

INTRODUCTION

Since 1955 when I first visited Bandung to attend the Afro-Asian Conference as a journalist, I have been fascinated by the multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society of Indonesia. I returned to Indonesia from time to time as a journalist and visited many provinces. Whilst appreciating the varieties of dishes, dances and music of the people, I also observed the behaviour of the peoples from different provinces.

In 1970, I was posted to Indonesia as Singapore's Ambassador and I took a keener interest in studying the psyche of the people at closer quarters. I spent four-and-a-half years in Indonesia trying to settle differences between the two countries and finally succeeded in cementing the personal friendship between former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and former President Suharto. I came into close contact with various strata of the Indonesian society — from the President, military leaders, ministers, top civil servants down to spiritual leaders, scholars, musicians, dancers, businessmen and other ordinary people of Indonesia. I befriended all of them and developed an affection for them and for Indonesia. I took the opportunity as an ambassador to travel widely in Indonesia and tried to befriend the governors and military leaders of the 26 provinces. When I left the country, Indonesia had not yet annexed East Timor.

Indonesia is an ethnological goldmine. Over the centuries, there has been an influx of people from China, Arabia, Polynesia, Indo-China and, later, Europe into Indonesia. The variety of its human geography is without parallel on earth. It consists of some 336 ethnic groups, living on 13,677 islands, speaking 250 dialects and are religiously and culturally different. The colours of their skins vary from yellow to brown and coal black.

In Indonesia, you can find ways of life which are five thousand years apart — from Jakarta where it is completely modernised to Wamena where I saw the Dhanis who were naked with their men wearing only *kotekas* (the dried skin of a gourd worn as a protection for their private parts), as if they were still living in the stone age. Compared with the Javanese aristocrat, the Irianese are like people from another world. Only a short distance from Bogor in the remote mountains, you can find Baduis who have been isolated from civilisation since the days of the Majapahit Empire in the 13th century.

I have chosen the title “A Fragile Nation — The Indonesian Crisis” because I have reason to agree with Amien Rais, the former leader of the 28-million-strong Muhammadiyah association and the current chairman of the Partai Amanat Rakyat (PAN) of Indonesia, who said in Singapore in July 1998 that Indonesia “was in danger of falling apart” and the “syndrome of Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union is creeping into Indonesia”. He said Indonesia was in danger of “disintegrating with voices of discontent in provinces such as Irian Jaya, Timor and Aceh”. Abdurrahman Wahid, the 52-year-old prominent leader of Indonesia’s largest Muslim party, the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), also issued a similar warning.

The riots of May 13-14, 1998 in Jakarta, targeted at ethnic Chinese resulted in 5,000 Chinese-owned buildings being burnt, several thousands of Chinese killed and at least 164 Chinese girls and women raped. There is a serious religious clash between the Muslims and the Christians in Ambon, resulting in at least 1,000 dead and hundreds wounded. The Muslims were burning down Christian churches, and the Christians destroying mosques. Jakarta Muslims are calling for a “jihad” (religious war) in Ambon. If that should happen it will spread

to other provinces where there are Christians. These events showed a serious infringement of the spirit of tolerance as symbolised by the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) inscribed on the Indonesian state crest. The atrocities caused by a minority fanatical group of Indonesians on ethnic Chinese show that this spirit of tolerance is disappearing in the Indonesian society. Let me first explain the meaning of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*.

These words appeared in a legend which can be found in a book entitled *Sutasoma*, written in old Javanese by Mpu Tantular around the thirteenth or fourteenth century. An ogre king by the name of *Purushada* (meaning 'eating people') was fond of human flesh for his daily meals. The commonfolk, one after another, became his victims and they were terrified. A knight by the name of *Sutasoma* took pity on the people and offered himself to the king to be devoured instead of the people. *Purushada* was furious with *Sutasoma* for trying to interfere with his eating habits which he considered quite normal. He attempted to kill *Sutasoma* but could not because *Sutasoma* was equally strong. A bitter struggle took place. Lord *Siva* entered the body of the king, and Lord *Buddha* entered that of the knight. It was a long-drawn battle in which supernatural powers were invoked. Neither one could defeat his adversary. Then the Brahmins came, appealed to both warriors to cease fighting, and told them that though their appearances might be different, they were in reality one. In the old Javanese language, the words which the Brahmins used to drop the hint that *Siva* and *Buddha* were one in different forms were *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. *Siva* and *Buddha*, realising the oneness in them, left the bodies of the two warriors. *Purushada* then gave up his habit of devouring people and began to lead a normal life.

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika means "Unity in Diversity" which describes the flexibility of the Indonesian people to syncretise and to blend the various religious beliefs, traditions and cultures — some of which are conflicting in the eyes of foreigners — into one to suit local conditions. It reminds the Indonesians of the necessity and virtue of the spirit of tolerance and accommodation in a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society. This spirit of tolerance and syncretism

has made intermarriages between persons of different religions a common affair. It is not unusual to find an Indonesian family in which many religions are practised concurrently. I have a friend in high position who is a Muslim. His wife is a Catholic, and his children are either Muslims or Catholics. One of them even practises *kebatinan* (an indigenous Javanese religious movement with a strong element of Buddhism). In this country, nobody tries to force another to adopt his religion, there is mutual respect so that all can live in harmony.

From a religious symbol, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* became a political one when former President Sukarno tried to syncretise nationalism, religion and communism into a state ideology under the name of *Nasakom*. Although it might appear to observers that the basic tenets of the three politico-religious concepts contain fundamental contradictions which are irreconcilable, President Sukarno was tempted to give it a trial run. *Nasakom* ended on the rocks because one of the three components had tried to impose its will on the others by the use of force. It had infringed the spirit of tolerance. Once the rule is broken, the balance of the scale is tipped, and the whole idea collapsed. It was a good lesson to most Indonesians and the spirit of tolerance as symbolised by *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* has since been institutionalised.

The slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* may be comparable to the biological term "symbiosis" meaning "relying on one another for survival". The more popular phrase in everyday use is "to live and let live". I remember vividly how the former Minister of Information, Mr Mashuri, explained to me his concept of symbiosis in human relations as opposed to the Western concept of "survival of the fittest". He said the symbiotic approach is to treat one's fellowmen as an interdependent part of the whole human society whose survival is conditional upon mutual help for mutual benefit. On the other hand, the Western concept of "survival of the fittest" makes humans treat one another as separate, antagonistic units. They attempt to eliminate others in order to survive, in the same way as big fish eat small fish and small fish eat the shrimps. Based on this concept, the strong try to dominate the weak and impose their will on them. This is the root of all the trouble in human society.

Mashuri said unless people learn to live with one another instead of following the concept of “survival of the fittest”, the world will always be plagued by tension, chaos and friction. The failure of the Nasakom ideology can also be interpreted as a clash between the spirit of “symbiosis” and that of “survival of the fittest”. One of the proponents of Nasakom tried to apply the theory of “survival of the fittest” on Indonesian soil, but failed because traditionally the soil had been saturated with the *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* spirit.

The failure of the Nasakom ideology has brought Indonesia back to the philosophy of *Pancasila* — a philosophy originated by Sukarno but refined by Suharto after he became President. Pancasila means observing the five principles: Belief in one God, Humanity, Sovereignty of the people, Social Justice and Democracy. The Suharto Government has made the first of October (the day after the disastrous Gestapu coup of 30 September 1965) the Pancasila day to remind the people of the disaster of the killing of six generals and one soldier. All seven of them were thrown into the Lubang Buaya (crocodile hole) after their assassination. Blame was put on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) for the assassination and about half a million of suspected Communist party members were slaughtered by extreme Muslims after the incident referred to as the *Gestapu* coup.

To revive further the spirit of the 1945 revolution and the struggle for independence, a Pancasila monument was erected at Kalibata where national heroes are buried. The monument comprising five towering pillars representing the five principles of Pancasila was officially declared open by President Suharto on 11 November 1974. The monument was to commemorate the millions of unknown soldiers who had sacrificed their lives for independence.

After the fall of Suharto, even the Pancasila philosophy is facing a serious challenge by some fundamentalist Muslims who are clamouring for an Islamic state for Indonesia. The success of the Islamic revolutions, particularly in Iran and elsewhere, have encouraged them to revive the Islamic dream of enforcing Islamic law in Indonesia. On 30 July, 1998, representatives of Muslim groups slipped into the state secretariat in Jakarta to present a petition to current President Habibie demanding

that political parties be freed from the state ideology of Pancasila, and also demanding the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia.

The Pancasila spirit is based on the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and, if weakened, then bloodshed, chaos and disharmony will befall Indonesia. In recent years, there were already many incidents of the Muslim extremists burning down Christian churches and Chinese temples. The May 13 riots demonstrated the intolerance of some people who went on a rampage against the Chinese. If Indonesia is Islamised, several provinces that are non-Muslim will want to split away from Indonesia. That is why I think the country is rather fragile at this moment.

In this book, my first chapter deals with the political and economic situation facing Indonesia after the fall of Suharto and the end of his 32-year-old reign as a "Javanese king". I describe his contribution as the "economic father" of modern Indonesia, but also explain his weakness in not being able to distribute wealth more equally among his people. I give the reasons behind his political collapse, and how he had failed to balance the power between the military forces and Islam. Like Sukarno, who fell because he failed to balance the power between the armed forces and the communists, Suharto also fell because he failed to maintain an equilibrium between the armed forces and Islam. In the first chapter under the title "Why Suharto Fell", I venture into the future of Indonesia and the various problems facing the country if the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is not observed.

The book describes the diversity of the various peoples, their history, their dialects, their traditions, customs, cultures, their colourful ways of life and their psyche. I have first made an analysis of the Javanese who are the real masters of Indonesia. I became interested in Javanese mysticism after a prominent Sumatran journalist, Mochtar Lubis, had hinted to me that I should first understand Javanese mysticism if I wanted to make headway in Indonesia. Then, even Adam Malik, the former Foreign Minister and Vice-President who was a Batak Muslim, advised me to study Javanese mysticism because he said he himself could not understand the Javanese.

I was made to realise that to understand Indonesia, one must understand Javanese mysticism. An elite of perhaps 2,000 men manipulate Indonesia's politics. Many of them are *abangans* or nominal Muslims who are Muslims and yet not entirely Muslims with their own beliefs. Unlike orthodox Muslims referred to as *santris* who believe only in Mohammed and Allah (God), these *abangans* believe in *kebatinan*, that is, the spirits which dwell in the *kris*; they believe in the existence of *Semar*, the guardian spirit of Java; predictions of *Joyoboyo*; and *Lara Kidul*, the Queen of the Indonesian Ocean. The Javanese are addicted to *wayang*, their shadow play. I have written seven sections under the title of Javanese mysticism, describing the *wayang*, the *kris*, the *kratons* (Javanese palace), *Semar*, the *Joyoboyo* predictions and *Lara Kidul*. Since the Javanese comprise 45 percent of the population, it is necessary to give more prominence to Javanese mysticism.

The book then deals with the history of the happy-go-lucky Sundanese, who dislike to be called Javanese because historically they hold a grudge against Gajah Mada, the famous Javanese prime minister. Gajah Mada had disgraced a Sundanese princess by putting her in the imperial harem when she should have been officially married to King Hayam Wuruk. The insult led to war between the Javanese and the Sundanese resulting in the killing of the Sundanese king and the princess, who also died in the battle. In the Sundanese city of Bandung, I discovered that there is no street named after Gajah Mada, unlike most other cities.

I next deal with the hot-tempered Madurese, who were also historically hostile to the Javanese kingdom. Then, I deal with the Balinese, who were practitioners of mass suicide and who live in a religious world of their own. I also touched on the Baduis who isolated themselves in the mountains off Bogor, and the Tenggerese who were Hindu devotees living around Mount Bromo. Both these tribes ran away from mainstream Indonesia when Islam came to Java because they refused to be converted.

This book then deals with the Sumatrans who wanted to establish a rebel government with Bukit Tinggi as their headquarters to rival

that of Jakarta. There were uprisings in Sumatra engineered by Colonel Simbolon, a famous Sumatran military leader, who, backed by his battalion of Sinta Pohan, went against the Jakarta Government led by Sukarno because they considered him a “wicked and godless man” who got too close with the communists. In Sumatra, I covered the cultures and traditions of the Minangkabaus and their matriarchal system; the Bataks, dynamic people who once practised cannibalism; the Acehnese who are Islamic fundamentalists still trying to establish an Islamic State of Aceh; and the Orang Melayu (Malays) who happen to be the founders of a Buddhist Srivijaya Empire and who now live in the Riau Islands and Palembang. As we know, Melayus are the majority race in Malaysia, but in Indonesia, they are a minority race.

From Sumatra, I turn to Sulawesi, and describe the Bugis (the seafarers) and the Makassarese — both tribes had aspired to set up an “Islamic Republic of South Sulawesi” — and the Torajans, mostly Christians who have their own peculiar customs and traditions and bury their dead in the rock mountains.

I have a special chapter on the Ambonese who were not ashamed to be called “black Dutch” and had been used by the Dutch as professional soldiers just as the Gurkhas were used by the British. These Ambonese were used by the Dutch to suppress the revolutionary movements in Indonesia. They too wanted to secede from Indonesia and form their own republic called “The Republic of Maluku Selatan” when Javanese republican forces came to replace the Dutch colonial army. Their attempt failed and hundreds of thousands of Ambonese and Moluccans were repatriated to Holland where they were stranded and unable to return to Indonesia. Ambon has again hit the newspaper headlines recently when a clash between Muslims and Christians took place causing the death of 200 Ambonese. It is the worst religious riot in history.

I also have a chapter on the Bandanese with a small population in Banda, about an hour’s flight from Ambon by a mosquito plane. Although this island is insignificant to modern Indonesia, it was once the centre of the nutmeg trade and an important island because two

of Indonesia's leaders, Dr Mohammad Hatta, the Vice-President and Sutan Sjahrir, Indonesia's first Prime Minister — were exiled there by the Dutch colonial authorities.

I have a chapter on the Irianese who, though living in the stone age, are also striving to rid themselves of what they call Javanese colonisation. I describe the primitive way of living in Irian Jaya and also talk about the separatist movement there which considers the moment ripe for a secession after the fall of Suharto. There is another chapter on the East Timorese whom I describe as a "people betrayed" and then discuss how and why Indonesia annexed the country and how the Timorese are still clamouring for independence.

I have a special chapter on the Chinese. They are after all Indonesian citizens and number more than 6.5 million — about three percent of the total population and more than double the population of Singapore. This chapter explains why Indonesians are anti-Chinese, the impact of the economic measures taken by Chinese *cukongs* (economic masters behind the scene) who have aroused feelings of hatred among the other Indonesians. I also discuss the problem of loyalty of the Chinese, their language and cultures. Through the centuries, the Chinese have built up a distribution network that is not easy to replace. Their trustworthiness had helped to draw foreign investments to Indonesia from Japan, America, Europe and overseas Chinese all over the world.

The May 13 riots have caused the Chinese to lose billions of dollars in properties and thousands of lives, and having many of their women raped. This resulted in an exodus of many wealthy Chinese and their capital thereby wrecking Indonesia's economic foundation. Nobody knows whether these Chinese who were essential to the successful functioning of Indonesia's business systems will ever return to Indonesia. Many of them have migrated to Thailand, which offers an easy way of obtaining permanent residency. Some have migrated to Australia which also took the opportunity to draw in new investors. What will happen if all the well-to-do Chinese decide to quit Indonesia? Can Indonesia survive without the Chinese?

I end the book with a chapter on the Dayaks who predominate Kalimantan. Kalimantan occupies three-quarters of Borneo, the third largest island in the world. The Dayaks are notorious for head-hunting and I touch on the culture and traditions of this people and their clash with the Bugis who are also head-hunters.

The aim of this book is to help bring about a better understanding of the Indonesian people who have inherited not only one of the richest natural resources of the world, but also a rich, diverse cultural heritage.

My book was written without scholarly pretensions. I am not afraid, now and then, to introduce my own personal impressions and reflections on the course of events. Nor do I shy away from prying into purely personal relationship. I have deliberately tried to give an account of what I saw or heard in a journalistic style. I realise that the specialists who read my book may discover certain defects. To some extent this is inevitable.

Indonesia is the third largest country in Asia, only smaller than China and India. It is resource-rich. It has large reserves of natural gas, oil, timber, rubber, coffee and other products. It does not need a super genius to run the country. All it needs is a good, lean and credible government, political stability and efficient economic management to restore confidence. With these and the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, the country has a bright future.

Very little has been written about the colourful cultures of the peoples of Indonesia. As a result, there is much misunderstanding and misconception about the country. The Javanese, for instance, are the most polite and refined people on earth. But, like the volcano, the hidden and suppressed emotions may sometimes burst out and suddenly you find acts of violence such as the Gestapu coup of 1965 and the recent May 13 riots in Jakarta. The Balinese are very charming people, always placid and calm, but there were several occurrences of *puputan* or mass suicide in their modern history. The various races of ethnic peoples in Indonesia have vastly different temperaments and lifestyles. This book makes an attempt to describe them all.

I have always believed that in international relations and human relations, the understanding and appreciation of each other's culture plays a very important role in bringing about peace and harmony in the world today. It is often the cultural barriers and misconceptions of each other's motives and intentions that bring about disputes, chaos and wars. For instance, the Javanese normally speaks softly whereas the Arabs often shout when they speak. There could be misunderstanding when the two races speak to each other. When a Javanese nods his head, it does not mean that he agrees with you but merely that he has heard you. This too could cause misunderstanding if one does not understand Javanese culture. There are many different characteristics and idiosyncracies in the various cultures of the Indonesian peoples and an understanding of them will be useful in dealing with them.

The IMF officials, for instance, recommended that Indonesia should increase petrol prices presumably for economic reasons, at the height of the economic crisis in mid-1998. Apparently, they did not understand the Indonesian culture, thereby precipitating Suharto's fall from office.

It is essential and beneficial for people dealing with the Indonesians or the Indonesian Government, be they IMF officials, foreign tourists or investors, to have a better understanding of the psyche of the Indonesians.

It is my sincere hope and desire that this book will help contribute towards this goal.