p. 174.

⁷²¹ Tan Malaka, *Madilog*, p. 84.

⁷²² Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution*, p. 88.

refashioning: M.N. Roy's *India in a Transition Stage* (1921) as much as Tan Malaka's *Naar de 'Republiek Indonesia'* ('Towards the "Indonesian Republic"', 1925) and *Semangat Muda* ('The Young Spirit'). Though in the end it was the nationalism of Sukarno that determined the form of the post-colonial Indonesian Republic, rather than the grander conception of a socialist Asia, as espoused by Tan Malaka, it is important for historians to show that narrow nationalist visions of politics were not the only ones in circulation. Nor were they the inevitable *telos* of the Indonesian 'national awakening': Tan Malaka was seen as a plausible leader of the Indonesian revolution as late as 1946.

Tan Malaka and Marxism

Tan Malaka was one of many writers who carried Marx's vision for a new, socialist world into Asia in the twentieth century. Like other Asian Marxists who converted to Communism after the First World War, such as his sometime contacts Ho Chi Minh and M.N. Roy, he was attracted to Marxism as a system of ideas through which he believed he could understand a complex, fast-changing, and often distressing world. Marxism provided a range of concepts that promised to illuminate the inner workings of history and politics, and offered concrete proposals for remedying the injustices of imperial rule and colonial capitalism. Although Marxism came to Asia phrased in the pure and apparently universal terms of Western science, when Asians like Tan Malaka, Roy and Ho Chi Minh came to apply this conceptual vocabulary, their Marxism was filtered through their own particular intellectual formations, and was altered as it was articulated new languages and for new audiences. This process inevitably entailed innovations and deviations from a doctrinaire Marxist path. Tan Malaka's greatest single departure from Marx was in his insistence on the importance of race for political organization, derived in part from his readings in ethnography rather than Marxism.⁷²³ Although his life was cosmopolitan, moving from city to city, and from jail to jail, his thoughts always returned to his home and to his imagined nation. It was a home seen through its absence, however, in Shanghai, Amoy, Sionching, and Hong Kong. It was also a home that was only comprehensible to a figure like Tan Malaka: uniting the Malay peninsula

⁷²³ He describes having read the ethnographer Alfred Haddon in *From Jail to Jail*, vol. 2, p. 38 and in *Madilog* at p. 395.

and the entire Southeast Asian archipelago into a single state made sense to him only because of his time spent in Singapore and Manila, where he observed and felt kinship with other *bumiputera* peoples.⁷²⁴

Tan Malaka's conception of a Federal Indonesian Republic and Aslia shows that he believed ties of 'bangsa' were fundamental, and Marxist class struggle, based on conflict of groups defined by their relation to the means of production, was a means to an end, an instrument to achieve statehood for the colonized 'proletarians' of Southeast Asia. While this stopped short of the fully-fledged cosmopolitanism of Marx and Engels, which sought the dissolution of all national borders as a necessary accompaniment to the abolition of class oppression, Tan Malaka nonetheless stands out as the most radical proponent of regional integration in Indonesia during his lifetime, going far beyond the schemes of Yamin, let alone the narrower conception of the Indonesian nation-state held by Hatta.

Tan Malaka's vision of Aslia reveals a rootedness in Southeast Asia, and a prioritization of the region in his political thinking. His focus on Asia and the coming Asian revolutions contrasts dramatically with the outlook of European Marxists, who retained a Eurocentrism in their political thought. Tan Malaka believed that Asians would liberate themselves and organize their own political set-ups, reaching the exalted historical epoch of Communism by their own efforts. This is not at all what Trotsky, for example, envisioned when he argued in 1919 that Europe would be the driver of colonial liberation:

The workers and peasants not only of Annam, Algiers, and Bengal, but also of Persia and Armenia, will gain their opportunity of independent existence only when the workers of England and France have overthrown Lloyd George and Clemenceau and taken State power into their own hands. Even now the struggle in the more developed colonies is more than the struggle for national liberation; it is assuming an explicitly social character. If capitalist Europe forcibly dragged the backward sections of the world into the capitalist whirlpool, then socialist Europe will come to the aid of liberated colonies with its technology, its

⁷²⁴ His extension of the boundaries of 'Aslia' into Burma, Thailand and Vietnam in *Madilog*, countries of which he knew little, had its basis in his belief that these countries had once been populated by the same racial stock of 'Indonesians'.

organization, its spiritual forces, in order to facilitate their transition to a planned and organized socialist economy.

Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia! The hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will also be the hour of your own liberation!⁷²⁵

Tan Malaka is a fascinating figure because he offers an Indonesian vision of Marxism of comparable ambition to that of Trotsky and the more familiar European Marxists. Far from believing that political activity in the metropole was essential to revolution in Indonesia, he argued that the Dutch were a nation of ‘pirates’ and ‘small traders’ who would never make anything happen on their own. Pride of place in his imagined pantheon of heroes in ‘Indonesia Merdeka’ is given to Jose Rizal, rather than any Western political figure. In his view, India and Indonesia were the likely triggers for revolution in Asia and potentially the world. Histories of Marxism ought to give greater prominence to Tan Malaka, not only as a sophisticated theorist in the Marxist tradition, but as an ambitious political philosopher who broke new ground in his application of Marxism to new contexts and in his development of novel arguments, most notably the case for Asia, which were made in part through a Marxist idiom.

Indonesian History and Global Intellectual History

What are the implications of this thesis for the various strands of secondary literature identified in the introduction? First, in terms of global intellectual history, the writings of Tan Malaka show the unevenness of the process of ‘mediation’ between intellectual cultures. It was not a straightforward matter of applying Marxist ideas to Indonesia, because these ideas were refashioned and synthesized with other political and moral vocabularies as they were applied. In Tan Malaka’s thought it is sometimes unclear where Marxism ends and Indonesian or Islamic thought begins. The interactions of indigenous and foreign ideologies produced tangled and sometimes surprising results. Much of this complexity can only be appreciated through a close study of language, specifically by focusing on how terms were translated, substituted or reworked from foreign languages into vernaculars. Some scholarship on non-Western political writers, which falls back

⁷²⁵ ‘Manifesto of the Communist international to the Workers of the World’, p. 43.

on English translations, lacks sensitivity to this dimension and so fails to capture the full nature of the process.⁷²⁶

Second, in relation to Indonesian history, this thesis has elaborated Tan Malaka's ideas more fully than other historians have done, by putting his writings, and those of his interlocutors, centre stage, rather than assimilating them into political or biographical narratives. Expounding Tan Malaka's thought in this manner provides a new perspective on central subjects of modern Indonesian history, such as Islamic reformism, the anti-colonial movement of the 1920s, and the Indonesian Revolution, by elucidating the arguments of one of the most important voices in those movements. The synthetic nature of Tan Malaka's political thought supports the argument of Takashi Shiraishi that the Indonesian 'national awakening' was an 'age in motion', a time when new ideas circulated rapidly through the Indies, and were combined in original ways, without solidifying into the unitary and opposed categories of Islam, Nationalism and Communism, which characterized the post-revolutionary political landscape. Tan Malaka was a remarkable individual, but his eclectic style of political thinking resembles that of several of his peers: the Islamic socialism of Tjokroaminoto; the millenarian Muslim Communism of Hadji Misbach; or the Islamic modernism of Hamka.

The eclecticism of Tan Malaka's writings owes much to the fact that he was an auto-didact. Unlike Hatta, Sjahrir or Sukarno, but in common with Tjokroaminoto and Hadji Misbach, he had no university education. He pieced together his political thought for himself, from whatever texts he could gather in bookshops and libraries. This did not mean that he was without insight, however, or that his language of politics was entirely idiosyncratic. As we have seen, he developed sophisticated theories of revolution and imperialism, and articulated his politics in a manner that resonated with other Indonesians, especially during the revolution when he gathered a large coalition around himself.

⁷²⁶ This is noticeable particularly in the 'global' literature on Marxism, such as David McLellan, 'Asian Communism' and Carrère d'Encausse and Schram, *Marxism and Asia*, both of which treat Marxist terms as universal and unchanging across languages.

The fact that syncretism of this kind was so widespread during the ‘national awakening’, a point appreciated by McVey as well as Shiraishi, shows that Indonesian political thought and global intellectual history are not in fact separate fields, but rather inform one another. Indonesian political writing during the ‘national awakening’ was global, not only for those who moved in Dutch ‘intellectual’ circles, like Hatta and Sjahrir, but even for more parochial figures like Hadji Misbach, or auto-didacts like Tan Malaka. As Anderson has argued, the extent of Indonesians’ engagement with foreign ideas reveals something important about Indonesian intellectual life, specifically how indigenous ‘linguistic and cultural universes’ had come to seem inadequate, in themselves, for understanding the world and advancing social progress by the twentieth century.⁷²⁷ It also tells us something about the ‘mobile’ ideas to which Indonesians were attracted. Tan Malaka’s political thought draws attention, in particular, to the capacious nature of Marxism. As Raymond Geuss has written, Marxism is a ‘large-scale theory’. These theories, he argues, have ‘a sufficiently open texture ... to be able to accommodate significant changes, even the refutation of some of their original component parts, while maintaining their identity.’⁷²⁸ The innovations of Tan Malaka, which he did not consider to be repudiations of a Marxist creed, but arguments made within a Marxist framework, confirm Geuss’s analysis.

Although Marx developed his theories in relation to European history and society, some of his terms, like ‘proletariat’, could be transliterated in Malay by Tan Malaka without difficulty, or substituted for a range of indigenous words, such as ‘kromo’, ‘kuli’, ‘murba’ or ‘rakyat’. Other terms resisted easy translation. When explaining Marxist economics in *Rentjana Ekonomi*, Tan Malaka wrote that ‘Karl Marx is the father of a theory, a well-known concept in the world of economics, known as “Nilai-Lebih” [added value]. In German it is *Mehrwert*; in English *Surplus-Value*. Forgive me if I translate it as “Nilai-Lebih”’.⁷²⁹ Unlike the term ‘proletariat’, he could not transliterate the Marxian original, or find an obvious Malay parallel term, but felt obliged to coin a new phrase, ‘Nilai-Lebih’, and give a range of translations from European languages. This suggests that while Indonesians already had concepts of an oppressed majority (the ‘kaum

⁷²⁷ Anderson, *Language and Power*, pp.124-5.

⁷²⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Reality and Its Dreams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 92.

⁷²⁹ Tan Malaka, *Rencana Ekonomi*, p. 143.

kromo'), they lacked a vocabulary of economic extraction. For 'surplus value' the original European terms were still required to explain and validate the analysis. The same was true for other Marxian concepts, such as the central terms of *Madilog* – 'materialisme', 'dialektika' and 'logika' – which Tan Malaka judged to be untranslatable. These terms could be explained in Malay, and combined into the neologism 'Madilog', but they could not be exchanged for vernacular words.

A close examination of Tan Malaka's writings reveals that he generally left scientific and philosophical terms untranslated, using English, German or Dutch words instead. Writing of 'psychology', 'subconscious', 'methode', 'geest' and 'Weltanschauung' lent him the aura of a learned philosopher and insightful social scientist. Despite not considering himself an 'intellectual', he used his mastery of foreign ideas to establish his political and philosophical expertise. His employment of European terms fit with his belief that Indonesia lacked an indigenous tradition of logical analysis and scientific investigation, necessitating the application of a Western conceptual vocabulary. His very notion of rationality was rendered in Western terms, as 'rasionalisme'. Tan Malaka's sense of his own importance derived from his conception of himself as a figure capable of bringing these foreign ideas to Indonesia and using them to accelerate the country's social and political progress. He was close enough to Western learning to master its ideas, but not so far from the 'rakyat' that he was unable to render those ideas in terms they could understand.

Tan Malaka's writings, and his engagement with foreign ideas and languages, tell a part of a larger story, that of Indonesia's integration with the wider world in the twentieth century. As material globalization gathered pace from the late-nineteenth century, and Indonesia became increasingly entwined with the world economy, the pace of the traffic of ideas likewise increased. The political thought of Tan Malaka, the *perantau* who never returned to his village, was one product, but he was not the only one. The writings of other Indonesian political figures of the 'national awakening' period would also repay extended analysis, of the kind offered in this thesis. Tan Malaka left an unusually large corpus of published works, but other authors also wrote extensively, such as Hatta or Hamka. The more scattered texts of Semaun, Darsono, Alimin, Hadji Agus Salim and Tjokroaminoto also deserve greater scrutiny than I have been able to offer in this

thesis, not to mention the writings of the earlier generation of writers, such as the Budi Utomo leader Soetomo and the Indische Partij partisans Tjipto Mangoenkoesomo and Ki Hadjar Dewantara. Beyond these more familiar names, the many newspapers of the ‘national awakening’ period, some of which have been cited throughout this thesis, where articles were often uncredited or written under pen names, represent a vast source on Indonesian political thinking which has yet to be fully tapped.

The history of Indonesian political thought has generally not been a primary concern among historians of Indonesia. The drama of the political events from 1900 to 1950, which resulted in the creation of the Indonesian nation state, has tended to dominate historians’ attention. For Tan Malaka, as for other Indonesian political figures, the focus of historians on high political narratives has tended to crowd out extended discussion of ideas. Thus far, the ‘global’ turn in intellectual history has also ignored Indonesia, focusing instead on India.⁷³⁰ This thesis has shown, however, that Indonesia during the ‘national awakening’ period offers fertile territory for global intellectual history. Tan Malaka’s life of ‘up and down’ helps us appreciate the ‘age in motion’ more clearly, seeing it not only as a time of political ferment, but an era of experimentation, synthesis, and innovation in ideas.

⁷³⁰ See, for example, Shruti Kapila (ed.), *An Intellectual History for India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi’s Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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