

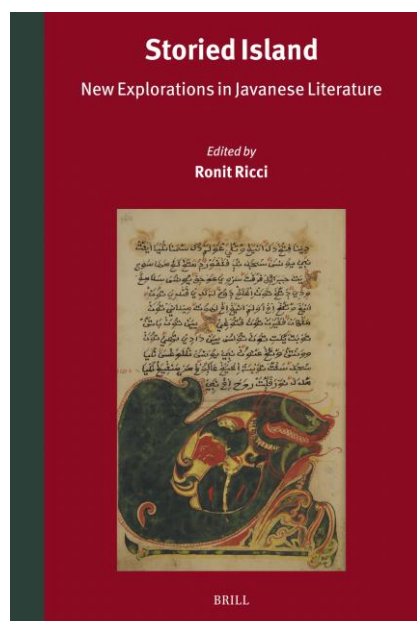
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BOOK REVIEW

Review Article Of 'Storied Island'



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Storied Island: New Explorations in Javanese Literature

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Ronit Ricci

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In her review of the book *Traces of the Ramayana and Mahabarata in Javanese and Malay Literature* in the journal *Archipel* edited by Ding Choo Ming and Willem van der Molen, Monique Zaini-Lajoubert clearly airs her amazement about the fact that the Introduction brings to the book "(...) *n'explique pas pour quelle raison il ne se trouve aucun Malaisien ou Indonésien parmi les contributeurs, ni pourquoi les deux éditeurs sont également absent du volume*" (p. 295). Zaini-Lajoubert is puzzled by the fact that the editors don't explain why there are neither Malaysians nor Indonesians among the contributors, even though the book focuses on a region – characterized by extraordinary literary activity ("*l'extraordinaire activité littéraire*") – where *they* live and work. Moreover, the editors themselves have not contributed to the book, except for the Introduction from which, incidentally, Ding Choo Ming is absent as well. It is not explained either, even though it was he who organized the conference on which this book is based. Hence, the Malaysian scholar who took the initiative for a scholarly gathering about Malay and Javanese literature, of which this book is the result, has left no trace in it. That is puzzling indeed.

In the same year 2018, Willem van der Molen, together with Yumi Sugahara, edited a similar book, published in Tokyo. It was exclusively dedicated to works in Javanese: *Transformation of Religions as Reflected in Javanese Texts*. Here again not a single Indonesian, nor Javanese for that matter appear to have contributed a chapter to the book, even though in the Introduction, the editors state that their publication is based on

a conference of which the participants came “from all over the world: Indonesia, the United States, Germany, Australia and Israel, besides Japan” (p. viii). Again, this is puzzling, not least because two academics from the Netherlands, not included in the list of conference participants, are among the contributors. Did they participate in the conference or not? And why again did the editors not write a chapter in their own book? It is totally strange. However, the most prominent is, of course, the fact that even though Indonesians apparently participated in the conference, they mysteriously disappeared in the conference’s publication.

I realize that it may be somewhat unconventional to begin a review of *Storied Island* by referring to two other books in the same field. But there is a striking similarity in all three fairly recent publications: the remarkable absence of Indonesian contributors, although all three deal exclusively with *their* literary and cultural heritage. Ronit Ricci, the editor of *Storied Island*, does not simply pass over this remarkable fact in silence, but in her introduction, she provides the reader with only slightly more information. She mentions the names of two Indonesian philologists, incidentally together with one Australian colleague, “who were unable to write chapters” (p. 4, footnote 2). Full stop, end of report. Nonetheless, that is still hardly less enigmatic.

Let us make clear that I consider this to be an important book and, as far as I am able to judge, a seminal contribution to the field of Javanese Studies. The very auspicious conditions under which it came into being have, no doubt, contributed to the high quality of this publication. Imagine yourself for a total of almost nine months as the guest of an international academic institute, together with other scholars who are amongst the most established ones in your field, enjoying weekly seminars with them, reading, discussing and translating crucial texts together, benefitting from each other’s expertise in formal and informal settings, with sometimes other specialists joining in for weeks or months.

To most if not all of us, active in the humanities with its limited resources, such a situation would seem totally unattainable, a mere pipe dream. However, believe it or not, it happened, in Jerusalem, between September 2018 and July 2019 at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies (IIAS) of the Hebrew University, with an international three-day “Java in Jerusalem” conference on top of it all. Under the title “New Directions in the Study of Javanese Literature,” seven scholars gathered for a whole academic year at the IIAS: Ronit Ricci from Jerusalem, Tony Day from Graz, Nancy Florida from Ann Arbor, Verena Meyer from New York and Ben Arps, Els Bogaerts and Willem van der Molen from Leiden.

It is interesting to note that Ricci and Van der Molen, in a brief announcement in *Archipel*, link the project directly to what they call “the decline of Javanese Studies in universities worldwide” (p. 13). This is echoed by Bogaerts and Day in their Introduction (“*Purwaka*”) to a special issue of *Wacana*, in which the project’s results are previewed. There they say that the project “sought to revitalize Javanese Studies” (p. vi). As the editor of *Storied Island*, Ricci in her turn strongly suggests in her Introduction that in the case of Javanese Studies we’re looking at a dying field. I wonder if that is indeed the case, but if it

is, this book might function as shock therapy for the ailing patient! For the energy is palpable, the expertise is overwhelming, the enthusiasm, the intellectual pleasure, the *jouissance* if you will, is contagious.

Many examples from all contributions to this book could be given to illustrate this. But to me personally the chapter by Tony Day, where he brings to life the famous *Sĕrat Cĕnthini*, was an especially great read. His contribution stands out, I think, because it most radically moves into new directions. First and foremost, he deals with this poem as “arguably the greatest expression of literary art ever written in Javanese” (p. 34) and in doing so he deviates considerably from the convention to read the *Cĕnthini* in a colonial fashion, as a reference work, a kind of encyclopedia about Java. Moreover, to strengthen his case for the literariness of the *Cĕnthini*, he uses (western) literary theory – something rarely seen in this field – and convincingly shows that such a combination can be very productive. Last but certainly not least, the way he translates into vibrant English the episode he deals with is absolutely spectacular! What on earth is this? – I asked myself when reading the verses from the *Cĕnthini* that Day has fortunately made accessible to us – what on earth am I reading? Pornography? Comedy? Mysticism? Grotesque realism? Likely all of this and a lot more. In short: *literature*, exuberant and almost breath-taking literature, which, if the full text were translated à la Day, could be of great interest to a lot of people in other parts of the world, common readers and literary specialists alike.

As I said, this is but one example of the ways in which in *Storied Island* the members of the “Java in Jeruzalem” group, enlarged with Yumi Sugahara (Osaka) and Edwin Wieringa (Cologne), have made a successful endeavor to “revitalize” Javanese Studies, based on nine months of intense and fruitful collaboration. Incidentally, in his essay from 2014 entitled “Rediscovering Islam in Javanese History”, republished here as the opening chapter of the book, the late M.C. Ricklefs has in a sense paved the way for this accomplishment. It is not clear whether Ricklefs was directly involved in the project – he passed away on 29 December 2019 – but his essay was evidently a prime source of inspiration to the other contributors. He expressly points to exhausted or even “demonstrably wrong” paradigms (p. 31) embraced by Javanologists from the past, especially with regard to the relationship between Java and Islam (also a leitmotif in *Storied Island*) and exhorts his colleagues to open up to, and explore new avenues of thought: “The overthrowing of a previously influential paradigm is important not only for our understanding of the past. It also gives us a better understanding of the contemporary process of religious change in Indonesia and may even help us to think more clearly about possible futures” (p. 31).

Remarkably, Ricklefs concludes his essay with the following remark: “It is pleasing to be able to say that much of the research for our new perspectives has been done by Indonesian scholars. It has long been my view that the international leadership for the study of Indonesian Islam must come from within Indonesia itself. In my own research

I've relied on the work of both established and younger Indonesian scholars. There, in my view, lies the future of the study of Islam among the Javanese" (p. 31).

Subsequently, according to Ricklefs, the future the field of Javanese Studies, which, in the words of Ricci in her Introduction, "has been gradually shrinking" (p. 3), is in the hands of the Indonesians. In a footnote to these last lines he even provides us with a list of no less than twenty-five names of Indonesian scholars whom ("among others") he cited in his three books on Islamization in Java. None of them appear in *Storied Island*. The same is true for a more recent publication by some members of the Java in Jerusalem group in the form of a special issue of the journal *Philological Encounters*. Edited by Tony Day and Edwin Wieringa and titled *Reading Javanese Literature with Questions of Theory in Mind*, also this "spin-off" only contains contributions by "non-Javanese academics who make use of explicit, non-Javanese theoretical methods and approaches", as the editors put it in their Introduction (p. 9).

Thus, within the last seven years, four international academic publications of some standing have appeared, dealing with the Indonesian literary and cultural heritage, to which no Indonesian scholar has contributed. True, in the special issue of *Wacana* edited by Bogarts and Day in 2021, three out of eleven contributions are from Indonesia. But if we take this fifth publication into account as well, Indonesian participation in these five publications together amounts to a mere 7.5% of the total number of essays (three out of forty-one). That would hardly make a difference; it is still remarkably low (oddly enough, moreover, two of the three Indonesian contributions to the *Wacana* special issue are not discussed by Bogaerts and Day in their Introduction but presented separately from the other articles by a Ph.D. student from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Why? No explanation is given).

Honestly, I find that distressing and I think that it is legitimate to ask: what is the matter here? Incidentally, it would be all too easy to pour (fashionable) scorn on the non-Indonesian editors of these publications. I have no doubts whatsoever about their integrity, but even without being 'woke' one may conclude that this calls for an explanation.

With regard to *Storied Island* and its spin-off in *Philological Encounters*, it is imaginable that the location – the capital of Israel – caused problems. Indonesia has no formal diplomatic relations with Israel and it could well be that this has been a serious hindrance to Indonesian scholars to participate in the Java-in-Jerusalem research project. Too many practical problems to overcome, perhaps, or a reluctance among Indonesian scholars to join for political or religious reasons? But then, the project's achievements were previewed in *Wacana*, an Indonesian professional journal that apparently had no such objections. And, of course, with regard to the edited volumes published in Singapore and Tokyo that I referred earlier, no such clarifications would make sense.

Perhaps more explanatory power could lie in the observation that Indonesian and non-Indonesian philologists have the same object of study but are, to a certain extent, worlds apart, with very different approaches and goals. This is, in any case, the impression one gets when reading the call for papers for the nineteenth international symposium of Manassa, Indonesia's association of philologists, held in August 2023 in Yogyakarta. In a remarkable statement, Manassa declares that in these times of globalization there are certain challenges ("*tantangan*") to Indonesia's national identity, which is therefore in danger of becoming weaker. Indonesian nationalism, patriotism and civilization are under threat and the very essence of what it means to be Indonesian ("*esensi keindonesiaan*") has to be strengthened again, indeed also by means of studying Indonesian manuscripts. Hence the conference's title and main theme: "*Penguatan Keindonesiaan Melalui Kajian Naskah Nusantara*".

Is this the elephant in the room? On the one hand there is a group of non-Indonesian philologists who are bound for the future and want to get away from, what Day and Wieringa in their Introduction to the special issue of *Philological Encounters*, call "the rather isolationist tendency of Javanese philology", its "island mentality" and the fact that it has, therefore, "consistently denied itself access to participation in a wider, comparative conversation about the literatures of the world because of an indifference to theory, to 'methods of making sense'" (p.1-2). On the other hand, if the Manassa statement is anything to go by, the Indonesian philologists seem to move into the very opposite direction, they look inward and appear to be heading towards a kind of splendid isolation, searching manuscripts for Indonesian values and "local wisdom" ("*kearifan lokal*"), and thereby protect their country from unwanted, threatening influences of an indeed dazzling modernity. A kind of identity politics, looking backward, to the past.

Interestingly, in such a way Manassa seems to take part in a larger trend in Southeast Asian scholarship, witness the 5th Biennial Conference of the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) that was held in Manila, Philippines, on July 18-20, 2024. The main theme of that conference was "De/Centering Southeast Asia", which, in its call for papers, was inter alia elucidated as follows: "De/Centering challenges the dominant narratives and perspectives historically centered in the "West" and its gaze on Southeast Asia, instead highlighting diverse and complex experiences, histories and cultures of the region as told by Southeast Asians themselves. Scholars from, and of, the region take ownership of their own narratives and histories, which have often been erased, marginalized, or misrepresented".

If this split between two groups of Javanologists is a valid observation, then the question urges itself upon us: Are these two visions incompatible? And if not, what can be done to bridge the gap? For it seems impossible and almost improper that well into the twenty-first century Indonesian and non-Indonesian philologists don't seem to collaborate very much and stand with their backs towards each other, as is evidenced by works such as *Storied Island* and other publications referred to here. I imagine that there

is enough common ground, namely the shared devotion to the field, on the basis of which a more structural or systematic exchange of ideas and an opening up to each other's approach could be possible. Assuming a pragmatic attitude and agreeing to disagree when necessary, both sides could thus benefit from each other's expertise and achievements and decide to more regularly collaborate in joint publications or at (inter)national conferences.

In such a way, and with a tip of the hat to M.C. Ricklefs, also the perceived decline of the field could be turned around, I guess, as there seem to be a lot more Indonesian than non-Indonesian philologists in this field, while the average age of the former seems more reassuring than that of the latter. The call for papers for the Manassa conference in 2023 that I referred to earlier provides a list of some twenty speakers all of whom are eminent Indonesian philologists, while in other parts of the Manassa website quite a few up-and-coming ones make an appearance. There is hope, in other words.

Finally, I am aware that, in various ways, the English language will not make all this any easier. I will not go into this here, but rather, as food for thought, refer to how according to *The New Yorker* the winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature, John M. Coetzee, has recently taken a stand against what he calls the "global English" of international communication: "I do not like the way in which English is taking over the world," he declared, at the Hay literary festival. 'I do not like the way in which it crushes the minor languages that it finds in its path. I don't like its universalist pretensions, by which I mean its uninterrogated belief that the world is as it seems to be in the mirror of the English language.' In the past, Coetzee, who writes in English, has therefore often published his books in Dutch and Spanish translations before publishing them in the English originals. Would something similar not be a good idea, too, in Javanese philology, as a means to sweeten the conversation between all those involved and so give the field a boost?

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