Women's role in the Indonesian revolution: some historical reflections

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Sanksi Pelanggaran Pasal 44: Undang-undang Nomor 7 Tahun 1987
Hentang Perubahan atas Undang-undang Nomor 6 Tahun 1982
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From 1945 to 1949, Indonesians fought for national independence against their former colonial rulers, the Dutch. Dutch colonial rule had been centuries in the making. From small forts and trading posts founded in the seventeenth century, the Dutch had gradually expanded their rule by the twentieth century to encompass most of the vast archipelago between the Asian mainland and the island of New Guinea. Their rule brought massive changes in indigenous societies. Patterns of landholding, systems of authority, attitudes to education, and the position of women all changed as the Dutch constructed a colonial economy which generated enormous wealth for them. Discontent with Dutch rule led to the emergence of a nationalist movement in the early twentieth century, but this movement had made little headway against Dutch power by 1942, when the Japanese invasion ended the colonial order for good.

The Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945 and two days later Indonesian nationalists, led by Sukarno and Muhammad Hatta, declared independence in a simple ceremony in Jakarta and founded the new Republic of Indonesia. Believing that the nationalists represented only a tiny, disaffected minority, the Dutch refused to recognize the independence declaration and instead began, with the initial help of their British and Australian allies, to restore colonial rule. In the islands of eastern Indonesia, and in the larger cities of Java and Sumatra, they largely succeeded in this aim, but broader Dutch ambitions were thwarted by their weakness after five years of German occupation and, much more important, by the strength of the Indonesian resistance. Instead of recreating their authority with a few simple shows of strength, the Dutch found themselves embroiled in a protracted colonial war in which they faced opposition from a far wider coalition of Indonesians than they had ever imagined possible.

Whereas the Dutch imagined that the issues at stake in this struggle were mainly those of legal and orderly government versus chaos and coercion, for Indonesians the struggle was indeed one for freedom. They were bitter over the long history of brutal exploitation which colonialism had meant for Indonesians. Dutch rule on Java had presided over a long decline in the standard of living of the Javanese which had seen the island reduced from a major centre of power and wealth in the archipelago to a desperately over-crowded island of poverty. In other islands, the brutal Dutch campaigns of conquest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often still a sharp memory. And Dutch attempts to promote economic development and greater welfare for the mass of the population during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, although sincerely intended for the good of Indonesians, had been conducted with a paternalism which many people found repulsive.

In the national revolution of 1945-1949, a story unfolds of long periods of negotiation and stalemate between the opposing parties, punctuated by brief periods of fighting. The scene of negotiations shifted between Indonesia, the Netherlands and the United Nations headquarters in New York, while the Republican front lines retreated under Dutch pressure from the main cities into the countryside. In the first half of 1949, the front line finally ceased to exist when the Dutch captured the Republican capital of Yogyakarta in Central Java and the embattled nationalist forces took to the hills and jungles to wage a guerrilla war which, in combination with international diplomatic pressure, ultimately forced the Dutch to give in and to transfer formal sovereignty to the Indonesian Republic at the end of 1949. Because of the many shifts in the theatre of the struggle, few Indonesians experienced the national revolution as it is described in the general histories. Yet the struggle has often been called a people's war because it engaged the Indonesian people so comprehensively in deciding their future. One of the characteristic symbolic actions of the early revolution was the acceptance of popular sovereignty from below.
in most government departments and armed units: superiors and officers—even the commander of the army—took office on the authority of elections amongst their subordinates and held it only as long as they retained their subordinates’ confidence. Much of Indonesian politics since 1949 has had to do with wresting this practical sovereignty back from the Indonesian people and restoring the sense of order and hierarchy idealized by both the Dutch and the early indigenous rulers.

The term “people” in this context typically refers mainly to males. Women were only sparsely represented in the government offices and armed units which spearheaded the transformation of attitudes and they were thinly represented in the political parties. There was no challenge to the authority of men in Indonesian society comparable to the challenge to state authority. Women in Indonesian society had never been as comprehensively subordinate to men as they had been in classical Indonesian and Chinese society, but there was a widespread belief that the most important role of women was as wives and mothers and that the best contribution the nationalist movement could make to classical Indonesian and Chinese society, but there was a widespread belief that the most important role of women was as wives and mothers and that the best contribution the nationalist movement could make to the position of women was to end the destructive effects of colonialism on family life.

The absence of a women’s perspective on the Indonesian revolution was noted critically by Christine Dobbin in 1979, but little has changed since then. The crop of regional studies of the revolution which was small, contributing roles.

Women’s Roles in the Indonesian Revolution

Relatively few women have left accounts of their experiences during the Indonesian revolution. They were less commonly involved in the historic incidents which receive greatest attention in Indonesian writing on these years, and of course they were far less commonly in the positions of power or wide influence which often lead people to record their experiences later in life.

It was fortunate that on the 30th anniversary of the declaration of Indonesian independence in 1975, the Angkatan 45 (Generation of 45), the official Indonesian association of the veterans of the revolution, held an essay competition to mark the occasion. Entrants were asked to write of their experiences during the revolution, and some 750 contestants took part. Prize-winning essays were published by Angkatan 45 in a series of four books, *Letusan di balik Baku, Cahaya dari Medan Laga, Aku akan Teruskan and Terbanalah Jalankan.*

In this essay, we will discuss some of the themes from six of the stories written for this competition, together with interviews conducted mid-1993, with twelve women who lived through the period, five of whom were already known to one of the authors (Anton Lucas) as wives of informants for a previous study of the revolution. In that study, a history of the “Three Region’s Affair” in the Pekalongan-Tegal area on Java’s northcoast the husbands but not their wives had been interviewed, largely because women were not directly involved in the historical events being researched.

The Angkatan 45 essays show the various ways in which women, thirty years after the events, recall their experiences of life in Indonesia during the revolution of 1945-1950. Only three of the six authors give us their ages at the time, these range from 16 (Sri Kushartini Sumardi) to 27 (Titik Pamudjo). Only one story takes place outside Java in West Sumatra (Darman Hamzah Zarmadi’s *Through the Nica Lines*). The other stories are Java-based, presumably written by Javanese or Sundanese women. None of the six authors reveal that they were yet married or had families of their own, and one story, *My Homage*, by Yayuk Sumarro,
has almost nothing about women in the revolution, unlike the other stories, where women are centre stage. In *My Homage*, Yayuk Sumarto is a women author writing not only about but as a male (her husband?) from a male point of view: "I was a pemuda, who helped set up the revolutionary Republican government in Pacitan, I worked with the old *pangreh praja*, this is how, as a young man, I felt in 1945." The only mention of a women is his marriage to one; the wedding took place on 17 September 1945: "the bridegroom was attired like a king in full dress" (no mention of the bride or her name). The couple first had to go to the big mosque to offer thanks and pray for a free Indonesia, postponing the wedding until midnight: "such were the fortunes of a bride and groom at that time".

Women's voices in the revolution are multiple and diverse. In the *Angkatan 45* essays, the women (so far as they tell us) are all in their teens or early twenties, and so did not yet have the job of looking after children. In contrast, most of eleven women interviewed were married before or early in the Japanese occupation, they were still looking after young children during the revolution. Often separately from parents on whom newly married Javanese couples traditionally depend for support, they could not go out and become guerrilla fighters, even if they had wanted to do so.

These sources themselves are a strong reminder of the diversity of women's experience in the Indonesian revolution. In the *Angkatan 45* essays, as was just mentioned, many of the women are young—in their teens or early twenties—and still without the responsibility of looking after young children. They tended, too, to come from better-educated sections of society, and thus had the confidence to write later about their experiences. In contrast, most of the twelve women interviewed had married before or early in the Japanese occupation and they were still caring for children during the revolution. None of them had written memoirs (although one had completed her husband's memoir after his death), perhaps because the revolution had been less liberating for this slightly older generation, and they felt more inhibited about putting themselves forward in writing.

Both the stories and interviews show how women decades later located themselves in the events of 1945-1949, how they felt they could, or could not, participate in revolutionary activities, for a whole range of reasons, including of course their gender. Some joined the struggle because they were single and had no family responsibilities, Others had fewer choices because they were married, and were too busy with domestic work to share with the male activists the sense of the Indonesian world order being turned upside down. There were many dilemmas to face in a world which they could sense was changing so fast.

**Women's Roles during the Revolution**

In this the fiftieth anniversary of Indonesian independence, it is important to examine Indonesian women's roles and activities during the period 1945-49. For many village women, the revolutionary struggle about which so much has been written at both the national and local levels had little relevance to their lives. They did not see themselves as part of the political struggle. For others, their roles were mainly as older or younger female siblings of male activists or as fiancées or young wives. During the five years of revolutionary struggle between 1945 and 1949 the kinds of roles expected of women expanded. This was partly because the rules of etiquette and social behaviour between the sexes became more open and less formal. Undoubtedly, the political and social turmoil of the years 1945-1950 gave women the opportunity to act differently towards the opposite sex than before the war. Their roles in society also broadened, they often had new responsibilities thrust upon them. To highlight some of these changes, let us first turn to the six *Angkatan 45* stories.

Some women became activists as *pemuda*. This term, literally "young person", took on a special meaning in the revolution. The pemuda were the young-at-heart who were willing to devote their entire being to the struggle, in contrast to what was seen as a more cautious, less committed older generation, and joined organisations, some mixed, some run by and for women, to help in the political and military struggle against the return of the Dutch. These organisations were largely urban based and recruited educated women who lived in larger cities (in particular Surakarta and the Republican capital of Yogyakarta). Most married women did not have the chance to join such organisations even if they had wanted to, because of family or household responsibilities. In the large cities such as Surabaya, girls still in high school staffed the newly formed Indonesian Red Cross.

Although women joined revolutionary struggle groups, few took part in the fighting. In the *Angkatan 45* story *Nyimah the Illiterate Srikandi of Batak Besi*, Titik Pamudjo tells how her illiterate neighbour Nyimah joins
the women’s struggle organisation Barisan Srihandi. She spent most of her time on train and station guard duty, also searching trains going into Jakarta to confiscate weapons and food “for the NICA”. Nyimah’s one involvement in a battle, leaves her with a scar from a bayonet “for life”. Sri Kusnarti Sumandi in the story entitled In the Student Brigade tells how, when she joined the Women’s Staff of Tentera Pelajar Brigade 17, Battalion 300, as a matter of course she spent most of her time cooking for, cleaning up after, and generally taking care of male revolutionary fighters. The possibility that she might take part in the fighting was relegated at the end of a long line of quasi-domestic duties, most of them little different from traditional female roles in Indonesia before the revolution. She is again basically a “helper”.

Many women living in the Residency of Pekalongan did however leave areas occupied by the Dutch after the first military attack on the Republic in July 1947, and made their way on foot and carrying a few basic belongings, over the mountains to Republican held territory in the region of Wonosobo. This was known as mengungsi, and described an experience that many women had between the years of 1945-49, and which the Angkatan 45 story Flight, by Titiek Mulyowati Soetomo also uses as a theme, namely the journey with her mother and new-born brother into the mountains south of Pasuruan in East Java after the Dutch occupation of the region. In Javanese, people referred to the experience as being dalam pengungsi. This referred to both a journey and at the end of the journey a re-location of oneself and one’s family away from Dutch occupied areas to a region of Republican held territory which was totally unfamiliar. Women did this because their husbands or close relatives who had worked for the local Republican administration had either to leave the Dutch controlled areas or risk the consequences, namely imprisonment (or worse) if they stayed. For women the experiences of mengungsi brought a whole range of problems with which they (not the men) had to cope, such as carrying children on the journey on foot over mountains, in traditional tight-fitting skirts or kain, often in bare feet, avoiding Dutch patrols and roving Indonesian bands, while finding food and a place to sleep each night. We will return to experiences of being dalam pengungsi shortly.

The Japanese occupation had been a time of great hardship and family financial reserves were often already exhausted by 1945. If they were not, women were able to sell what jewellery they had left to buy food for their families during the revolution. Husbands, if they worked for the new Republican government, were sometimes paid irregularly, or not at all. Wages were so low they did not go far. Women turned to a traditional occupation, making and selling snacks from their own homes, to make ends meet. Often it was the Dutch who came and snacked at the roadside stalls. The left over snacks not sold were eaten by the women and their families.

Women’s Perceptions of the Revolution

Some women felt part of the revolutionary process because of what their husbands did, others because they were free of family ties, and could join in the revolutionary resistance more directly. Obviously it was easier for the latter group to join predominantly male groups, as the Angkatan 45 story In the Student Army reveals. Ibu Rusmi, one of the women interviewed who did not have family responsibilities, went off and joined the men as female guerrilla fighter, not because of any revolutionary ideology, but because she did not want to stay at home by herself. She acted as a typist, a courier, and insisted on her right to carry a rifle. Whether they felt part of the revolutionary process and became activists or not (and not everyone did), women were caught up in revolutionary events, constantly witnessing new historical situations, witnessing scenes of Dutch soldiers beating up or shooting Indonesian civilians, and seeing planes bombing Republican held countryside. As well they were giving birth to children, and trying to keep their families fed while on the move, changing their kain for more practical dresses made of unbleached cotton (blanc), changing their hair styles, and coping with terrible family tragedies, such as the death of infants or young children or parents at a time when medical resources were few.

As mentioned Ibu Rusmi, a single woman (who never married after her boyfriend disappeared, believed killed, during the revolution), went off and joined an all male guerrilla unit, because her friends and her brother had gone, and things were too quiet at home:

P [interviewer]: Anu ‘Bu, kepingin nutu perang, sabehnya?

P: Banyak orang yang melihat temannya ikut perang, nggak ikut perang?
I: Saya kok ndak tabu itu. Kalau saya, mas Pono wui langa dlu ya
Java still had to conform to the concept of 'Jawa grubyak), Dutch. Put My Husband in jail” 16

For married women, because of strictly defined gender roles and domestic responsibilities, the feeling of being a part of the revolution or "being a Republican" often came from the commitment of their husbands. Ibu Karmo, wife of the Republican bupati of Kendal, could not follow her husband to the mountains to join the guerrillas, as we have seen, because she felt she would be a burden to him. Ibu Umi Warsitohardjo, whose husband was jailed for his Republican activities in Tegal in October 1947 (after the Dutch occupation of the north coast) felt she was a Republican because of the commitments of her husband, Ali Warsitohardjo.17 During his prewar student days in the Jakarta Law School, Ali Warsitohardjo had met Soepeno, who was an important figure in the Socialist Party, a confidant of Prime Minister Sjahrir and later Minister of Youth and Development in Prime Minister Amir Sjahrir's first cabinet.18 Soepeno used to visit his home town of Tegal until it was occupied by the Dutch, staying in the large old colonial Dutch house where Ibu Umi and her husband lived, a house with almost no furniture, and only two small single beds. “So Pak Ali would give up his bed and sleep on a couch in the front of the house, Soepeno would sleep in the one small bed in one room, while I would sleep in our other small bed in the other.” Ali Warsitohardjo's strong Republican affiliations—his connections with Republican minister Soepeno and the Socialist Party and his position as deputy chairman of the executive committee of the local Tegal Republican assembly from 1945-1947—led local Dutch military intelligence to accuse him of subversive political activities (including involvement with armed Republican organisations and distribution of anti-Dutch pamphlets). Arrested on 14 October 1947 on later charges of "sedition" activities including being "anti the Netherlands", subsequently held in Tegal jail, he was moved first to Tangerang then Cipinang prison in Jakarta from where he was released in mid 1949.19

During Ali Warsitohardjo's imprisonment in Tegal, their five year old first (and then only) child, Bambang Widjoyo, contracted what is thought today to have been meningitis, and died very suddenly:
Ibu Umi's husband was taken from Tegal prison by military escort, where he was allowed to remain in the house overnight to wait for the funeral of his son the following morning. He had to sit all night in the front room of the house and the Dutch military officer who ran the Tegal jail (captain pelajaran) Captain P Kroese, would not allow the couple to meet. In the morning the funeral took place, but Ibu Umi did not go to the graveyard:

I: Jadi dia (suami saya) berangkat membawa layon anak saya ke makam, saya diem dirumah.

P: Ibu nggak ikut?

I: Ibu. Tujuan tuh saya (menyapu), supiri ngimpi, bayi bayi saya meninggal, terus rasa kengeng, Saya bengimas. Sampai dia (suami saya) kembali ke penjara, saya tidak lama kemudian saya tinggalkan rumah itu. Karena saya dengar suaranya bayi “Mama, Mama, Mama” kalaau (dia) menangis. Saya tinggalkan rumah, saya mondeh di tempat itu apa namanya tepatnya dia (suami). Mereka “Ko”, mengendarai di taklalat di Tegal, untuk menghindari keluarganya. Dia itu suami saya terus punya kesibukan, tidak apa apa hanya menangis dia (makan anak-anaknya) seminggu sekali. Untuk menghilangkan itu, saya punya ini kesibukan, saya harta baku dalam bahasa Belanda. Sudah jauh suatu suatu itu, apa namanya, kikin krokot, krokot, kikin mawem-mawem makan, terus ditaruh di tengah, dijual oleh pembantu saya, kadang habis, kadang-kadang ya kalau tidak habis kita makan sendiri... 21

Due to the efforts of his wife Ibu Umi Warsitohardjo in approaching the Dutch military authorities in Tegal, Ali Warsitohardjo was moved first to Tanggerang then to Cipinang prison in Jakarta in early 1949. Ibu Umi had to find a job to support herself, and to buy food to take to the prison. She got a job in a Chevrolet dealership opposite Gambit railway station, as a typist on a salary of £250 a month "enough to live and to send food to the prison". But Ibu Umi didn't like it there much, there were too many Dutch and Chinese employees for her to feel comfortable, so she left and worked for the Dutch sponsored Vereeniging van Huissvrouwen (Housewives' Association), which was better because she liked being with other women. 22 As with most educated women of her generation, starting a family again meant stopping work, after her husband joined the Agrarian Affairs section of the Ministry of the Interior early in 1951.

Most women married to committed Republicans had few financial resources on which to support themselves and their families. Ibu Umi Warsitohardjo would seem to have been an exception. In Tegal she had a helper to sell the snacks she prepared, she read books in Dutch in her relative’s house to console herself after the death of her son, and her Dutch helped her get the highly paid job at a Chevrolet dealership in Jakarta. For some women speaking Dutch created new opportunities and was a great help in getting things done in Dutch occupied areas. Ibu Umi was able to go to the jail and talk to Dutch officers about getting a transfer to another jail in Jakarta. Soehatini Harsono in her Angkatan 45 story was able to influence a young Dutch soldier to think more deeply about why he was fighting a colonial war in Indonesia, because she could speak with him in Dutch. She was used to eating bread and cheese (“Dutch food”) as well. So presumably, was Ibu Umi who went out to buy roti (bread) when her son suddenly fell ill. Titiek Mulyowati Soetomo (in the story Flight) also encountered Dutch military. Her father was away fighting for the Republic, her mother has just died, and she was left with baby brother Gatot. A Dutch soldier approached “and addressed me in a language I did not understand. Oh how I hated his face and flaxen hair”. But he gave some chocolate to baby Gatot: “He was the enemy of my country, but he gave chocolate to my little brother” and later she said a prayer to her Mother: “Mother, forgive me, your child, for accepting charity from Father’s enemy”. Yet she had no choice but to accept charity from “Father’s enemy”, and was taken to an orphanage, told that her father had been killed, but she would be looked after, at Dutch expense. More dilemmas but because of her baby brother she had to accept.

Village women, who had little or no schooling and whose main concern was making a living, probably had fewer choices about whether they would join the Republican movement or not. Ibu Raminem decided that the local “bamboo spear movement” in the village of Borobudur in Central Java was not the place where women should be:

P: Kalau yang berangkat itu bambu runcing itu laki2 atau perempuan?

I: Laki

P: Perempuan?

I: Nggak ada

P: Kenapa?

I: Tau, orang perempuan, kok pungi bawa bambu runcing. Nggak ada, be
Gender Roles and Relations

Some of the six stories from the Angkatan 45 competition in this volume mention romantic relationships. Sri Kushartini Sumardi had two sweethearts, which did not "lessen our devotion to the struggle. Not at all!...to achieve independence for Indonesia we were ready for any sacrifice, even if it meant sacrificing our sweethearts". Later in her story the author has another admirer, a Bugis youth from South Sulawesi, an experience she describes as "a brief love in the guerrilla area". A brief love meant finding oneself holding hands rather tightly as they walked together through a large and rather scary cemetery one night.

In contrast the women interviewed had different experiences. Iba Fatimah, who during the revolution walked to Solo from Yogyakarta, recalls:

I: Pacar-pacaran itu inggak ada, tidur perempuan sama perempuan.

P: Masa pacaran nggak ada?

I: Nggak ada, zaman guerillah, Ngeliat orang digaplokin aja kita udah, nanti ngeri.

Women seemed to get used to sleeping "apart" from their spouses, partly because of long separations (up two years in one case), partly because of domestic arrangements. Ibu Umi slept "sebelahan" (side by side) with her husband before his arrest in a grand old house in Tegal, because the house had no furniture when they moved in, so they could only afford (or find) two small single beds. When visitors came her husband gave up his bed and slept on a couch. Ibu Karmo, newly married to the Republican bupati of Kendal, knew about condoms, she had seen them lying around the rubbish bins near the Dutch club in Semarang before the War. After the birth of Triek Mulyowati Soetomo's baby brother as told in her Angkatan 45 story Flight, her father slept next to her instead of with her mother, as her Father told her "it would be too much to have another child". Her Mother agreed "for it was only too easy to become pregnant".

Ibu Rusmi, who joined the fray (melu grubyak-grubyuk) that is joined the guerrillas in the Wonosobo region of south Central Java. Perhaps, as a younger sister of the Republican bupati of Kendal, she was regarded differently, or was given special treatment. However as a single woman among a group of men living in the mountains she had problems at times. First she had to convince the unit commander she could carry a rifle:


P: Tetepakhirnya penyelesaian gimana? I: Ada, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya. Orang-orang (laki-laki) kan bawa bedil. Nggawa nzng aja; aja, cedhak-cedhak, nggawa bedil ya rada kana wedhok.25

Again, because Bu Rusmi was one of two women in a guerrilla unit it was expected that she would be doing administrative work, not fighting. There were other personal matters that women had to cope with in all-male guerrilla units:

I: Nyawuan sewu Bu, kalau misalnya datang bulan ya wuktu itu, biasanya pakai apa?

P: Ya biasa. Pakai duku biasa. Tapi ya...itu lucu. Ada (ndak usah)
Living in a revolution with men around fighting a guerrilla war had its difficulties.

**Experiences of Evacuation (Mengungsi)**

As we have noted, many women in Java shared the experience of having to leave their homes at short notice, carrying their children on foot out of the Dutch were gradually expanding their occupation of Java. The north coast kabupaten towns of Java were occupied, and the Republican administration of these towns moved south to a new base in Wonosobo in the Banyumas region, while the Dutch set up new administrations in the areas they occupied.

From the two administrative centres of Tegal and Pekalongan, families had to walk to the south and find their way over the mountains to the Republican controlled region of Wonosobo. Ibu Mustapha, who married before the end of Dutch colonial rule, and was taken to live in Tegal, lost her second and third babies from dysentry during the Japanese occupation. Her husband, as regional commander of the TNI
leaving their homes and going to live in villages was a whole new experience. Ibu Soepeno, recently given the official title of 'hero's widow' (because her husband, Minister for Youth and Development in Prime Minister Amir Sjarifuddin's second cabinet, was executed by the Dutch in East Java in 1949) had to leave her home.

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As mentioned earlier, unlike the authors of the six Angkatan 45 stories, the majority of women who were married at the time could not join the revolutionary movement. Staying behind in a Dutch controlled region, however, did not mean being pro-Dutch. However, there were other considerations. Bu Karmo's husband became the revolutionary Bupati of Kendal immediately to the west of Semarang in 1945, and moved his administration to Wonosobo early in 1946, when the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) which controlled the provincial capital of Semarang, included Kendal regency under its administration:

Many women and children had experiences all over Java like this, mostly but not always in groups. Ibu Wadyono was on her own (as we have seen), and Titiek Mulyowati Soetomo's experiences going by herself with her mother on a journey across the mountains in East Java form a large part of her story Flight.

If conditions in these evacuation journeys were so difficult was it worth it? Some women with close connections to a well-known Republican family particularly military—Bu Fatimah's aunt had left her to work in the household of a Lieutenant of the Republican army and had no choice but to go with him to Solo. Other women with Catholic
connections did not have to feel so threatened by the Dutch who apparently treated Catholics (and probably Protestants as well) differently (see Bu Widyono's account above). Ibu Raminem's mother-in-law, who lived in the village of Borobudur, became a Catholic with her family in the 1930s after she believed her life was saved by a Dutch Catholic sister. This, according to her son-in-law, gave the family some immunity from the Dutch forces which occupied the Magelang region of Central Java:

P: Tapi Ibu nggak ngungsii?
I: Ngak, nggak ngungsii.
P: Sebabnya?
Makan apa, fahat makanan, jualan dipasar apa saja.32

This conversation raises again the issue of livelihood in revolutionary times. Indonesian women traditionally had family responsibilities making ends meet. Food had already been scarce during the previous three and a half years of Japanese occupation. The Japanese army no longer requisitioned up to one third of Java's rice crop. The Dutch set up an economic blockade of the Republic which began in 1946, although there was still produce in the larger city markets, many families had sold off possessions in order to survive the Japanese occupation. In some regions families were well off, Darmani Hamzah Zamardi (in her story Through the Nica Lines) tells of a Minangkabau family able to barter buffalo milk for rice and salt, the scarcest commodity in West Sumatra at that time. In fact the family's relative prosperity raised some jealousy and suspicion in the community.

For poor and less well-to-do urban women, either single or whose husbands were away, the main opportunity for income lay in selling drinks and snacks. Bu Fatimah found herself regularly serving coffee to Dutch soldiers. She was very scared of them, and afraid that if she refused she would be shot. The soldiers never volunteered to pay and she never asked for money. She also sold cassava snacks on Malioboro, the main street in what was then the Republican capital of Yogyakarta.

I: Ngak, ngak hayar merta?

A different kind of encounter with the Dutch was that of Suhartini Hansono in her Angkatan 45 story Bread, Cheese and Boiled Cassava. Because she spoke fluent Dutch, she struck up this friendship with a young Dutch soldier, strengthening his doubts about the justice of his country's cause in Indonesia. But this relationship precluded her inviting him into her house, she would like to for the company, but it would be politically unacceptable.

The Currency Question

During the Occupation, the Japanese had replaced pre-war Dutch currency with their own money, specially printed occupation notes which rapidly lost value. After August 1945, both the Republic and the Dutch, fearing that the standing of their currency would be damaged by the economic chaos, continued to use the Japanese notes. The Dutch finally introduced their own currency in March 1946, but the Republic delayed its own issue until October. Dutch currency, generally called “NICA money” (after the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration, the official name of the returning colonial government during its first few
months) soon circulated in Dutch controlled territories, whereas ORI (Ori [i.e. Uang] Republik Indonesia) was used within the Republic and women had to bring both currencies to the market to do the daily shopping, in case some traders had a preference. The Dutch allowed both currencies to circulate in regions they controlled, Republican civilian and military groups, on the other hand, were less accommodating. Women traders operating across the ceasefire lines were often suspected of collaboration or profiteering if they were found carrying Dutch currency.

Ibu Raminem was born in Sumatra, but at the age of nine during the Depression, her parents, who were plantation workers, returned to their home village of Borobudur with her six brothers, all of whom went to the local village school. Raminem was not sent to school because she was a girl. Instead she went to work as a maid with a wage of 9 guilders a month in the 16 room Hotel Borobudur, a small tourist hotel owned by a Dutchman for visitors staying overnight at Borobudur, where her father was also employed as a gardener. Raminem still has strong memories of the hardships during the occupation, the diet of dried cassava every day, and beggars dying on the roads from malnutrition. Her younger brother was sent to Sumatra as a romusha or forced labourer. The Japanese opened a small spinning factory where local girls went to work. Because the war made imports into Java almost impossible, cloth was desperately scarce and many girls wore gunny sacks as sarongs. Bu Raminem refused, but her sarongs were patched by the end of the occupation. Towards the end of the revolution Bu Raminem used to take palm sugar and eggs to sell in the market in the nearby large town of Magelang, occupied by the Dutch in late 1948:

I: Bagi pohon anem ya, ke sawah...samping (Magelang) pukul delapan. Mati hubah kok, Kalau udah tua (jalan kaki) ya empat jam. Termasuk menyerang sungai itu.

P: Nggak ada kendaraan?

I: Ha, zaman perang kok ada kendaraan apa. Naik tank, yang ada motor tank, Jalau sini Magelang, Salaman, yang ada motor tank... (ke Magelang basa) gula jawas sama ayam, kalau basa telur ayam, telur ayam, di jalanan, kalau sama tentara Republik ya nggak boleh.

P: Kenapa?

I: Itu kan mau dijual sama Belanda. Kan nggak boleh masuk di

Magelang. Nggak boleh, diminta telornya (oleh tentara)...Nggak dibayar! Diminta saja.

P: Terus Ibu nggak merasa berdosa menjual telur pada Belanda?

I: Enggak, kok bisa! Orang jualan kok bermula! (sambil tertawa).

P: Kok jual telor sama penjajah?


During the last year of the revolution, the Dutch army was nominally in control of the whole of Java, but the reality was that the island was a political and military patchwork with some areas firmly held by the Dutch, some still in Republican hands and many more contested by the rival forces.

Ibu Raminem used to change her Dutch currency in Magelang every day before returning to Borobudur, because she had to use ORI money in Borobudur to buy her palm sugar. If the Republican army found you were carrying what was now called "Federal money," the consequences were serious. In Magelang both currencies were in circulation, although some traders didn't like Federal money, because it was "Dutch." On one terrible day the Dutch currency lost its value within hours, and the market in Magelang was in chaos:

Lantas apa tu, uang mau habis ya. Uang mau nggak ada, itu pokul berapa ya, pokul pagi, nentu pokul sepuluh sampai dua belas, abi, uang Federal ndak laku. Orang kan, orang kaget toh. Ada yang mati, ada yang kagetnya punya uang banyak kok terus ndak laku... Kalau uang Belanda dulu itu kok bugas ya (sambil lihat foto berwarna dari uang Belanda). Apa tu, halu, kalau disimpan itu nggak bisa cepet ruah. Kalau yang kertas itu, apa namanya timang kertas kan alii.

Bu Raminem had no regrets about trading with the Dutch, because she had to make a living somehow. She did not leave her home when the Dutch had re-occupied Borobudur, because she had no way of supporting herself, and did not want to be a burden on village people with whom she would have to stay if she moved out of the Dutch occupied area into neighbouring Republican held territory.

Even as a young unmarried woman, Bu Raminem was too busy making a living, and felt she did not have the economic security and
would be a burden on others, if she moved into Republican territory in the hills. She felt the idea of a woman joining the bamboo spears movement was not appropriate (nggak pantes), so that alternative was not a possibility for her.

Further Reflections

The six essays in this collection were all written for a competition conducted by the official veterans association of Indonesia, the Angkatan 45. Therefore we should not be surprised if they confirm to some of the ideas and values of the Angkatan 45. Presumably the Angkatan 45, through a competition on the thirtieth anniversary of Indonesian independence twenty years ago, had an agenda of its own, namely to preserve the values and ideals of "the revolution" as interpreted by the veteran's group. Those women who shared these feelings of patriotism, who in a sense located themselves in the veteran's mythology and ideology of the revolution, would want to enter an essay in this competition. The stories Ibu Eusmi tells of her experiences would not have been relevant (some would say inappropriate) for an official veteran's sponsored essay competition, because they are constructed in a different way, and from a different perspective.

As we have seen in this Introduction, both the stories and the interviews give insights into the variety of women's voices which can be heard in the Indonesian revolutionary struggle. Some of their experiences suggest that, although they may have been working to change the political order by removing the Dutch, they did so by extending, and perhaps intensifying their pre-revolutionary roles, rather than changing roles.

During the revolution some, perhaps only a few, women had more freedom to choose, if not new roles, then new experiences. Some did experience "the privilege of self-determination" for the first time in their lives, even if the majority were more often than not still "the recipients of male action". Whether or not it was acceptable for cultural reasons to join guerrilla groups with male activists, most women still had to provide for themselves and their households. This meant they had to live with new situations, having to sell possessions in order to make ends meet, or if they had no possessions, to go and work with friends or distant relatives, again doing domestic work. They also bore the brunt of having to trade or shop in markets were both Dutch and Republican currencies were circulating.

Those who chose, or were forced, to leave their households in areas newly occupied by Dutch military forces had to cope with all kinds of new and difficult living conditions, including relying on the hospitality of strange villagers, childbearing, and grieving for children who had died away from homes or parents.

Other women (perhaps the majority) did not see themselves as part of the revolutionary struggle, for gender reasons (like Raminem) or because women felt it was not practical in revolutionary situations for them to be with their husbands, even if they did not yet have children. These were the roles that Javanese culture placed (and still place) on women. For them especially things were difficult (sulit) enough without becoming pemuda.41

The revolutionary situation of 1945-48 gave a minority of educated urban-based women a chance to take up new roles in struggle organisations such as the all women's Jakarta based Barisan Srikandi. Yet there seemed to have been a sprinkling of women through the struggle organisations (badan perjuangan), and not only (although mainly) cooking, washing and cleaning for the young men.

It was much harder for women to join the predominantly male Republican army (which became a guerrilla movement in 1949) as soldiers, women were expected to sit and type behind the fighting lines or act as couriers, continuing a role played by women in the anti-Japanese underground movements during the war42.

Finally, what strikes the reader of these stories, is the physicality shapes this writing, the smells (aniseed), the sound of knives being sharpened for the execution of a "spy" (which turns out to be a goat), the feeling of seeing the Java Sea for the first time from the slopes of Mt. Bromo, the cold "biting into flesh and bone", the tastelessness of a "soup" which is just like salt and water. There are also strong emotions; constant suspicion, quiet despair, frustration, anger (sakit hati), and fear—Ibu Fatimah found herself praying for her own safety every single time she left the house in which she was living in Solo. Women faced these feelings and emotions with a range of responses all of which are in the stories which follow.