

THE VERNACULAR PRESS AND THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDONESIA

AHMAT ADAM

Introduction

The emergence of the native press in Indonesia was a mid-nineteenth century phenomenon. The founding of a vernacular press took place following the introduction of the Government Regulations (*Regeerings Reglement*) of 1854 which had envisaged the relaxation of the Press Laws of the Indies. When the first native-language newspaper appeared at Surakarta, on 25th January 1855, the Press Act was still in the offing and the Bill was still being debated in the Dutch Parliament. The birth of the said paper, named *Bromartani* [all-round proclaimer] thus took place in an atmosphere of expectation for press liberalism. But the much-awaited Press Act which was finally introduced in 1856 soon aroused great disquiet among publishers and printers. Article 13 of the Act, supplemented by Articles 15 – 18, clearly stipulated the system of preventive censorship. The Act not only required printers or publishers to send signed copies of their paper or periodical to the Head of Local Government, the Public Prosecutor and the General Secretariat, failing which they would face a fine of between 50 to 1,000 guilders but also empowered the government to supervise the operation of the press by stipulating that publication depended on permission from the government and that the Governor General had the power to stop the publication of any paper or periodical. The Governor General also had unlimited powers to expel anyone who appeared to pose a threat to peace in the Netherlands Indies.

The first native-language newspaper was published in the Javanese language.¹ It was not until a year later that the first Malay-language newspaper was published. The *Soerat Kabar Bahasa Melajoe* as it was called, was published by E. Fuhri at Surabaya. Although Javanese language newspapers did appear intermittently in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, the Malay vernacular press nevertheless seemed to have flourished much more especially after 1860. The Malay language was not just a *lingua franca*, but also the language adopted by the Dutch to communicate with the indigenous population and the other non-European communities. The fact that Christian missionaries primarily used Malay to propagate the Christian faith and to conduct sermons as well as to print Christian literature for the natives also helped to spread its usage among the non-native speakers of the language. The Malay language was also the mother-tongue of *peranakan* Chinese who adopted the simple or "low" form of Malay which through the process of time had been very much coloured by the grammatical forms, vocabulary and other linguistic traits of foreign languages such as Chinese, Dutch and Portuguese.² This "low Malay" or what was then called *bahasa Melayu rendah* was at times referred to as Batavian Malay or

¹The *Bromartani* appeared weekly and was published by the Harteveld Bros. Its editor was C.F. Winter, the reputed Javanese philologist.

²The so-called "low" Malay was also very much influenced by Javanese and Sundanese linguistic peculiarities.

Melayu Betawi and one cannot underestimate its influence on bahasa Indonesia today. Throughout the nineteenth century and even until the 1930s, the lower form of Malay which gradually became known as *bahasa Melayu Tionghoa* was the most important medium for the vernacular press in Indonesia.

Although the newspapers and periodicals of the past century had used the Malay and Javanese languages, nonetheless it is interesting to note that from the time of the launching of the first Javanese newspaper until the end of the nineteenth century the native press business had almost totally been the monopoly of the European publishers and printers. If there ever was competition from other non-European publishers, it was only from the Chinese who in 1886 managed to buy the printing press of Gabriel Gimberg & Co. at Surabaya. It is even more surprising to discover that it was not until the late 1880s and the nineties that native Indonesians emerged to become editors or correspondents of newspapers and periodicals which were nevertheless European-owned.³ Among the well-known editors of this period were Raden Sosro Danoekoesoemo, a teacher (editor of *Soeloeh Pengadjar*), Datoek Soetan Maharadja (editor of *Palita Ketjil*, later renamed *Warta Berita*), Ki Padmosoesastra (editor of *Djawi Kando*), and Raden Ngabehi Tjitro Adiwinoto (editor of *Pewarta Hindia*) who were all priyayis in the sense that they were government officials.

The belated appearance of indigenous Indonesians in the publishing business and the press industry in particular could be attributed to their weak economic position. The conspicuous absence of an indigenous business community in the second half of the nineteenth century did not in any way help Indonesians to start a printing firm. It was rather strange that the first non-European to assume the job of editor of a native-language newspaper was a peranakan Chinese. In 1869 Lo Tun Tay edited the paper, *Matahari*, which was published by Bruining & Wijt at Batavia.

It would not be too far off the mark to say that the slow growth of schools had also hampered the participation of Indonesians in the field of vernacular journalism. Although there were some government-backed native schools in Java as early as 1852⁴ and 1851 in case of Sumatra⁵, secular education for the Indonesians was something difficult to come by. Although the missionaries had done tremendous amount of work to propagate Western education in Java as well as the outer islands, nevertheless such Christian-orientated schools were not popular to Indonesian Moslems. It was not until the Fundamental Education Decree of 1871 was issued that more schools were set up and more Indonesians (the children of priyayis) were given the opportunity to acquire western-type of education. The rise of schools indirectly encouraged educationists and missionaries to publish newspapers and

³Among the famous publishers of this period were: W. Meulenhoff, Ogilvie & Co. (both at Batavia), G.C.T. Van Dorp at Semarang, W. Bruining & Co. at Batavia, Vogel Van der Heyden & Co. at Surakarta, Messrs. Karseboom & Co. and Albrecht & Co. (both at Batavia), Thieme & Co. at Surabaya and many others.

⁴This was the teachers' college at Surakarta run by Pulmer van den Broek. In that same year Regency schools were set up in the Preanger and Bagelen residencies.

⁵In 1851 the Government of West-Coast of Sumatra set up its first native schools. See H. Kroeskamp, *Early Schoolmasters in a Developing Country*, van Gorcum, Assen, 1974, p. 326.

periodicals because the dearth for reading materials was urgently felt by teachers as well as students.

Towards the closing years of the last century, education for the indigenous people seemed to be the dominant topic of discussion in the native press. There was a growing realization among the educated few that in order to improve the welfare of the Indonesians something should be done to make secular education available to them, especially to the children of priyayis who were looked upon as the group that would bring changes to society. The newly-felt consciousness with regard to education and literacy also provoked interest to encourage reading among priyayis and government officials and this led to the founding of priyayi clubs which usually formed small libraries to provide reading material to members. It was also during the last decade of the nineteenth century that pedagogical journals were published at various towns where the teachers' colleges were located. In 1887 P. Schuitmaker published the *Soeloeh Pengadjar* [the Teacher's Torch] at Probolinggo. At the demise of this journal in 1893, another educational periodical names *Matahari Terbit* [the Rising Sun] was produced in 1895 to take its place. In 1899 from the firm of G.C.T. van Dorp at Semarang there emerged another teachers' journal. The *Taman Pengadjar* [the Teacher's Garden] was edited by P. Vermeulen, Mas Boediardjo, Mas Soerja, Mas Abdoelah and Mas Ngabehi Dwidjasewaja, who were all teachers. The journal published articles concerning education, methods of teaching, Javanese literature as well as articles pertaining to the importance of the Dutch language.

In spite of the intermittent appearance and demise of vernacular newspapers and periodicals, by the beginning of 1900 there were fourteen newspapers and five periodicals being published and circulated (mainly by the European publishers) in the Indies. The newspapers and periodicals published in the various cities were:

Newspapers	Periodicals
Batavia	
Pemberita Betawi Bintang Betawi	Hoekoem Hindia Soerat Kabar Soldadoe
Surabaya	
Bintang Soerabaja Primbon Soerabaja	
Yogyakarta	
Retno Dhoemilah (Malay & Javanese)	
Surakarta	
Bromartani (Javanese) Djawi Kando (Malay & Javanese)	Sosodoro (Javanese)

Padang

Pertja Barat
Warta Berita
Tjahaja Sumatra

Ambon

Penghentar

Out of the 14 newspapers, 5 were dailies: *Bintang Soerabaja*, *Selompret Melajoe*, *Primbon Soerabaja*, *Bintang Betawi* and *Pemberita Betawi*.

The opening of the twentieth century marked a new era in the growth of the native press and Indonesian awareness with regard to the role of the press in arousing social consciousness among the literate Indonesians. The year 1900 especially was a significant date in the history of modern Indonesia. Not only was it significant in the colonial context, being the year preceding the inauguration of the Ethical Policy and so marking a departure from the so-called liberal policy, but it also notched an important event in the Indies. This was the founding of the Chinese socio-cultural organization, *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan* which was granted governmental recognition on June 3, 1900.⁶ This organization was formed by some *peranakan* Chinese businessmen and intellectuals after more than a decade of unceasing effort to work for Chinese unity in the Dutch East Indies to demand for better treatment from the Dutch in the social and economic fields.⁷ Ever since the eighties, the native-language press had been a medium for expressing Chinese dissatisfaction with regard to obstacles imposed on the community in their commercial and economic pursuits. They were especially resentful of the discriminatory law called the Travel Pass Law which they felt was curbing their movement in the Indies and hampering their peddling trade.⁸ They also complained of being burdened by all kinds of taxes levied upon their community by the government. Thus the dawn of the twentieth century saw a social awakening among the Chinese in the Indies and this was to produce a chain of events which ultimately gave expression to the indigenous Indonesian awakening in the first decade of this century.

⁶On the *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan*, see Nio Joe Lan, *Riwajat 40 Taon dari Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan (1900–1939)*, Batavia, 1940. See also Lea E. Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism: the genesis of the pan-Chinese movement in Indonesia*, the Free Press, Glencoe, 1960, Ch. 3.

⁷Some of the intellectuals were also journalists by profession; they were editors of the Malay-language newspapers and among them the most prominent, both as editor as well as leader of the THHK, was Lie Kim Hok who was editor of the *Pemberita Betawi* and *Perniagaan* in 1909.

The most pressing issue for the Chinese in the Indies then was the question of education for Chinese children. Because of this, education was given top priority in the programme of activities of the THHK.

⁸This obnoxious law required Chinese travellers to obtain passes whenever they wanted to go from place to place. If they were peddling their wares and they had to put up the night in a certain village they would be found guilty if they had not obtained the necessary document. To the Chinese the *surat pas jalan* (travelling pass) was discriminatory because the natives were not required to have it. It was also cumbersome as it also involved bribing officials in the village or at the assistant wedono's office. The law was finally withdrawn in 1913 after much protestation from the Chinese community.

The formation of the *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan* not only boosted Chinese morale in so far as it gave them a tremendous feeling of *esprit de corps*, it also acted as a catalyst to the Indonesians especially those who were involved in the press business who clearly saw that the increasing demand for changes voiced by the Chinese and European publishers had paid off. The THHK had enabled the Chinese to set up their own schools which started with the opening of the first THHK school on 17 March 1901.⁹

In around 1900 almost all the vernacular newspapers were catering for Chinese readership and thus were printing news and articles which would suit Chinese taste. European-edited newspapers such as *Pemberita Betawi* and *Bintang Soerabaja* even went to the extent of issuing colourful editions marking every Chinese festive days in their calendar. Because of this sudden resurgence of Chinese nationalism in the Indies even the editor of the first Indonesian-owned periodical which appeared on 17 August 1903 saw it fitting to announce his support for the *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan*. When the said periodical, *Soenda Berita* was launched, its editor, R.M. Tirta Adhi Soerjo announced that twenty percent of the profit acquired from subscriptions would be donated to the THHK, and to any welfare bodies catering for the indigenous people at Semarang as well as to the White Cross colony at Salatiga (home for poor Christians). Tirta also promised to donate twenty percent of the returns from advertisement charges to other charity bodies. Undoubtedly, Tirta Adhi Soerjo's motive in offering donations was to attract Chinese and Eurasian/European subscribers and advertisers apart from Indonesian readers. However, the contents of the *Soenda Berita* concerned mainly the Indonesians. The periodical was the first ever to be published and edited by an Indonesian. It appeared weekly at Batavia and was printed at the G. Kolff & Co. printing press. Its articles were mainly concerning commerce, agriculture and law and they clearly reflected the editor's desire to arouse interest among his fellow Indonesians to strive for progress through learning.

The dependence of the vernacular press on Chinese and European subscribers was acknowledged by Tirta Adhi Soerjo himself. Looking back to his early days, he said,

"... I still remember the days when I served as editor ... during which time the Malay press could only survive by depending on the Chinese and European readers; editors should be scrupulous enough not to be careless in promoting the interests of the two communities, for otherwise it was not unusual for them to lose their jobs..."¹⁰

⁹These THHK schools were more modern in outlook. Not only was *Kuo Yu* taught but foreign languages were also introduced. Prior to these there were already private Chinese schools in the Indies (in 1900 there were 439 schools throughout the Indies, 257 being in Java) but the method of teaching and curriculum content was obsolete. The teaching of English had in some ways irritated the Dutch and perhaps it was partly due to this that the Dutch government conceded in 1908 to build Dutch-Chinese schools in the Indies.

¹⁰Tirta's speech to the native traders at Bogor which appeared in *Pewarta Boemi*, 16 May, 1911.

Tirto attributed the progress of the Chinese to the dissemination of information and widespread propaganda given by the Malay-language press of the Indies. He said,

“... Through the influence of the press, the Chinese were awakened from their slumber, and everyone was on the move to exploit every sign of progress and find ways to achieve that progress. It was due to this that there arose various associations and schools and [they] contributed towards strengthening their business activities...”¹¹

Indeed, the favourite theme discussed by correspondents and readers in the newspaper columns in the early decades of this century was *kemajuan* or progress. The launching of the Ethical Policy was received by the Indonesian journalists as an era of change which would give them an opportunity to pursue modern secular education and to find ways and means for achieving progress.

In 1902 there appeared an illustrated magazine called *Bintang Hindia* in the cities and towns in the Indies. This fortnightly periodical was published and printed in Amsterdam but circulated for the consumption of Indonesians in the colony. It was edited by a medical student who was a qualified *dokter Djawa* and who was sojourning in Amsterdam while waiting for an opportunity to continue his studies in one of the universities in the Netherlands.¹² The magazine was published on the initiative of an ex-army officer, H.C.C. Clockener Brousson who had assumed the post of chief editor although most of the editing work was done by Abdul Rivai himself. It was published in Malay with a few pages in Dutch because the editors felt that the use of Dutch should be encouraged and fostered among Indonesian intellectuals. This aim to popularize the Dutch language was in fact supported by the Indonesian teachers in the Indies. Since the aims of the *Bintang Hindia* were not incongruous with those of the Ethical Policy, Brousson sought the help of the *Algemeene Nederlandsch Verbond* and the *Vereeniging Oost en West* to request the government to grant financial aid and moral support for the distribution of the *Bintang Hindia* in the Indies. It was stated by the two editors that the *Bintang Hindia* sought to promote cultural development of the native population as well as to strengthen the bond between the Netherlands and the Indies. It was thus recommended that the periodical be distributed to native schools at the government's expense and be made available to native head teachers and teacher-trainees as well as *dokter Djawa* students. It was also proposed that the *Bintang Hindia* be supplied to the military cantonments, hospitals and boarding houses.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Abdul Rivai was a Palembang Malay who had come to the Netherlands in 1899. He had been practising as a *dokter Djawa* in East Sumatra but was not satisfied with his position. He managed to gain admission first at the Utrecht University but he was required to sit for the preliminary theoretical examination since his *dokter Djawa* qualifications were not recognized. He refused to do so, and took steps to appeal to the Minister of Colonies to exempt him from the examinations. It was while waiting for a reply that he lived in Amsterdam and founded the publication of a periodical called *Bandera Wolanda* in collaboration with Brousson, in 1901. After the said periodical was dissolved, both men started the *Bintang Hindia*.

The government's reaction to the request made by Clockener Brousson and Abdul Rivai was rather cautious and hesitant. The background of Rivai who was looked upon as an "impulsive and emotional" character seemed to have given suspicion to the authorities. Thus when the Governor General requested information whether the *Bintang Hindia* deserved any financial subsidy, the reply from the Minister of Colonies was:

"... I think it would be useful to draw your excellency's attention to the fact that it concerns here the press and the potential damage it would cause by the publication of despicable articles ... If your excellency think that notwithstanding these conditions it would still be possible for the government to lend support to the publication of this periodical, then in my opinion, conditions should be explicitly imposed whereby articles in your excellency's opinion are of agitative or intolerant nature should be kept out, failing which the subsidy would be immediately withdrawn..."¹³

By April 1904, however, the First Government Secretary informed the Governor General that he had no objection to giving financial assistance to the *Bintang Hindia*. The Minister of Colonies then affirmed that he too had no objection to granting support to the magazine, "so long as the articles published would not exercise a bad influence on the native reading public".

The softening attitude adopted by the government was above all due to the realization that the press could be a useful tool for propagandizing the government's policies. It would also give the government a chance to communicate to the literate stratum of Indonesian society. The government was quite well aware of the fact that vernacular journalism had found a foothold on the native literati. The rapid growth of newspapers and the increasingly large number of subscribers for newspapers or periodicals were signs that change was taking place in the Indies. It was a happy coincidence that the Ethical Policy was launched when there were already signs indicating a willingness on the part of the indigenous population to strive for a better deal. As indicated by readers' letters in the newspaper columns there were demands for better and wider opportunities in education and the approximation of rights with the so-called *bangsa sopan* (civilized race). In the context of the 'ethical' aims of the government, it was thus felt that the Amsterdam-based *Bintang Hindia* could prove a useful medium "to promote widespread education by the dissemination of good reading matter...". As a matter of fact, the Director of Education, Religion and Industry Mr. Abendanon, was instructed to have the magazine distributed to schools and colleges. The magazine was even circulated among the priyayis who served as government officials. The cost of subscription for the schools was borne by the government. It amounted to a total sum of fl.3,500— to be paid yearly for the subscription of the magazine at fl. 2.50 each.

The popularity of the *Bintang Hindia* in the early years of its existence was almost unchallenged. Its readership constituted of government officials, school

¹³Vb. 23 February, 1904.

teachers, soldiers, businessmen, college students and school children. Printed by the firm, Boon at Amsterdam, the illustrated journal had distributing agents and readers in almost every part of the Indies, including Singapore and the Malay Peninsula. It called itself a "Malay-Dutch magazine for the *kaum muda* [the younger or progressive generation]. When it first appeared its number of subscribers totalled about 6,000. But in 1904 the figure swelled to 14,000 and one year later it jumped to 30,000 which was a record in the history of the native press in Indonesia.¹⁴ In the words of Abdul Rivai, "the *Bintang Hindia* wishes to communicate to the Indonesians". He said, the rajas, chiefs and other officials wanted to know the progress of their people through the *Bintang Hindia* so that they could learn from their mistakes. Abdul Rivai, the editor was the prime mover of ideas on progress which he propagandized through the *Bintang Hindia*. He called upon the Indonesians to cast away their old way of thinking and urged them to follow the Chinese *kaum muda* who had earned progress or *kemajuan* through their association, the *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan*. He even urged the Indonesian intelligentsia to found a similar organization. In his writings Rivai saw a dichotomy between the younger generation and the old in both the Chinese and Indonesian communities. There was polarization in approach and attitude towards modernization between the *kaum kuno* (conservative group) and the *kaum muda* (progressive group or younger generation). Indeed, the *Bintang Hindia* claimed that it was the organ of the *kaum muda* and was promoting their ideas and aiding their struggle for progress. *Kaum muda* then became a catch phrase of the period to refer to people who had acquired a certain level of western education. Abdul Rivai defined *kaum muda* as "... all people of the Indies whether young or old who refuse to follow the ancient system, obsolete customs and outdated habits, but wish to attain respect by way of knowledge and education...". Articles published in the *Bintang Hindia* reflected the general conception of the term, that to be included in the circle of *kaum muda* meant to be classified into the enlightened and progressive stratum of society which had benefitted Western cultural values through a secular education. Abdul Rivai himself called upon the elite¹⁵ to abandon the retrogressive *adat* for, he argued, such *adat* or customs formed a stumbling block to progress.

In spite of its profession of being a *kaum muda* journal, however, the *Bintang Hindia* did give hearing to voices in defence of the *adat* and traditional norms. A Sundanese writer, M. Adwidjaja lamented that he was sad to see some of his fellow Indonesians throwing away their *adat* and traditional skills in preference to "aping the ways and skills of the European, which were not even copied properly, thus giving them little benefit from it. While the skills of the foreigners were not fully understood and acquired their own indigenous skills gradually disappeared". He then noted that after more than fifty years of Western education, the indigenous people were still backward. To his mind this was due to:

¹⁴In the 1870s, the number of subscribers usually did not exceed 800. Towards the closing years of the century a publisher could well be proud if he managed to get a thousand subscribers.

¹⁵Rivai divided the Indonesian elite into two camps of leadership: the modernists and the traditionalists. He named the former, *bangsawan fikiran* [intellectual aristocrats] and the latter, *bangsawan usul* [aristocrats by birth].

- a) their lack of love for their own people and country;
- b) their direction was twofold, which divided between their loyalty to the Dutch and their desire to be ruled by Turkey (in reference to the pan-Islamic movement), and
- c) they had no faith in their own people.

The writer said that this was evident from the fact that throughout the Indies the indigenous population had no major organization which could strive for the progress and welfare of the people. What they had were only small societies which were more concerned with their own provincialism and mundane matters such as the question of saving bank. Even then, most of these associations were not recognized by the government, and membership was not exclusively restricted to Indonesians. The writer also noted that the indigenous people also did not have a major commercial organization that could match those of the other races.

The *Bintang Hindia* became a forum where topics touching on the welfare of the Indonesian people were discussed. The question of whether Islam posed a hindrance towards achieving progress was quite often debated which prompted the editor to remind readers not to discuss lengthily on issues of religion. On the question of *adat* many readers argued that without *adat* the Javanese would be *kapiran* [literally: infidels] which probably meant a loss of national culture or identity, for it was stated that without *adat* they would be looked down by the other races. Progress, it was argued, must be strived for by using the technique of the West but not at the expense of sacrificing the Javanese identity.

However, like most of the readers' letters which appeared in the native press in the first decade of this century, the general opinion concurred that education was the major weapon for them to use in order to make any headway for the attainment of progress for the indigenous people. The question of education nevertheless was linked with the question of language, namely the Dutch language. It was with this aim of propagating the Dutch language among Indonesians that the *Bintang Hindia* specially provided regular columns for learning Dutch. But by late 1906, the popularity of the *Bintang Hindia* had begun to decline. It seemed the magazine suffered from its lack of readers. Many Chinese were also withdrawing their moral support from the *Bintang Hindia* because by this time they already had semi-official organs of their own which unmistakably were Chinese in orientation and thus became the mouthpiece of the Chinese community.¹⁶ The *Bintang Hindia* continued until the middle of 1907 but a personal quarrel between Clockener Brousson and Abdul Rivai (who incidently was also busy at this time with his medical studies at the University of Amsterdam) led to a split in the editorial board. The withdrawal of the government's financial subsidy and the financial mismanagement of Brousson finally led to the death of the illustrated journal.

The signs of general awakening among the native Indonesian literati were not only indicated by articles in the *Bintang Hindia*, but could also be seen in news-

¹⁶By the end of 1906 there were already six Chinese newspapers circulating in Java. They were the *Li Po* (Sukabumi), *Loen Boen* (Surabaya), *Ho Po* (Buitenzorg), *Tiong Hoa Wie Sin Po* (Buitenzorg (?)) *Ik Po* (Surakarta) and *Seng Kie Po* (Batavia).

papers in Java and Sumatra. The *Selompret Melajoe* which was one of the earliest newspapers to be founded in the Indies and the longest to survive, not only carried news of events in and around Semarang, but also published articles of interest to the various communities and its readers' letters make interesting reading especially with regard to issues concerning native education and native welfare. In Sumatra, the *Sinar Sumatra*, *Partja Barat* and the *Alam Minangkerbau* were popular newspapers and they too were not lagging behind in highlighting the polemical topics of the period. The *Insulinde*, a Padang-based periodical, in fact claimed to serve as "guidance for all priyayis and gentlemen who were in pursuit of knowledge..."

However, of all the native journalists who emerged at the turn of the century, the most colourful figure and certainly one that could be said to have given substantial contribution to the development of the native press in Indonesia and the growth of national consciousness among Indonesian intellectuals was Raden Mas Tirta Adhi Soerjo. It was Tirta who pioneered the Indonesian participation in the press industry. When the first periodical he founded (*Soenda Berita*, 1903) ceased to appear in 1905 he started another journal called *Soeloeh Keadilan* [Torch of Justice] in 1907 upon the advice of the Chief *Jaksa* at Ceribon, R.M. Temenggung Pandji Arjodinoto. It that same year he launched his first weekly newspaper (the first to be owned and run by an Indonesian) named *Medan Priyayi* [Priyayis' Forum]. He was the chief editor for both publications.

The desire to start a native publishing company and thus make his living in the press business prompted him to approach a certain Haji Mohamed Arsad, a Sundanese from Bandung to procure financial backing. By making Arsad a partner of the company, Tirta managed to start a publishing firm in August 1907 which would facilitate him in producing more journals. Since Haji Mohd. Arsad was the principal shareholder, the post of Director was given to him and the company was called H.M. Arsad & Co. In the following year the company published the first women's journal in the Indies. The *Poetri Hindia* [the Indies' princess], as the journal was called, was launched in January 1908 with Tirta as one of its chief editors.¹⁷ The journal's patron was the Bupati of Karanganyar, Raden Temenggung Tirta Koesoemo. Articles in the *Poetri Hindia* were mostly contributed by wives of priyayis and they touched on various aspects, namely hygiene, child-care, evils of being extravagant, Javanese cookery and others of feminine interest. Apparently the periodical received the backing of the authorities. Some time in 1909 the editorial board received money for the journal from the Queen Mother, Queen Emma "as an inducement for bringing progress to the housewives in the Indies".¹⁸

The encouraging response from readers and subscribers to the publications by Tirta Adhi Soerjo and the realization that the native printing business could well thrive, encouraged Tirta to expand his business by founding a printing and publishing concern which he hoped could be started with the backing of rich priyayis and wealthy Chinese. His ambition was fulfilled when towards the end of

¹⁷Tirta was assisted by a number of ladies who were given the titles of chief-editors and editors. His own wife, Raja Fatimah, and H.M. Arsad's wife were also appointed as editors of the periodical. Most of the ladies were quite highly qualified in the context of this period. They were either teachers or graduates of Dutch schools. There were also names of European ladies on the editorial board.

¹⁸*Medan Priyayi* (3), 1909, p. 744.

1908 he managed to set up the Medan Priyayi Javanese Book Trader, Printer and Stationer Company Limited, with a target capital of fl. 75,000—. ¹⁹

With the setting up of the Medan Priyayi firm as a limited liability company, the Indies had seen for the first time the birth of a serious attempt by an Indonesian entrepreneur to start a sizable business concern through the sale of shares. However, this went to prove that by themselves the Indonesians would not be able to set up a business company in order to compete with the non-indigenous business concerns. Efforts to enter the business world had, time and again, been expressed in the vernacular press at the turn of the century but they only succeeded in setting up co-operative shops; even these found great difficulties to survive due to lack of managerial skill and entrepreneurial leadership among Indonesians who were more priyayi-orientated than business-orientated. Tirto Adhi Soerjo himself was a priyayi but he was very much interested in business as proven when at the turn of the century he became an insurance agent for a European company. He had little experience and the know-how in the business field. The only skill he had was as a journalist and his interest in the press made him more inclined to start a printing business.

The formation of the Medan Priyayi Co. Ltd. was accompanied by the rise of small commercial cooperative ventures. In Sumatra, Dja Endar Moeda of Padang had managed to set up a printing press in 1906. But it was only in 1911 that the Sumatra Malays made a breakthrough in establishing a relatively sizeable business concern with the setting up of the *Perserikatan Orang Alam Minangkerbau* (Union of the People of Minangkabau) and a printing press was established in that year to produce the newspaper, *Oetoesan Melajoe*.²⁰

The so-called awakening of Indonesians in the economic field was greeted with enthusiasm by Tirto Adhi Soerjo. He felt that at long last changes were taking place in Indonesian society. His enthusiasm was further boosted when the Budi Utomo came into reality in 1908. He said the position of the Javanese could be advanced if their leaders who had gained position and influence would use them to improve the welfare of their people and not merely to promote their own vested interests. The sentiments expressed by Tirto when the Budi Utomo was founded on 20 May, 1908 were that of rejoice at first but he was not forgetting the existence of native associations in Sumatra.²¹ He said that the Javanese and the Sumatrans could learn from one another. He called for the unity of "the sons of the Indies" [*anak Hindia*] and reminded them not to be jealous of each other so that efforts and initiatives of one side were not denied or looked down with malice by the other. Touching on the need for Indonesians to support their fellow indigenous businessmen, he reminded them "not to take pride if they had to buy their goods from the shops of other

¹⁹This was to be divided into 300 shares, valued at fl. 25, — each.

²⁰The *Perserikatan Orang Alam Minangkerbau* was founded on the initiative of Datoek Soetan Maharadja. See Ahmat Adam, "The Vernacular Press in Padang, 1865–1913", *Akademika*, journal of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, no. 7, July 1975, p. 83.

²¹Local associations were more rapidly founded after the formation of the Budi Utomo. In 1909, there existed the *Sinar Kota Bangkahoeloe* and the *Sumatra Setia* both in Bencoolen and the *Keradjinan Minangkerbau nan Doea* in Padang.

aces". He urged them to compete with the other communities and to spend their money in stores or shops owned by their own people.

Tirto Adhi Soerjo's concern for the welfare of the native people was expressed not only in his writings but also in his actions. In 1906 he had made a tour of Java and according to him he was approached by a number of leading priyayis to seek ways and means of improving the welfare of the people.²² Upon the completion of his tour, Tirto discussed the matter with Raden Mas Prawirodiningrat the Chief *Jaksa* [Public Prosecutor] at Batavia, Taidjin Moehadjihin the District Commandant at Mangga Besar, and Bahram the District Commandat at Penjarangan. Following their deliberations they unanimously agreed that a society of priyayis to be named *Sarekat Priyayi* should be formed. A provisional committee was immediately set up and notice was circulated in around Java calling for support in the formation of the Priyayi Society which was to be based at Batavia with branches throughout Java. The principal aim of this society was to establish a scholarship fund and to promote the education of children of priyayis.²³ The *Sarekat Priyayi* also intended to start a library where books and other reading materials could be made available not only to students but also to the members of the society.

The *Sarekat Priyayi* then was the forerunner of a modern type of organization for Indonesians whereby the aims of the much-earlier *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan* in propagating education for Chinese children seemed to have cast some influence on the priyayis. It could also be deduced that the aims of the Budi Utomo which was to emerge soon after the formation of the *Sarekat Priyayi* did not appear to differ very much from those of the *Sarekat*. The *Sarekat Priyayi* was founded sometime in late 1906. Its committee consisted of:

President: R.M. Prawirodiningrat
Vice-President: Tamrin Mohd Tabri
Secretary-cum-Treasurer: R.M. Tirto Adhi Soerjo
Commissioners: Taidjin Moehadjihin, and Bachram.

Tirto claimed that when he announced the intention to form the *Sarekat Priyayi* about seven hundred priyayis throughout Java had agreed to become members. The founders of the society also realized the need to have an organ for the society. As a matter of fact, R.M.T. Pandji Arjodinoto advised the committee to start a newspaper as soon as possible. He himself volunteered to donate fl. 1,000-as initial capital to start the society's organ. It was to be a politically-orientated paper.²⁴ In spite of the noble aims of the *Sarekat Priyayi*, however, there was no

²²As far as this writer knows this tour has never been mentioned by any historian of modern Indonesia. But the tour made by Dr. Wahidin Soedirohoesoedo in about the same year is well-known. However, evidence shows that Tirto also made the tour although whether it was earlier than Wahidin's trip or later, cannot be ascertained.

²³With this aim in mind, the society intended to set up a boarding school house at Batavia. The Society was quite ambitious for it planned to impose only the barest minimum of charges for the hostel. Wherever possible, children from poor priyayi families would be given free accommodation. The society also envisaged the founding of a Froebel primary school. The Dutch language would be included in its curriculum, as this could prepare them for admission to Dutch Schools.

²⁴*Medan Prijanji*, (3), 1909, p. 8.

certainty that the society was able to execute what it planned for. It might have existed only in name and when the Budi Utomo was founded in May 1908 the name of the *Sarekat* seemed to have been eclipsed. Nevertheless the intention to start a newspaper did materialize. On 1 January 1907, the maiden issue of the *Medan Priyayi* appeared as a weekly from the printing press at Sukabumi.²⁵ Tirto Adhi Soerjo became its editor and administrator. He had established it with an initial capital of fl. 3,500-. But the real expenditure incurred in its publication was fl. 7,500-. When it was first launched it had about 1,000 readers, at least half the number being priyayis.

The *Medan Priyayi* could be said to be the first full-fledged indigenous weekly newspaper. It acted as an organ for the native intelligentsia succeeding the *Bintang Hindia*. The *Medan Priyayi* encouraged readers to submit articles on issues ranging from native education to questions of culture, native bureaucracy and administration which were socio-political in nature. It was not unusual to find articles in the form of complaints and criticisms levelled against the corrupt priyayis and inefficient government officials who exploited the *orang kecil* [common folk] through their abuse of power. Tirto Adhi Soerjo's unrestrained criticisms against the Dutch and native officials and his very nationalistic sentiments as expressed in many of the issues he raised in the *Medan Priyayi* demonstrated the political orientation of the weekly. His articles had been sharp and biting, exposing the corruption often practised by the higher priyayis themselves. This landed him into serious trouble later. On one incident he was sued for libel when he used the term *snotaap* [urchin] to refer to the *Aspirant* [probationary] Controller of Purworejo whom he accused of being corrupt.²⁶ Tirto was also found guilty of defaming the character of the *Wedono* of Tjangkrep in Purworejo and for this he was sentenced to a two-month exile to Telok Betong. Tirto's outspokenness brought him many enemies. To those Indonesians who chose to become naturalized Netherlands he gave them the title "*Belanda besluit*"; his nationalistic feelings could well be seen from his statemnet when he disapproved of Javanese who couldn't speak Javanese well but would rather speak in the Dutch language. He said,

"... We the natives shall always remain indigenous, but it is of importance that we strive like the Europeans, researching, studying and promoting our [knowledge] of the language, customs and institutions [of the Dutch], but [their] language and customs should not be used to usurp our original language and customs; they are only to be utilized as capital to increase our wealth and strength".²⁷

Tirto disapproved of the rush for "Westernizing" Indonesian culture. His views on modernization seemed to indicate that he was against the ideas of the *kaum muda* as propagated by Abdul Rivai through the *Bintang Hindia*.

²⁵The paper was converted into a daily newspaper in July 1910. By that time it was published and printed by the Medan Priyayi Co. Ltd.

²⁶*Medan Priyayi*, (24), 30 June, 1908.

²⁷*Medan Priyayi*, (3), 1909, p. 459.

The polemic on *kemajuan* and how it should be defined was still the pre-occupation of the vernacular press both in Java and Sumatra right up to the period long after the formation of the Budi Utomo. In Sumatra, the controversy between the *kaum muda* and *kaum kuno* took a slightly different twist especially in Sumatra West Coast during the first decade of the twentieth century. Whereas the sociological division between the secular western-educated elite and the traditional nobility group represented one form of the dichotomy as expressed in the terms *kaum muda* and *kaum kuno* or *kaum tua*, the confrontation between the conservative ulama and the young ulama (who were very much influenced by ideas from the Cairo journal, *Al-Manar* which was edited by Muhammad Rashid Ridza, a student of Syeikh Muhammad Abduh, and from the writings of Ibnu Taimiyah and Ibnu Qaiyim),²⁸ formed another aspect of the polarization which gave rise to another group also called *kaum muda* but with a religious connotation. This *kaum muda agama* [religious progressives] group became a target of hostility for the *adat* group who, led by Datoek Soetan Maharadja, was conservative and *adat*-influenced in its religious outlook. The *kaum muda* ulama was accused of trying to undermine the *adat* and at the same time trying to bring back Wahabbism in Sumatra.²⁹ But the religious *kaum muda* professed to purify Islam from the irreligious *adat* practices of Minangkabau. As such, so they stressed, there was a need for Moslems to return to the real sources of the Islamic faith, namely the Koran and the hadith, the Prophet's tradition. The *kaum muda* ulama were led by Haji Abdullah Ahmad, Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah and Syeikh Muhammad Djamil Djambek. Their adversaries, the *kaum tua* ulama were led by Syeikh Chatib Ali of Padang, Syeikh Muhammad Mungka, Syeikh Bajang and others.³⁰

The outcome of this confrontation between the *adat* defenders and the modernist *kaum muda* led to the rise of newspapers which became the spokesmen for each side in defence of their stand. In 1911 Datoek Soetan Maharadja started the *Oetoesan Melajoe* and within that same year, about four months later, the *kaum muda* ulama launched the religious-orientated *Al-Moenir* aimed at disseminating Islamic teachings among Moslems in Minangkabau. While proclaiming that Moslems should not be confined to the Shafi'ite school only in their interpretations of Islam but instead they should apply the *ijtihad*, namely to strive to attain truth by using *akal* [reasoning], the *Al-Moenir* also published articles which hitherto had been considered *taboo* by the *kaum tua* ulama. The question of wearing neckties and hats and taking photographs which had been considered *haram* [forbidden] by the *kaum tua* ulama were openly discussed and readers were informed that such things had never been forbidden by the Koran and *hadith*. The *kaum muda* ulama also taught that the Friday sermon before prayers could be delivered in the language that was understood by the congregation. The *kaum muda* also showed their progressiveness to their fellow Moslems by encouraging them to acquire general

²⁸ Mahmud Junus, *Sedjarah Islam di Minangkabau*, Jakarta, 1971, p. 54.

²⁹ Datoek Soetan Maharadja himself labelled the *kaum muda* ulama as successors of the Padris or Wahabbis who were trying to bring back Minangkabau into the period of the Padris during which time his great grandfather was killed.

³⁰ Hamka, *Riwayat Hidup Dr. H. Abd. Karim Amrullah dan Perdjuaan Agama di Sumatra*, Jakarta, 1957 (3rd edition), p. 101.

knowledge and to study European languages besides learning Arabic and Islamic theology.³¹

The religious polemics in the years between 1911 and 1913 had been so heated up that conflicts and dissension in Minangkabau society worsened. The growing influence of the *kaum muda agama* was bitterly resented. This motivated Datoek Soetan Maharadja to found another paper to counter the *Al-Moenir*. In 1913 two newspapers called *Soeloeh Melajoe* and *Soeara Melajoe* were published by Datoek Soetan Maharadja. Through the *Soeara Melajoe* the *kaum tua* ulama, led by Nkoe Chatib Ali and Datoek Soetan Maharadja, voiced their repudiation of the teachings of the *kaum muda* in the *Al-Moenir*.³²

In spite of the possible threat of dissension within Minangkabau society that was brought about by the religious controversy between the *kaum muda* ulama and the *kaum tua* group in the period around 1911 and 1912, another trend in the modernization of Minangkabau society began to emerge and this time it came from the women intellectuals of Minangkabau. Through the campaign of the Malay-language press for a greater consciousness among parents on the importance of education for girls, and especially from the pen of Datoek Soetan Maharadja himself, the women of Minangkabau began to show signs of accepting the challenge of change and modernization. On 10 July 1912, through the patronage of Datoek Soetan Maharadja himself, a women's newspaper called *Soenting Melajoe* [Malay Ornament] was launched making it the first ladies' newspaper ever to be published in Sumatra. The paper was meant to be a kind of reformist feminine organ in which the Minangkabau women intellectuals could contribute ideas to stimulate interest among their fellow-women to strive for progress and betterment of their sex. The *Soenting Melajoe* was edited by Datoek Soetan Maharadja's daughter, Zobeidah Ratna Djoewita and Siti Rohana, the daughter of a *Jaksa* at Medan. The awakening of the women of Minangkabau could be seen when Siti Rohana founded the *Keradjinan Amai Setia* [Loyal Mothers' Endeavour], an association that aimed at promoting handicrafts made by women. The association also had a school to teach reading and writing in the *Jawi* [Arabic] and Romanised characters. Domestic science was also part of the course provided.

It is interesting to observe that Datoek Soetan Maharadja, for all his conservativeness with regard to the *adat*, and was a *kaum tua* in so far as religion was concerned, could well be categorized as a 'secular' *kaum muda*. He was certainly a modernist with regard to Western education which he believed should be spread more extensively for the indigenous people. In 1902 he founded a boys' school. In 1909 he also set up the first weaving school for girls.³³ His dual cultural stance prompts one to bring him to comparison with his Javanese contemporary, Raden Mas Tirto Adhi Soerjo. Both men believed in pursuing material progress for

³¹Mahmud Junus, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³²The *Al-Moenir*, however, did not exist very long. By 1916 it had ceased to appear in Padang. According to Mahmud Junus its printing press was burnt down.

³³See Taufik Abdullah, "Modernization in the Minangkabau world" in Claire Holt, (ed.), *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, Ithaca, 1972, p. 223.

the indigenous people. Lika Tirto, Datoek Soetan Maharadja also believed in sustaining the aristocratic hierarchical system in which both men belonged to the upper stratum of native society. The only marked difference between the two men was that while Datoek Soetan Maharadja was a firm believer of the *adat* as being the determinant of Minangkabau identity, so that his attitude towards the modernist religious intellectuals was hostile, R.M. Tirto Adhi Soerjo saw in Islam as the potential factor in uniting the indigenous community in organizational ventures that would elevate native social and economic positions while projecting the "national" identity and cultural tradition. It was for this particular reason that he founded the *Sarekat Dagang Islamiyah* in March 1909 at Bogor with the declared aim of "looking after the interests of Muslims in the Netherlands Indies". The organization was commercial in orientation and was founded jointly with some Arab merchants and native priyayis.³⁴ Tirto was elected secretary-cum-adviser of the association. Sech Achmad bin Abdulrahchman Badjenet was made President. However, when Tirto sought the government's recognition of the society it was rejected on the ground that in matters of commerce and industry the laws pertaining to the Arabs were totally different from the natives'. Thus ended the life of the forerunner of the Sarekat Islam movement.

The rise of Indonesian social consciousness which ultimately led to a national awakening was a by-product of many factors. The implementation of the Ethical Policy had certainly played a role of great importance in bringing consciousness to Indonesians in general with regard to their socio-economic environment. The emergence of a pan-Chinese movement in Indonesia also played its part in giving a catalyst for Indonesian awakening. But the role of the native press was especially important in exposing the Indonesian intellectuals to the current issues and problems in a colonial society. In a society where education was the privilege of a few, and where a medium to express what they felt was not too easily available, the newspapers thus became an important forum where views were exchanged and debates ensued. The journalists themselves, be they correspondents or editors, were people with influence and their intellectual background plus their exposure to events around them rendered them the possibility of shouldering the responsibility of leadership for their society. They became men of action in the sense that they tried to do something to correct the ills and drawbacks that befell their people. Thus it was that people like R.M. Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Abdul Rivai, Datoek Soetan Maharadja, Wahidin Soedirohoesoedo, Mas Boediardjo and Mas Ngabehi Dwidjasewaja (both helped in running the Boedi Oetomo) and others that followed such as in particular, R.M. Soewardi Soerjaningrat, Oemar Said Tjokroaminoro, Abdoel Moeis and many others had all been journalists while at the same time holding posts in organizations which served to fight for the cause of their people. It is therefore the contention of this paper that the rise of Indonesian national consciousness was intertwined with the rise of the native or vernacular press in Indonesia.

³⁴Its founders were: Sech Ahmad bin Abdul Rachman Badjenet, Mohammad Dagrime, Sech Galib bin Said, Sech Mohammad bin Said Badjenet, Mas Railoes, Soeleiman, Arsad, Abdullah and Tirto himself.