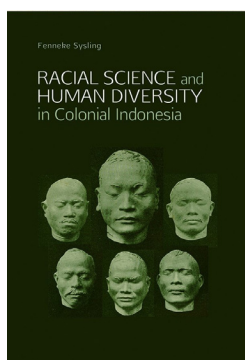


BOOK REVIEW

***Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia***

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This book which entitles ‘Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia’ was written by Fenneke Sysling, a historian of science and Colonialism. This book is published in 2016 by NUS Press, National University of Singapore, Singapore. This book provides an exposure of Western thinkers, especially in the field of physical anthropology, in mapping out the existing races in Indonesia. Towards this mission, the Colonial scientists faced many obstacles in both technical and non-technical aspects. Here, technical obstacle is more related to administrative matters and the practice in the field, such as acquiring permission to access the area where research would be undertaken. This area can be limited due to security issues in the Colonial territories. Therefore, these physical anthropologists commonly undertook the investigations in some structures and infrastructures under the Colonial’s rule. And for the nontechnical the obstacles are related to the problems or difficulties in explaining and revealing the ‘truth’ of race which is acceptable by either academic or non-academic audiences. Recorded documents and experience in race mapping in Indonesia is then compiled by Sysling in this six-chapter book. First chapter entitles ‘Bone Trajectories: Collecting Human Remains in Colonial Indonesia’. Second chapter entitles ‘The Fattest Lady at the Fair: Anthropological Measurements and the

Colonial Government’. Third chapter entitles: ‘Eyes on Race: Photography and Plaster Casting as Knowledge-Making Practices’. Fourth chapter entitles: ‘Racial Borderlands: Anthropology in the Timor Archipelago’. Fifth chapter entitles: ‘The Archipelago of Racial Difference: J. P. Kleiweg de Zwaan and Human Diversity’. Sixth chapter entitles: ‘Nature’s Boundless Multitude of Forms? Hendrik Bijlmer and the Pygmy Question’.

The main idea of this book is on the origin Indonesian race and how Colonial was eager to know better about it. The book shows the documentation of anthropological findings of the Colonial Indonesian’s indigenous nature and culture from some Colonial physical anthropologists. They ‘believed that their objective knowledge of the colony’s inhabitants was crucial to scientific and societal progress’ (Sysling, 2016: 15). However, their efforts in producing an objective knowledge were not merely appoint them as agent of Colonial empire. Claims that their research would benefit the Colonial state were therefore often a form of self-advertising (Sysling, 2016: 16). The work of these Colonial physical anthropologists was also supported by the archaeological evidences. These evidences were important in providing information of structure and measurement of skeletons, skulls and bones of the dead. Thus, the genealogy of human race was traced back from interpretations

to the measurement anthropometric dimension of living humans and remains of the dead as well, and documentations which acquired from photographing and model-making.

Of interest, beside some practical descriptions, this book also describes some discourses when determining a 'real' indigenous race in Indonesia. This discourse was derived from different perspectives. One perspective came from the foreigners (as travelers or scientists) who claimed that they have better observation method. This claim was concerned about the experiential-based credibility, as trained scientist, in undertaking observation which is better from uneducated travelers (see Sysling, 2016: 104). Further, this discourse was also concerned about the possible misjudgment from scientists, as Chris Ballard noted on John Crawford's variable in observation, who never traveled to the region where the observation should took place (see Sysling, 2016: 104–105). And the second perspective is a discourse that was raised among scientists and European people. This discourse emphasized a 'dialogue' between subjectivity and objectivity of knowledge, especially when the findings were disseminated to the public. As experienced by Hendrik Bijlmer, the dissemination session was not always in scientifically-related framework. At that time, Bijlmer was urged to use the terms of 'pygmies' and 'dwarfs', even this dichotomy was fundamentally against with his findings in the field (see Sysling, 2016: 15 and 164–165). The audiences were not realized the complexity of nature and culture in Colonial Indonesia. Bijlmer himself was one of Dutch anthropologists who surprised by the immeasurable variety of people in the Dutch Indies (see Sysling, 2016: 163). In this sense, audiences were interested in knowing 'a pleasant truth' rather than a scientifically-objective one. Such pretension essentially disregards the objectivity of observation's findings, and, to some extent, of knowledge. This also notices that the racial scientific discourse might potentially be related, or, at least, ended up with the idea of racism itself.

Speaking on racism, the above situation reflects a category of racism, a Structural Racism, which is developed from prejudices (see Reading, 2013: 4) that some people are considered superior

to others and vice versa. In time, this kind of racism can also be turned into Epistemic Racism which based on discrimination of the intellectual foundation and considers some people are unintelligible than others (see Reading, 2013: 3). However, today's racism seems to be different with its conceptual framework. Hiding under the current concept, such as capitalism or liberalism, racism was being transformed into a subtle and illusive form that can infiltrate to any system, including to Colonial educational system. Maintaining the spirit of Colonialism can be its own mission. In 1918, for instance, Dr. Rajiman, a member of Boedi Oetomo, argued that Colonial education, which was tailored by the Dutch, as 'inadequate and does not fit with the native character, is not uplifting, but obscuring' (see Goss, 2011: 102). This similar circumstance was continued until the rise of New Order regime after the *coup d'état* to Soekarno's government. The control of New Order regime was vast, including that 'Scientists, too, were brought in as state agents, and by 1970, Indonesian science was a government enterprise' (see Goss, 2011: 164). In some extents, this book enlightens us about how Indonesia, including its knowledge, was constructed in accordance with Colonial interests. Even the term of 'racialised common-sense' (Sysling, 2016: 103) can also be considered as a conceptual manipulation upon indigenous people. Borrowing Robert Cribb's opinion on natural and cultural conservation, the knowledge production for Colonial Indonesia was only 'an attempt to shape the Colonial discourse in late-Colonial Indonesia for the sake of sustaining Colonial rule' (Cribb, 2009 as cited by Sysling, 2016: 168).

As conclusion, the book is remarkable in describing a physical anthropological method in racial observation in Colonial Indonesia. This can be benefit for anyone who would like to undertake similar action research in the same field. On the other hand, this book is also interesting for those who want to know about the other side of story of Colonial Indonesia and how Colonial scientists produce knowledge about it. Some do say that critical reading is always important, particularly when the book was written by non-local person. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2007: 335) wrote her response to Patricia Grace's talk on 'Books are

Dangerous' and argued that many books were nothing but essentially wrongful writing about the Maori. However, the book wrote by Fenneke Sysling tries to present the factual condition of Colonial Indonesia. The contents are quite objective and enough for our continuous reflection on Indonesia in the Colonial perspective.

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