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# Historical Perspectives on a National Heroine: R.A. Kartini and the Politics of Memory

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON A NATIONAL HEROINE:  
R.A. KARTINI AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Amber Woodward

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SIT Study Abroad

Indonesia: Arts, Religion, and Social Change

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## Acknowledgements

I came into this program knowing almost nothing about Indonesia, having prepared to go to Nepal and ending up in a completely different country on the other side of the world. I had no plan, little background knowledge, zero language skills, and no idea where this would take me. I was determined to forge ahead with a historical study, but first, I had to learn something—anything—about Indonesian history. Luckily, I wasn't alone in this. I would like to say a big thank you and *terima kasih* to everyone who made this project possible. To my family, who supported and encouraged me from the other side of the world, 15 hours away, I could not have made such a leap into the unknown without you. Everyone in the 2015 fall semester of SIT Bali—we were so fortunate to have such a thoughtful and diverse group of personalities that became a family over our months together. Your support (and the fact that we've all gone through this together) has gotten me through so much. To our amazing language teachers, Pak Yudi, Ella, Jo, and Edo, for equipping us with languages skills and random cultural insights that have come in handy every day, sometimes in the most unexpected of ways. Thank you, Bu Sita, for providing me a place to stay in Denpasar, lots of helpful interview advice and suggestions, and new perspectives on living in Bali. Thank you to everyone who helped with this project, especially those who I interviewed, and took their time and effort to make this the best it could be. And finally, to Bu Ary especially, who has supported us all throughout our time here as teacher, academic director, and force of nature, giving us the chance to learn and experience as much as possible. *Suksama!*

## Abstract

R.A. Kartini is an Indonesian national heroine, considered Indonesia's founding feminist. Because of her inherently political status as a woman, a Javanese subject of Dutch colonialism, and an aristocrat, her memory has been used in diverse ways throughout history. In this paper I examine four main periods in which Kartini's image has been dictated due to current political and social climates: Dutch imperialism, Indonesian independence, the New Order, and the present day. This paper is based on three weeks of research and fieldwork, including eight interviews with eleven informants, who had a diverse range of educational backgrounds and knowledge of history. My results attempt to identify trends in the use of the politics of memory surrounding Kartini and the reasons she is able to be contextualized in so many different ways.

## Introduction

In 1911, a book of letters was published in the Netherlands, written in Dutch by a young Javanese woman. The author, R.A. Kartini, had died seven years earlier, at only age 25, but her words, the hopes and fears that she had expressed prolifically to her Dutch friends, were now preserved by J.H. Abendanon, Minister of Education in the Dutch Indies as well as a friend of Kartini. Abendanon had no idea, however, how far reaching the effects of *Door Duisternis Tot Licht (From Darkness, Into Light)* would prove to be. The book found success in the Netherlands, enough to fund the foundation of several 'Kartini Schools' for girls' education by Dutch living in the Indies who found Kartini's effort admirable. The first translations into Malay and Javanese reached the Indies in the 1920s. There is little doubt that the nationalist leaders of the future Independence movement knew of *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*. In fact, Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, declared Kartini a national hero in 1964, one of only twelve women to receive such an honor. Under Suharto's presidency, 'Ibu' Kartini took on the tone of the new government and portrayed the role of the ideal of womanhood. After Indonesian independence, Kartini's birthday became a national holiday, and even now, women celebrate her image with *kebaya* and look-alike contests, as well as music and dance.

In actuality, our knowledge about R.A. Kartini is rather limited. Our understanding of her comes mostly from her own letters, in which she talked about her life and family as well as her ideals and struggles, and is supplemented by the historical connections that can be made to her references to time, people, and places. And not even the letters stand as a completely accurate portrayal of Kartini—Abendanon not only published her works, but edited them as well, selectively removing letters he knew would not be well-received by the Dutch colonial power. From there, Kartini has been revised and revised by translations, edits, historian's opinions, and political agendas. The rhetoric in most accounts treat Kartini as a mythic figure, rather than a person: she is 'legendary', she 'represents' more than herself, she is 'a symbol' of ideologies, she is 'mythic'. Kartini's life has been so abstracted that it is possible to view her from nearly any angle.

The lack of significant historical record outside of her own letters to document Kartini's life created a mythology increased by selective editing and translating. This has resulted in enough ambiguity that different groups have been able to manipulate her image. As a Javanese female figure, Kartini has been used to make important statements about the role of race and gender in society.

This essay aims, through a combination of research and field work, to look critically at the settings in which the memory of Kartini has been developed as a figure of certain political, social, and cultural movements. I will examine the historical context or "temporal habitations"<sup>1</sup> of Kartini's life and writing. Changes to the conditions of Dutch colonialism during the latter

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hawkins, "Life and Times: The Temporal Habitations of R.A. Kartini," *Kronoscope* 14 (2014): 35-50, doi: 10.1163/15685241-12341290.

half of her life and following her death significantly affected the ways in which the Dutch received and discussed her letters as well as their publication itself. I will also discuss the use of Kartini as a symbol after Indonesian independence during both the Old and New Orders under Sukarno and Suharto respectively. To Sukarno, Kartini represented nationalism and women's place in the new nation. During the New Order, due to Suharto's conservative shift in rhetoric about gender roles, parts of Kartini's identity were glossed over in order to portray her as a "model"<sup>2</sup> of womanhood in contrast with other women's organizations that posed potential threats to the state. Since the fall of Suharto, a combination of these attitudes has been adopted to understand Kartini, and contemporary opinions about Kartini elucidate many features of Indonesia's position in the world today. I will discuss these by analyzing the implications of my field work, a series of interviews of a socially diverse group of informants, from different ages, classes, and educational backgrounds.

### **Theory, Methodology, and Ethics**

It is my aim to study the historical construction of memory over the course of multiple time periods straddling both pre- and post-independence in the post-colonial context of today's Indonesia. In this, I think it is important to recognize that I approach this project as a white westerner able to study in Indonesia for a limited amount of time. I come from an academic tradition, a historical background, and a culture that are all privileged in today's world. The West, and America in particular, are centers of both physical and ideological power. This can be seen in that in historical study there is a widespread conception of the West as the implicit locale

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<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Tiwon, "Models and Maniacs," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie Sears (Durham: Duke University, 1999), 47-70.

of “modernity”<sup>3</sup>, or the only place from which advances have historically come from. To be a part of this historical tradition is itself a privilege in my studies. Though I have learned a great deal during my semester abroad, I realize I remain far from fluent in the customs, beliefs, and histories of Indonesia. I am humbled by the diversity and cultures that I have only begun to appreciate, and am thankful of the patience, forgiveness, and aid provided to me in trying to construct a historical narrative about a place I do not fully understand, as privileges accorded to me by my race, nationality, status as a student, and other ways, have played a significant role in my time here. My limited time too, has affected my project. I hope to address the silences created by both my privilege and my ignorance, as well as note those created by history.

Post-colonial scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains that “silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”<sup>4</sup> In each of the periods I examine, power dynamics at the time determine who is able to make sources and which sources are compiled and kept. My own ability to retrieve those facts is limited not only by the silences already created by the historical record, but also by language barriers. I have only an elementary knowledge of Bahasa Indonesia and none at all of Dutch, meaning that my access to sources is restricted by language barriers, from written sources to dependence on English speakers, translations, and my own attempts at Bahasa Indonesia in interviews. Culture, identity, and language have all certainly shifted the character of all the

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<sup>3</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27-46.

<sup>4</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.



information I have received. I have tried to limit and address those silences in my use of sources and my construction of a historical narrative, but nonetheless, certain silences will continue to exist.

Silences—the moments in which certain historical voices are not heard—are of high significance in the focuses of my project. Post-colonial studies are one such frame of reference from which I attempt to analyze them. Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses the tendency for historians to put the histories of non-Western peoples into the context of a narrative of progress and transition to lead to the ‘modernity’ of Europe. Because of the narrative of the European ‘universal’ and ‘victorious’ march toward Enlightenment themes like emancipation, non-western histories are made to appear in line with this, ultimately forcing every history, regardless of geography and culture, to become a European/Western history. When non-Western histories do not fulfill this expectation, these histories are written in the tone of insufficiency: “the failure of a history to keep its appointment with destiny (once again an instance of the ‘lazy native’, shall we say?)”<sup>5</sup>. Post-colonial historians are especially responsible for portraying a time and place and conveying its meanings, knowing the very way in which they construct their narratives of history have ramifications on the ways power and peoples are seen in the present. I feel the responsibility here to keep in mind the cultural perspectives of my own that I bring to my work while at the same time seeking to question and de-center traditionally one-sided narratives.

The narratives that I interrogate in this paper are principally ones having to do with perspectives and the construction of collective memory. In history especially, events do not simply happen, they are collected and depicted. The modes that media, governments, and others

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<sup>5</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 31.

chose to represent those events—the attitudes, the rhetoric, the very words they use—change how people remember them. Often the mode of remembering is influenced by the historical moment, affected by social, cultural, and political forces. Though we often believe that history is made of objective fact, the facts that form the basis for historical narratives are most always projected through a lens of perception. This process is what I will refer to as the ‘politics of memory’, the construction of collective memory via subjective and selective interpretations of fact for political or other historical reasons. It too is the location for the construction and interrogation of silences, because by telling a particular story through memory, certain facts are chosen to support it, and other voices are forgotten. Narratives produced by the politics of memory many times serve larger purposes, as I will show through the example of Kartini, such as the imagining of a nation as a coherent community<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, in my discussion of present Indonesian attitudes and perceptions about Kartini, I performed a series of interviews during my three weeks of field work. I had one interview with each participant, ranging from a duration of about 10 minutes to 2 hours. My informants came from a variety of backgrounds: current university students, residents of a rural village in Bali, professors, writers, and other professionals living and working in Bali’s capital, Denpasar. I encountered some reluctance to be interviewed from people in the village and male students especially, who told me they could not help me—either due to gender, age, or education—and apologized for their ignorance of my subject. I reassured them that I only wanted to know what they knew, and that they did not need to be able to tell me very much and it would still be helpful; with the aid of my advisor, Bu Sita, I reformatted some of my questions to help make

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

interviews more comfortable for my informants, no matter their level of expertise. I mostly focused on asking participants about their personal knowledge and about their own interactions with the material, such as participation in *Hari Kartini* (Kartini Day) celebrations or history lessons in school. Other than being uncertain how to answer a few questions, my questions posed no risk to my informants who kindly agreed to let me reproduce their thoughts here. The goal of my field work was to examine the nature of understanding, opinion, and education about Indonesian history, and particularly R.A. Kartini from a variety of perspectives in modern times. This in turn allowed me to analyze historical trends into the present.

### **Kartini's Life and Times**

Raden Ajeng Kartini<sup>7</sup>, born in 1879 to an aristocratic Javanese family, lived during a period of major developments in Dutch colonialism. The backdrop to her own struggles for women's education and against what she perceived as oppressive Javanese traditions were significant changes, such as the ascension of Queen Wilhelmina, the close of the thirty year long war in Aceh, the unification of all of what would become modern Indonesia<sup>8</sup> under the Dutch. At the same time, the changes in colonial policies, structural approaches towards Javanese society, and social movements that created new opportunities for women like Kartini also locked them into prescribed roles. In addition to drawing from her letters, recent scholarship on Kartini

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<sup>7</sup> Raden Ajeng indicates a title, rather than a name. Raden equates to being of the upper class, Ajeng refers to an unmarried woman. An aristocratic woman's name changed to Raden Ayu once she had wed.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the terms "Dutch East Indies", "Indonesia/Indonesian", and "Java/Javanese". The Indies will refer to the territory held by the Dutch during the colonial period that would later become Indonesia. Post-independence (ca. 1945), I will refer to this area as Indonesia. However because there is no collective term for the residents of the Indies, I will sometimes use "Indonesian" to suggest this idea. Keep in mind that this a purposeful anachronism, as most residents of the Indies under the Dutch did not see themselves as a part of a larger nation, but as members of island-specific communities. Kartini, when referring to 'us', 'her people' or 'the people' generally meant the Javanese, not the entirety of the Indies. A sense of solidarity in the Indonesian nation was imposed by Dutch rule.

has suggested placing her back within her historical context in the hopes of revealing a ‘truer’ image of the woman who became such a myth. Some of the circumstances that influenced Kartini most strongly were made possible by her location in history; though unusual, her Dutch schooling, her ideologies, and her break with the upper class Javanese tradition of seclusion for girls of marriage age were at least in part, products of a particular historical moment. The facts of her life and temporal situation provide the basis for the manipulations of her image that have occurred over time.

Kartini is almost always viewed in the sense that she was exceptional for her era. She was the daughter of the *bupati*, or regent, of Jepara, a district in East Java, and thus, as a member of the aristocracy, was in line to benefit from certain privileges of the colonial system. Her father, Raden Adipati Sosroningrat, came from a family line which had begun the tradition of providing their children with Dutch educations several generations earlier. While Indonesian girls’ Dutch education was still largely an anomaly, Sosroningrat’s move to place Kartini into school until the age of twelve is understandable given the new roles the Javanese upper class were expected to take at this time. For many years, the Dutch had kept order in the Indies by ruling with a system of *adat* chiefs, traditional leaders who now submitted to a hierarchy of colonial power. This system allowed the Dutch to control areas without requiring the need for large military forces or high rates of European immigration<sup>9</sup>. In Java, the heart of the empire in the Indies, the Dutch saw the potential in creating a class of civil servants that already had the respect and influence of their position in society, co-opting the pre-existing class structures for new uses. The *priyayi*, to which Kartini and her father belonged, was a mixture of governmental

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, most of the Dutch officials who actually lived in the Indies lived clustered in major cities, such as Jakarta. The (peaceful) outlying regions were run by local men of power and tradition (*adat*).

occupation and social status. In the *priyayi* system, having power under the Dutch gave one power in society, a kind of bureaucratic royalty. Sosroningrat was a part of a growing group of regents who believed a Dutch education would benefit their children's standing in life—even his daughters, whose only destiny was to marry.

Sosroningrat's views on education were, of course, tempered by tradition. Kartini was removed from school at age 12 and placed into seclusion, prohibited from interaction outside of her *kabupaten*, or home of the *bupati*. Kartini refers to the as the “box”, where, per tradition for girls of the Javanese upper-class, “I was locked up at home, and cut off from all communication with the outside world, whereto I would never be allowed to return except at the side of a husband, a stranger, chosen for us by our parents, and to whom we are married without really knowing it.”<sup>10</sup> Brides often did not even meet their future husbands until well into the wedding ceremonies. However, Kartini had shown an affinity for her studies of Dutch, and her father, very close to his eldest daughter, again eased for her some of the strictures of isolation. He provided her with access to Dutch books and magazines and allowed her to communicate via letter to her Dutch acquaintances. Kartini in this time worked diligently on her Dutch, becoming acquainted with feminist magazine, *The Dutch Lily*, Semarang paper, *The Locomotive*, run by supporter of ethical colonialism, Piet Brooshooft, as well as well-known Dutch novels, such as the colonialist tale *Max Havelaar*. She also read the works of Indian crusader for women's rights, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, and was impressed to find that “it's not only white women who are able to take care of themselves—a brown Indian woman can make herself free and

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<sup>10</sup> E.M. Beekman and R.A. Kartini, “Kartini: Letters from a Javanese Feminist,” *The Massachusetts Review* 25, no. 4 (1984), 587, accessed October 3, 2015, JSTOR.

independent too.”<sup>11</sup> They were her form of escape from her narrowed life, and “without them,” she wrote, “I might have perished, or what is worse: my spirit, my soul, would have died.”<sup>12</sup> Her time in seclusion spent pouring over tracts and articles forged many of the ideologies that were prevalent in of her later letters.

At age 16, four long years after she had been forced into her ‘box’, Kartini left seclusion, though still unmarried, allowed by her father to attend the consecration of a Protestant church. From then on, she was allowed to make infrequent visits outside of the *kabupaten*, to other towns and regencies. She began to visit Marie Ovink-Soer, a contributing writer for *The Dutch Lily* whom Kartini admired very much, on the pretense of learning ladies’ handicrafts. She and her sisters, Kardinah and Roekmini, rode by covered carriage so as not to break their seclusion while traveling. In 1898, the colonial government of the Indies recognized Kartini and her sisters, despite the fact that they were single women, through invitation to a grand ball in Semarang to celebrate the ascension of Queen Wilhelmina to the throne. Kartini’s attendance at this ball, and her very invitation to it, showed that the Dutch colonial government didn’t disapprove of, if not supported, this break with Javanese tradition. However when regional papers began referring to “the well-known Raden Ajeng Kartini”, her family, scandalized, oppressed Kartini’s more overt efforts to join Dutch intellectual society, such as the publication of her articles and opinion pieces.

A year later, in 1899, Kartini placed an ad in a Dutch women’s magazine for a correspondent who lived in the Netherlands, and thus came to the acquaintance of Stella

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Stewart Taylor, “Raden Ajeng Kartini,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 3 (1976): 651 accessed September 17, 2015, JSTOR.

<sup>12</sup> Beekman and Kartini, “Letters from a Javanese Feminist,” 587

Zeehandelaar, a 25 year-old post-clerk, working and living on her own. To Kartini, she was the essence of “a modern girl”, independent, socially minded, and persevering. Stella was a socialist and an activist, whose causes included women’s rights and the welfare of colonial peoples. It is due to Stella that we have such rich autobiographical information on Kartini and her culture, as she felt the need to introduce herself and explain a world that Stella would never know. Kartini connected most deeply with Stella over the discussion of gender, which they considered to transcend colonial and cultural boundaries. She laid out her arguments for women’s education for the benefit of general welfare for Stella, explained her disgust for polygamy and child marriage, and her desire to be free from the confines of tradition, despite the duty she felt she owed her father. But she also wrote long passages praising the Javanese language and arts, writing about her love for her family, and adoration of Stella herself. Jean Stewart Taylor noted, “Later commentators, both male and female, felt obliged to apologize for what they perceived as excessive sentimentality. They forgot that Stella was the first woman through whom Kartini could step outside of the highly ranked Javanese system, which set people in superior-inferior relationships, never as equals....Kartini was most free with her, possibly the reason Abendanon included so little of their correspondence in his collection.”<sup>13</sup>

Among the others that Kartini wrote to was the Abendanon family: J.H. Abendanon, the minister of education, who would later publish her letters, his wife, Rosa Abendanon-Mandri, of whom Kartini also effused affection, and their son. Kartini actively included them in updates on her education and her efforts in the local community—she sought to spread the popularity of Javanese arts, and supported a wood carving village, as well as collected and recorded local fairy

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, “Raden Ajeng Kartini,” 655.

tales and poetry. She discussed her resistance to marriage and her desire to work, to learn nursing skills or to become a teacher—occupations that clearly fit within notions of gendered roles for women—but at the time, for an upper-class woman to work at all was almost unheard of. She went so far as to petition the Dutch government for better education in the colonies for (at least aristocratic) women in her essay, *Educate the Javanese!* She argued, like many other early feminists within a heavily patriarchal system, that the education of women would equal better motherhood, and more responsible and modern male citizens. Women's education was, she believed the key to both the welfare of the nation, and the betterment of women's married lives. With education and more awareness of choice, polygamy would decrease and rights would increase.

Determined to create her own school for girls, Kartini applied for a scholarship to study in Holland. The government awarded it to her, but in the end, she declined it. Abendanon and her family both advised her heavily against leaving Java for the 'corrupting' influence of Europe, and Sosroningrat's declining health may have also pushed Kartini into bending to her family's wishes. When she opened her first girls' school in early 1903 nonetheless, another turn knocked her plans off course. The regent of Rembang, an older widower with several lower wives, but none of the upper class, asked to be married with Kartini. Biographers have puzzled over Kartini's acceptance of this offer, especially when she so staunchly opposed polygamy, forced marriage, and indeed, any kind of marriage for herself. As her letters show, however, family pressures were clearly wearing her out, and she likely realized that though she voiced opposition against the oppressive traditions of her society, she had no choice but to function within the world that she lived in. By October 1903, Kartini had married. Stella seems to have stopped



writing to Kartini after receiving news of the marriage, a major blow to Kartini's network of correspondence. Though she did break tradition again and exchange letters with her future husband before the wedding, it's clear that her idealism had been darkened, and now she felt keenly the struggle between her dreams and her reality:

“Didn't I say to you that we gave up all personal happiness long ago?

Now life has come to claim that promise from me. Nothing will be too bitter, too hard, too difficult for us if we are able through it to contribute even one drop of sand to the building of that beautiful monument: the people's happiness.”<sup>14</sup>

Even in the last two years of her life, Kartini decided that her work must not cease. She demanded written permission from her husband to continue the work of girls' education, which she did by setting up a second attempt at a school for her new stepchildren. Though Kardinah had married before Kartini, Roekmini was still able to help with the new school, and both of them continued to work for girls' education after Kartini's death. On September 17, 1904, due to complications following the birth of her first child, Kartini passed away, leaving a legacy she might never have imagined.

### **Toward an 'Ethical' Colonialism**

The colonialism that so heavily framed Kartini's life had a long history before her birth. Beginning around the 1600s, Dutch presence appeared in the Indies. Initially, these were traders of the United East Indies Company, who placed themselves into trade systems and searched for profit. As they moved for a more definable hold over the Indies “these 'colonialists' simply

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 658-659.

inserted themselves into existing political and trade networks while inflating their sense of propriety ownership over indigenous peoples.”<sup>15</sup> However, the truth was, among so few Dutch and so many ‘natives’, as Hawkins claims, no real European hegemonic system of colonialism existed until the mid-nineteenth century. Until the second half of the 1800s, the Dutch claim over the East Indies, meant little to the Indonesian people, and was enforced even less uniformly.

The Netherlands had been a world power among the countries of Europe in the seventeenth century, but had fallen behind in what became a competition in the West to imperialize. Holland joined the “race for empire” so as not to lose influence. The Dutch government proceeded with what historian Adrian Vickers calls “reluctant imperialism”<sup>16</sup>—they had no policy for aggression, but rather would, paradoxically, ‘reluctantly’ conquer a people. Whatever the claims of the Dutch government, in the Netherlands’ scramble to consolidate their empire, the Dutch waged wars within the Indies from the 1870s to around the time of Kartini’s death. Some regions of the Indies turned easily to Dutch control, but others required the Netherlands pour immense amounts of troops and money into their containment. The guerrilla war in Aceh, Sumatra, for example, lasted for thirty years, beginning in 1873 and lasting the entirety of Kartini’s life—until 1903. The Netherlands’ ‘reluctant imperialism’ turned out to be violently misnamed, as many Dutch policies within the Indies were undeniably aggressive. Work conditions for Indonesians were extremely poor and oppressive, aggravated by global depressions and poor weather—drought, famine, and starvation consistently plagued the Dutch Liberal Party’s attempts at a trickle down, capitalist economy in the Indies. Instituted also were

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Hawkins, “Exploring Colonial Boundaries: An Examination of the Kartini-Zeehandelaar Correspondence,” *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 7, no. 2 (2007): 2, accessed November 3, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

systems of ethnographic codification that introduced new forms of oppression and inferiority into the Indies. And yet by 1880, only 60,000 people counted as European lived in the Indies.

The Dutch policy to avoid aggression had clearly failed in the eyes of the world. The amount of blood and aggression used by the Dutch to unite the Indies proved shocking when revealed, forcing the Dutch to make at least minimal steps to adjust the administration of their colony. The Dutch saw the ‘natives’ suffering at an unprecedented rate, saw the poor economic conditions of the Indies that returned poor profitable results to the Netherlands, and voices began to raise against current policy. One of the first to suggest a more ‘ethical’ approach to colonizing was Piet Boorshoof, who wrote in 1884 an article entitled “The Ethical Movement in Colonial Policies”: “I’m a Dutchman who profits every single day from the income of the Colonies. I should really favor the interests of the Netherlands over those of the Indies but I do not doubt for a single moment that the Netherlands have done a great injustice to the Indies, an injustice that must incense every person.”<sup>17</sup> Around Boorshoof and his paper, *The Locomotive*, in Semarang, gathered a community of other ‘ethically’-minded Europeans in the Indies, including governors and writers, and among them, J.H. Abendanon.

Following the ascension of Queen Wilhelmina in 1890 and another global economic low, the Ethical Movement gained ground in Dutch politics. In 1901, it became law under the Ethical Policy. This program had the general aim of improving the welfare of colonial subjects, bettering their conditions. Motivations for embracing the Ethical Policy varied widely. To progressives within the Indies and abroad, the Ethical Policy represented a ‘debt of honor’ owed

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies* (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 155. The original Dutch title of Boorshoof’s article is “*De ethische koers in de koloniale politiek*”.

to the Indies as restitution for abysmal treatment by the Dutch colonial government. It aimed as well to elevate the ‘primitive’ conditions in which natives lived in ignorance. The sense that the Netherlands *owed* something to the Indies allowed for an expression of Dutch paternalism. As consolation for the ‘great injustice’ done to the Indies, the Dutch would lead the colony out of the darkness and into civilization, all out of the goodness of their hearts. The systemic colonial divide of European superiority and colonial inferiority mixed compassion with patronization. Robert Nieuwenhuys quotes J.S. Furnivall in his *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy*: “‘All these people [the Dutch] want to help so much: ‘Let me help you,’ one can almost hear them say, ‘let me show you how to do it, let me do it for you,’”<sup>18</sup> because clearly, in the eyes of imperialism, the Indies could not improve themselves to the caliber of Europe on their own. Adrian Vickers writes, “[The Dutch] wanted to act on behalf of the peoples of the Indies, to protect them from the worst effects of modern life, but in a contradictory fashion, to develop the Indies at the same time into a modern state.”<sup>19</sup> Here the contradictory logic of paternalism is revealed: in the discourse of elevating Indonesian society, inherent categories of inferiority and superiority exist. To receive aid, the Indies had to be kept inferior, continually subjugated while it was the subject of such ‘benevolence’.

The “debt of honor” overlapped with both economic and international incentives for changing colonial policy. The Dutch saw the Ethical Policy as “well-considered self-interest”<sup>20</sup>. In financial terms, where the Liberals had failed, Ethical Movement supporters believed they could restart revenues. By improving working conditions and infrastructure, what benefited the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 157-158.

<sup>19</sup> Vicker, *A Modern History of Indonesia*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies*, 156.

colony in daily life benefited the colonizer in profits. The Ethical Policy was also a move to save face in the international community, where it had become clear that the Netherlands' word did not reconcile with their actions—in a very damaging way. Both for themselves and in the eyes of Europe, “bad conscience was translated into a noble policy of improving [natives'] lives”<sup>21</sup>. But even those in support of using force in the Indies wholeheartedly backed the Ethical Policy. For such a wide-ranging plan to function, it required a colony where it could methodically and homogeneously deploy standardized changes—which meant it required a united Indies. The way this would occur was of course, “concurrent military takeover”<sup>22</sup>.

Luckily for the Dutch, “this aim was so vague, it could be interpreted in many different ways: as economic progress with which the liberals could identify; as Christianity for the religious parties; or as a more general guidance to ease the local people into the modern world”<sup>23</sup>, and so came out in a variety of projects. Agricultural advances and irrigation structures, finance, and small industries aimed to raise the struggling portions of economy of the Indies. A significant part of the Ethical Policy was its focus on education in order for ‘the natives’ to make progress toward a European-esque Enlightenment. However, the constant danger of an aware public who might make demands for their freedom, contracted the Ethical Policy’s educational reach. Once again hoping civilization would just trickle down to the poor, the Dutch limited their efforts to the upper classes, who, once again were more ‘European’ and much more intimately involved with Dutch society and government. As a part of the generation

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<sup>21</sup> Vickers, *A Modern History of Indonesia*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 18

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 17-18.

of Javanese aristocrats leading up to the Ethical Policy's institution, Kartini was one of the first girls to receive this kind of educational privilege, and thus became one of its first examples.

### **Contextualizing Kartini**

The major shifts within Dutch colonialism in tandem with the tension between tradition and change in which Kartini led her life determined both her exceptional forays into freedom and her eventual return into tradition. She could bend many of the rules of Javanese colonial society, but ironically, ultimately only within the bounds of 'appropriate' resistance. A great deal of her causes drew her very identity into question, as an aristocrat, as a woman, as Javanese, as a colonial subject. Kartini spends many letters in an attempt to resolve her inner conflicts within this system. The ways in which she addresses them, or doesn't, speaks not only to her personal philosophies, but also to the greater systems of power that functioned around her.

Kartini held her identity as a woman certainly as the most contested and meaningful part of her experiences. She saw the inequities that her gender forced upon her, from familial expectations to physical seclusion. She identified, whether rightly or wrongly, her disadvantage within Javanese culture, which has been largely concomitant with Islam since the religion's arrival in the Indonesian archipelago. She disassociated herself with Islam in her letters to Stella especially, noting that she only followed the religion because of her ancestors, and that "Not to marry is the greatest sin a Muhammadan woman can commit...And marriage here, oh, miserable is too feeble an expression for it. How can it be otherwise when the laws are entirely for the man and never for the woman?"<sup>24</sup> Kartini, who desperately wanted to reach over cultural boundaries

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<sup>24</sup> Beekman and Kartini, "Letters from a Javanese Feminist," 588

with the solidarity of gender, first felt the need to dismiss the great barrier of religion between herself and her Dutch (and by and large, Christian) friends, marginalizing Islam to an inconsequential inconvenience. She attempted to bring herself into line with the growing movement of Dutch and Western feminism, building relationships with activists, reading and writing on the ideas she received. Her community was largely built around progressive Dutch thinkers, both men and women, and for all of their work, Kartini was “effusively thankful to Dutch ‘ethical’ comrades in arms.”<sup>25</sup>

The constant factor in all of these relationships, particularly Stella, was the boundary of racial, and thus colonial, divide. The racial hierarchy imposed by the Dutch as they colonized put white Westerners at the top, and Indonesians, within their own specific castes, far below. Kartini believed fervently that the intellectual ‘true self’ and shared traits like gender connected her with her Dutch community beyond the consequences of power differentials. Michael Hawkins writes that this “transnational sisterhood” was inevitably prevented by the fact that “Though Kartini aligned herself with Dutch feminists, the strictures of imperial associations did not allow her to actually become a Dutch feminist. She remained Javanese.”<sup>26</sup> At no point, regardless of her education, her exceptionalism, or her engagement in society, could Kartini ever pass for being Dutch. Her race, her position as an imperial subject made her longing for solidarity an impossible dream—she had no choice but to retain the Javanese identity encoded with inferiority.

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<sup>25</sup> Frances Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls in Java and Bali, 1900-1942: Dutch progressives, the infatuation with ‘oriental’ refinement, and ‘western’ ideas about proper womanhood,” *Women’s History Review* 4, no. 1 (1995): 32.

<sup>26</sup> Hawkins, “Exploring Colonial Boundaries,” 1.

Kartini showed an awareness of her racial and cultural characteristics and of the system that imposed them. She wrote to Stella, “Dear Stella, I am really pleased that you regard me as the same as your Dutch friends and that you will treat me accordingly, and that I am for you a kindred spirit, for you all people, white or brown, are equal.”<sup>27</sup> Kartini argued multiple times in her letters that race should not determine superiority, but goes on in this same paragraph to say, “No matter how stupid, ignorant or uncivilized a Javanese may be, the class of people to whom you belong will always see in them fellow human beings whom God has created just as he has created civilized people.” Constantly, Kartini seems torn between Europe and Java, and she finds herself as not quite either – she refers to the people of the Indies as childlike and naïve, often even dirty and brown in comparison to the Dutch, even as she praises Javanese language and art. She critiques colonial policy, but effuses a love of the Dutch language and European culture, what she refers to often as that which is ‘civilized’. Her language is constantly coded with the socialized expressions of superiority and inferiority of her time period. Her word choices reflect the European narrative of progress, wherein she saw the Dutch as ‘modern’ and advanced, and the Indies as lagging far behind. Though Kartini tried to rebel against the limitations this set for her, the only lexicon she had to fight it was one that constantly reinforced those very institutions. “This incongruous position,” argues historian Frances Gouda, “placed Kartini in liminal territory, in a never-never land equally far removed from the ‘crazy’ Hollanders as she was distant, as she wrote in one of her letters, from the ‘stupid’ Javanese.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Beekman and Kartini, “Letters from a Javanese Feminist.”

<sup>28</sup> Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls,” 36.



Education was not enough to grant Kartini status among the Dutch; it was her ability to communicate to them her special knowledge of all things ‘native’. She believed that she could use this ability to find a ‘perfect’ synthesis of the best parts of both Dutch and Javanese cultures. Gouda calls her language around the blending of cultures for the betterment of the Indies a “subtle evolutionary rhetoric”<sup>29</sup>. She desired that Java leave behind the petty aloofness of the Dutch and the bad habits she traced from the roots of modernity, such as drinking, while Java could flourish in its arts and education more successfully through the addition of ‘civilized’ systems. Kartini expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of ‘nativeness’ that she saw in the Indies. However, within colonial society, ‘nativeness’ was not only a state of non-civilization, it was socioeconomically coded. Just as she had done within the social constructs of race, colonial power, and gender, Kartini once again had to justify her place within the intersectionality of race and class to herself and others.

‘Europeanness’ and ‘nativeness’ occurred on a spectrum in the Indies, where even the Dutch struggled to delineate who could be counted as what. Dutch from the Netherlands were on top, followed by Dutch who had been ‘stayers’, living for generations in the Indies, and then the Eurasians. Only then did the Indonesians enter the hierarchy, their respective ‘Europeanness’ determined now by their social class. The *priyayi*, whose aristocratic status gave them higher governmental ranking within the Dutch system, became more, though never fully, European. This had the effect of separating the *priyayi* from the lower classes, stratifying them within a Dutch-imposed feudal system. Increasingly, this removed families like Kartini’s away from contact with the people, while instituting a system of European *noblesse oblige*. The Dutch

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 33.

romanticized the organizations of class within Indonesia and made them fit their own conceptions of a ‘charming’ European feudal system<sup>30</sup>. The idea behind this provided built in protection also for the colonial system. Under *noblesse oblige*, knowledge and wealth were supposed to eventually trickle down to the lower classes from the *priyayi*; this also meant that the Dutch could educate an extremely limited and elite population, and while maintaining they were making ‘ethical’ progress, avoid the dangers of an educated mass public.

Perhaps because of closer affiliation with the upper class than the laboring class, many of the Dutch, and Kartini as well, saw the fate of an aristocratic woman as worse than a woman from the *desa*<sup>31</sup>. Various writers, particularly Pramoedya Anata Toer, claimed that because of Kartini’s heritage, she had a keen passion of the common people of the Indies—her mother, Ngasirah, was the second of Raden Adpati Sosroningrat’s two wives. In Javanese tradition, a Muslim man could have up to four wives, and for the aristocracy, this often meant one primary wife of the upper class, and various wives who, rather than running a communal household, were responsible for their own livelihoods. This increased a woman’s status in society, though making her little more wife than servant. The most important consideration though, was that her children would be raised with no differentiation as to the status of the wife. Though technically the daughter of a commoner, Kartini was raised as a part of the upper class. In his biography of

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<sup>30</sup> The romantic Orientalism of the Dutch provides a stark example of Chakrabarty’s interrogation of post-colonial and eschatological conceptions of history. Here the Dutch appear ‘modern’ (i.e., European) while the colonized are set in a strict timeline of progress that ultimately leads to the same end, but they are just ‘further behind’ in their history. The non-West is displaced temporally, set up as if portraying Europe’s Middle Ages. Despite occurring simultaneously, the Dutch and the Indies do not exist within the same time.

<sup>31</sup> *Desa* is the word for village in Bahasa Indonesia.

Kartini<sup>32</sup>, he suggests that seeing the struggle of her birth mother gave Kartini a passion for helping ‘the people’ of Indonesia.

For the most part, despite her talk of ‘the people’, Kartini largely left the lives of the lower classes unconsidered. A laboring woman was not forced into seclusion, would likely meet her husband before marrying him, and have some degree of choice in it—Kartini saw struggles of her own class, of forced marriage and isolation. In part due to the polarization of classes, she had the luxury not to have to consider the struggles of a woman from the *desa*, for whom famine, difficult labor, and earning enough money to survive were daily realities. Gouda confirms that “Kartini rarely established a linkage between her own predicament and the somber reality of Javanese women’s lives in the *desa*.”<sup>33</sup> In her letters, she recalls being made uncomfortable by the strange glances she received when visiting villages. She also writes of choosing teaching and nursing as suitable professions because she thought that they would not ‘shame’ or lower her family’s status in any way. Economic privilege was a power that unlike race and gender, Kartini did not contest, but within the colonial system, all of them were tied together, influencing one another in inextricable ways.

In the end, Kartini’s identities were inseparable from the larger colonial forces around her. She produced thoughtful works and fought for solidarity through oppression, but was also forced to create these within the boundaries of pre-defined power structures. As Michael Hawkins points out in his article “Exploring Colonial Boundaries: An Examination of the Kartini-Zeehandelaar Correspondence”, the ideas which Kartini had access to as a colonial

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<sup>32</sup> See this paper, “Kartini in the Time of Independence” pg. 30, for further discussion on Pramoedya Anata Toer

<sup>33</sup> Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls,” 32.

subject were pre-screened through an ‘imperial conduit’ before they reached her<sup>34</sup>. Kartini came to understand that within the framework of her life, she could make shifts, but never escape it completely. Hawkins goes on, “Kartini’s decision to enter into a polygamous marriage perhaps reveals her most astute and insightful understanding of the realities of empire. After realizing the limits of her own social and political identity, Kartini chose the most empowering avenue possible within the rigid dynamics that framed her existence...”<sup>35</sup> Certainly, if she can stand as a symbol of anything, Kartini can be seen as a study of the creation and resistance of colonial thought within a colonized subject. The tensions she encounters within the heart of her own identity, the paradoxes of race and education, class and language, religion and temporality are amazingly complex. And the rhetoric she uses to address her cognitive dissonance is telling of the impacts and pervasive intersectionality of imperialism with all parts of life. Emphasis on the ambiguity and multiplicity of her numerous overlapping identities have allowed for diverse depictions of Kartini within different cultural memories.

### **Dutch Colonial Representations of Kartini**

With the publication of the compilation of Kartini’s Dutch letters, *Door Dusternis Tot Licht*, the Dutch produced a symbol through Kartini. In fact, the preparation of the Dutch mentality to create and receive Kartini as a specifically representative figure had begun long before the publication of the book. The conditions which determined the portrayal of Kartini came directly from the Netherlands’ history of imperialism in the Indies, and to the Dutch, Kartini was meant to both embody and further that which they wanted to consider an era of

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<sup>34</sup> Hawkins, “Exploring Colonial Boundaries.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

change. Even during her lifetime, her Dutch friends, supporters of the Ethical Movement, viewed her as an example of the civilizing (i.e., Europeanizing) power that education could have on a young aristocratic woman. The Minister of Education, J.H. Abendanon was prompted not only by the memory of his friendship with Kartini, but also by support for the Ethical Policy to turn Kartini's private correspondence into a public manifestation. The Ethical Policy had been in existence only three years at the time of her death, and patronage for its programs, as well as its very ideologies, could be found in Kartini's poetic mastery of the Dutch language and her critical thought. Her letters were never intended for an audience, but through their externalization, Abendanon necessarily crafted something new, a transfer of information wherein he had control over the images it shaped. Because her letters existed only within the private sphere, their move into the public required transformation. Abendanon's version of her letters, edited for these political purposes, ironically remains our first and primary source of information on Kartini. She never had the chance to exist in history without manipulation. Her image started to change the moment others began to speak about her.

To Abendanon, Kartini had dual roles. Personally, she was a close friend of the Abendanon family, treated like one of their children. They urged her family to ignore tradition and keep her out of seclusion, even though between her small outings, she returned every time to her 'box'. Kartini and her sisters spent significant time with the Abendanons, at their home and on various trips. The very fact that her letters fell into his hands after her death is an indication of the affection between Kartini and Abendanon's family. At the same time, Abendanon, not unlike Kartini, was a follower of Ethical Movement founder Piet Boorshoof, and believed it vitally important to maintain favor for the policy in the Netherlands. Abendanon saw this bright

young Javanese woman, whose compellingly tragic story would be drawing to readers, and whose knowledge would prove the effectiveness of the 1901 change to colonial policy, as an opportunity to create proof for his politics. Kartini was not only fascinating, but an embodiment of progress.

To the Dutch colonial memory, Kartini took on several intertwining purposes. Danilyn Rutherford noted that to the Dutch and indeed the West as a whole, she became “an emblem of the benefits of enlightened colonial rule”<sup>36</sup>. Such educated, refined thoughts, Kartini seemed to say, could be achieved by a colonial subject when an imperial power invested in the welfare of their dependents abroad. With the aristocratic class able to think with such sophistication<sup>37</sup>, their place in guided self-rule was assured, and the assumption followed that such civilizing forces would trickle down to the rest of the population. As Vincente Rafael has famously said, “the culmination of colonial rule...can be achieved only when the subject has learned to colonize itself.”<sup>38</sup> Kartini’s intellect, her insights, showed this to be true, thanks to ethical rule by the Dutch. The fact that the policy benefited the Dutch too, made it into a perfected approach to imperialism.

In addition to proving through ethical means that the Dutch were achieving colonial progress, for “the Dutch adherents to the ethical movement” and other idealistic Western thinkers, “Kartini gradually grew into a legendary figure... as a symbol of cooperation between the ‘white’ and ‘brown’ people. They also regarded Kartini as personifying their idea of what the

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<sup>36</sup> Danilyn Rutherford, “Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People,” *Indonesia* 55 (1993): 24, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3351085>.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, always falling short of being mistaken for authentically European. Kartini’s prose was and often still is, considered overly flowery, sentimental Dutch, despite her technical mastery.

<sup>38</sup> Hawkins, “Exploring Colonial Boundaries.”

modern Indonesian should become.”<sup>39</sup> ‘Cooperation’ was almost certainly an oversimplification and an overstatement, for it was Kartini who was adopting Dutch modes of communication, to examine ideas critically in Dutch fashion. The ‘majority’ group in a system of power is never required to adapt to the minoritized’s ways of being; for colonialism to remain intact, Kartini as symbol had to depict progress, but never total achievement. The same is true for those who believed Kartini should be an archetype for ‘the modern Indonesian’. For the elite, this may have been true, but as soon as Kartini was applied outside of the containment of her social class to the rest of the population, the criticism in some of her letters magnified had the potential to be dangerous.

Gouda suggests that the requirements to become a ‘modern Indonesian’ woman in the perception of the Dutch at this time was not only elitist, but almost paradoxical. The Dutch fantasized the perfect colonial subject, or as Gouda calls it, an “orientalist romance”: the desire to see that which was somehow both ‘exotic’ and ‘European’ at the same time. “An unspoken consensus among members of the Dutch colonial community prevailed that women, above all, represented and emblemized ‘tradition’, because they ‘naturally’ lived it in their daily rituals of family, work, and religion who mediated between the pushes of the modern world and the pulls of the past”<sup>40</sup>. Women like Kartini, in order to be a ‘modern Indonesian’ had to take on Dutch appearances, without dropping their commitment to tradition. Never fully European, but ‘uplifted’ by the benefits of her Dutch education, Kartini struck this balance. The Other fascinated, while the European made understandable. The Dutch romanticized the figure of

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<sup>39</sup> Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies*, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls,” 27-28.

Kartini, first as the model for the Ethical Policy, then as a symbol of social progress, and finally as the embodiment of the Dutch fantasy for a perfectly European Indonesian woman.

None of these interpretations had the full story that even just the letters could provide. As an editor of a compilation, Abendanon did not hesitate to cut out whole sections of Kartini's letters. He selectively chose those to feature in *Door Duisternis Tot Licht* that portrayed her at her most poetic, showed the engaging tragedy of her life, and expressed ideologies that the Dutch could recognize. Many of her liberal letters to Stella and her more blatant critiques of colonialism did not make it to the public, for the benefit of Abendanon himself and for the image of Kartini in history. His adaptation of her letters really did have such impact on both her memory and the history of the Indies that he had right to be concerned about their reception by the public. The book was so popular in the Netherlands that three editions ran within one year, ten years before it was translated into the vernacular languages of the Indies. A heavily edited version of Abendanon's revision appeared in English in 1920 as *Letters of a Javanese Princess*<sup>41</sup>, focusing on Kartini's personal life, rather than her beliefs. In 1922, a Malay translation of Kartini's letters finally appeared, supposedly commissioned by Abendanon himself. Though a limited number of Indonesians at the time were literate in either Dutch or Malay—which had governmental connotations—and still overwhelmingly spoke regionally based languages, Dutch educational efforts from the Ethical Policy were sparked by Kartini. Inspired by her letters, and aided by her sisters Kardinah and Roekmini, the Van Deventer family started the Kartini Foundation in 1913. With the help of book royalties, private donations from across the

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<sup>41</sup> This edition was translated by Agnes Louise Symmer, edited and with an introduction by anthropologist Hildred Geertz. Symmers and Geertz attempted to create a Kartini who was very much a passionate, though tragic, 'modern girl', de-emphasizing the causes and rhetoric Kartini often expressed. It contained only 87 of Abendanon's original 106 letters, and became the principle version in English.



Netherlands, and government aid, they opened six private schools in the 1910s, and a few second class schools in the 1920s. Around the same years, the first Indonesian women graduated from law and medical schools. Kartini, or at least her persona in Dutch memory, sparked great change in the colonies thanks to the preservation of one version of her within Abendanon's book. Her hopes to impact the lives of her people would continue to be fulfilled, though never quite in the way she had expected during her life. To the Dutch colonial society, Kartini was a beacon that radiated the wisdom and the progress achieved by the Ethical Policy. The Malay translation of her works, however, arrived serendipitously just in time for a new group of leaders to be influenced by her memory.

### **Kartini in the Time of Independence**

The end of Dutch control in Indonesia coincided with the end of the Second World War. On August 17, 1945, Indonesia declared itself an independent nation, free from the subjugation of empire<sup>42</sup>. First president, Sukarno, found himself with the immense task of creating a nation out of a collection of islands whose only unifying point up to that time was the commonality of Dutch colonialism and the growing desire to be free of it<sup>43</sup>. Many scholars of Indonesian history have pointed out that without the standardizing power of Dutch imperialism, Indonesia as we know it today wouldn't likely have formed as it did. Sukarno faced a people who spoke hundreds of different languages, practiced many different religions, and followed a variety of customs that changed from community to community. Although nationalism had grown enough

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<sup>42</sup> In order to focus on the perceptions of Kartini under Sukarno's established government, this paper will not go into detail about the period of Japanese occupation following the war or the brief Dutch attempt to reestablish control in Indonesia. For more on these events, see Adrian Vickers' *A Modern History of Indonesia*.

<sup>43</sup> The twenty years of Sukarno's presidency have come to be known collectively as the Old Order, lasting from 1945-1965.

to spur the movement for independence, it was hard to envision that kind of solidarity extending to the daily lives of the new Indonesian people. The Dutch-cultivated use of Malay on the archipelago turned into the official language of the state, Bahasa Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia, with its single level of speech, (unlike the languages of Bali and Java, for example, which each have high, middle, and low registers for hierarchy and formality), represented for Sukarno what the new nation should be—it was progressive, it was practical, and most importantly, it was far more egalitarian than the stratification of Javanese or the colonial connotations of Dutch.

Sukarno was well aware that to form a nation, spacial and legal boundaries were not enough. Historian Benedict Anderson has famously posited the definition of a nation as: “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>44</sup> A nation thus has physical borders, is autonomous, and is “imagined” in the sense of its members’ ties to one another in a sense of community. To create this imagined collectivity, the citizens of a nation must have markers they can point to as common, prevailing symbols of their nation’s existence and their own personal, shared stake within it. Shared language, a national flag, and a national anthem are common of such icons.

In such a young nation, Sukarno found it important that the Indonesian people were able also to identify common links to the past. Anderson continues to say that while nations have an “objective modernity... to the historian’s eye”, they have “subjective antiquity in the eyes of

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<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5-6.

nationalists”<sup>45</sup>. A country’s ideological community must have an imagined ‘antiquity’ that allows it to exist long before its physical creation. The identification of a collective history, one that links a nation’s existence to the past and thus to reality<sup>46</sup> is a major step in the building of nationalism. One of Sukarno’s most visible methods of historicizing Indonesia was to create the *pahlawan nasional*, or national heroes, men and women from across the archipelago that could be seen communally as those who contributed significantly to the foundation, welfare, and history of Indonesia. R.A. Kartini was the first woman to achieve such an honor, officially declared a national heroine in 1964 with her own holiday, her birthday, April 21.

Sukarno most certainly had read the Malay translation of Kartini’s letters *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* as a young man receiving an unconventional education in Java that included many Marxist works. Both of these influenced his approach toward governing, as well as his stance toward women in the immediate post-independence years. Sukarno saw Kartini as a figure committed to her country. According to Gouda, “The Old Order government of Sukarno bestowed upon the aristocratic Kartini a sense of genuine, populist commitment to ‘the people’ or ‘the masses’ (*rakyat*) as fellow Javanese and co-equal victims of Dutch colonial oppression.”<sup>47</sup> Regardless of Kartini’s ‘real’ connection with the Indonesian people and waving away her aristocratic standing, she could become Indonesia’s first nationalist, common and popular, committed to breaking down colonial walls from the inside. In the same vein, as a symbol of the people, Kartini could not retain her title of Raden Ajeng or Raden Ayu, which signified her

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> The connotation that history is made out of empirical fact, rather than interpretation, give gravitas and veracity to the rhetoric which it is used to support. One cannot argue with history, after all, it *happened*, so it’s *true*.

<sup>47</sup> Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls,” 30.

aristocratic status, but instead eventually gained the title of *Ibu*, or mother, Kartini. Under the Old Order, Sukarno mobilized the memory of Kartini as the literal “Mother” of the nation. One Indonesian woman at the time, wife of a Dutch journalist gave this speech to the Dutch on the transformative power of Kartini, full of images of creation: “It was Kartini, this immortal woman, who guided us from darkness to light, who steered us through the eye of the storm into calm waters, who escorted us through struggle to achieve honor, who nurtured us in our suffering to bring us joy”<sup>48</sup>. Not only one with the people, even despite her exceptionalism, Sukarno used Kartini as a representation to explain women’s place in the new nation. While insisting that men were the main force behind the nation, running the country, Kartini showed that women too must participate in the development of the nation—everyone could contribute something to the strength of Indonesia. Kartini displayed the kind of support for the nation that all women, students, mothers, and workers alike, needed to demonstrate.

The primary document on Kartini from this time period was Pramoedya Anata Toer’s biography *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, or in English, *Just Call Me Kartini*, published in 1962. Toer, Indonesia’s premier novelist, puts his talents to describing the life of Kartini, deeply invested in the Sukarno-era rhetoric of Kartini as the people’s hero. The title is in reference to Kartini’s letter to Stella, in which she requests Stella call her not by her noble title, but simply by Kartini. Toer goes so far as to disregard Kartini’s aristocratic title in favor of focusing on the commoner’s background of her mother, Ngasirah. He argues that Kartini’s ideologies, such as her fight against polygamy, and her love for the ‘people’ stemmed from the suffering and inequalities that she saw her mother go through. In Toer’s vision especially, Kartini wished to

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<sup>48</sup> Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls,” 29.

break down the segregating strata of society “in order to envision an undivided nation that transcended differences in birth and status”<sup>49</sup>. She used her knowledge of Dutch as leverage within the colonial system, to fight in from within, pushing boundaries and embracing Javanese arts. For Toer, Kartini’s trials, especially her time in isolation, provided her with enlightenment. She reentered the world aware of her duty to Indonesia. Danilyn Rutherford, who discusses the differences in Kartini’s depictions between the Old and New Order periods, explains in Toer’s biography, “Old Order Kartini was a radical, her identity grounded in struggle with the colonial power. In the dawn of a new era, Kartini did not just adopt a pre-existing position; she created her consciousness anew.”<sup>50</sup> Toer describes her as the first Indonesian thinker. In a young nation, in a period full of hope, opportunity, and pulsing with the themes of progress, Kartini took on a role as an idealized hero, who sees the nation’s suffering and wants to help. As well as representing the role of women in the new Indonesia, cementing the nationalism of the people with ties to the past, and even becoming the ‘Mother’ of Indonesia, Kartini played a vital role in the first years of the country’s sovereignty, allowing those like Sukarno and Toer to rewrite history from the perspective of the ruled. They appropriated Dutch narratives, like that of Kartini, for their own. She proved that thoughts like these, of nationalism and of the Indonesian people, had existed pre-independence, historicizing the importance and legitimacy of Indonesia as a nation, rather than as an ahistorical, non-agent subject of colonialism. ‘Our own people,’ Sukarno and Toer argued with the use of Kartini, ‘are capable of greatness.’ They sought to solidify the existence of a history as a single people that extended long before 1945 and would continue long after.

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<sup>49</sup> Gouda, “Teaching Indonesian girls,” 30.

<sup>50</sup> Rutherford, “Unpacking a National Heroine,” 35.

## Changes to Kartini under the New Order

A change in the character of Kartini followed swiftly the change in government in Indonesia. The transition from Sukarno's Old Order to the New Order of second president, Suharto, was violent and tumultuous, beginning with the events of the a coup in 1965, that killed six of the army's top generals. The coup of September 30 remains to this day shrouded in mystery, but the official explanation spread that Indonesia's communist group, the PKI, one of Sukarno's largest support bases, was responsible for the killings. Affiliated with the PKI was Indonesian women's group, the Gerwani, who were quickly attached to the story, the newspapers telling grizzly tales of how these wild communist women had abused the generals, dancing naked and castrating them before the PKI murdered them. The accusations threw Indonesia into a state of flux.<sup>51</sup> Massacres of suspected communists, atheists, and the affiliated who might threaten the state continued for two years. Suharto seized control of the army, and eventually, as Sukarno lost control of events, his political support shattered, Suharto took control of the country as well.

Suharto's new regime, technically beginning in 1967 when he became president, would go on to last until 1998.<sup>52</sup> His government, unlike Sukarno's, was marked by its turn toward strict conservatism and rigid stability. Even so, Suharto continued to embrace Kartini as a hero. As he himself affirmed, "As head of the country, I deeply regret that among the people there are still those who doubt the heroism of Kartini...Haven't we already unanimously decided that

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<sup>51</sup> The events surrounding the 1965 coup and following massacres involve multiple groups across religious, political, and social lines. They remain to this day a taboo subject in Indonesian historical studies. I summarize the relevant information here, but to learn more, please view the suggested readings at the end of this paper.

<sup>52</sup> Fallout from the 1997 Asian economic crisis hit Indonesia very hard. Intense upheaval and a frustrated population finally pushed Suharto out of power following rioting in 1998.

Kartini is a national heroine?”<sup>53</sup>. However his traditionalist shift on the roles of women in society meant that to Suharto, Kartini represented a very different being than she had to Sukarno.

In the New Order, appropriate expressions of women’s place in society were of paramount importance. Order in the nation had to be echoed by order in the home, which came through the strict and constant policing of gender roles and sexuality. To Suharto, there were only two versions of womanhood that could exist, and only one of them was acceptable to the state. The Gerwani manifested all that was wrong for women. They were not only marginalized, they were demonized, made out as evil, chaotic, and sexually deviant, a threat to order and society. Women in a large group, organized without reference to men, had a frightening destructive potential that could upset not only the stability of the nation but also uproot longstanding gendered power structures. On the other hand, “the New Order, under President Suharto, explicitly defined the ideal Indonesian woman,” the direct opposite of the Gerwani, “as a submissive wife and devoted mother,”<sup>54</sup> obedient to the last. The importance of *kodrat*, or a woman’s traditional role in society, pervaded all of Suharto’s rhetoric on gender. Proper women now had the doubled role of being traditional wives while supporting the nation. Julia Suryakusuma calls this State Ibuism: “The state gender ideology, or the official social construction of womanhood in Indonesia... derived from the interests of the state,”<sup>55</sup> defines women so that they “do not exist in their own right, but in relation to something or somebody.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rutherford, “Unpacking a National Heroine,” 23

<sup>54</sup> Petra Mahy, “Being Kartini: Ceremony and Print Media in the Commemoration of Indonesia’s First Feminist,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 28 (2012): accessed October 24, 2015, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue28/mahy.htm>

<sup>55</sup> Julia Suryakusuma, “State Ibuism,” in *Sex, Power, and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003* (Jakarta: Metafor Pub, 2004), 162.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164.

Women were defined explicitly first by their husbands and then by the state, expected to act within the boundaries of being a housewife and mother. To contrast the Gerwani, women's organizations like the PKK and Dharma Wanita were set up at this time. Dharma Wanita especially defined a woman's role in relation to both the state and patriarchy. For the wives of civil servants, a woman's position within Dharma Wanita corresponded exactly with her husband's rank in government. She had to show her support endlessly, modeling the perfect wife. If one did not fit within the narrow definition of womanhood, the devil-like affiliation with the Gerwani threatened at every moment.

Suharto, like Sukarno once more, referred to Kartini by the title she was bestowed with when she became a *pahlawan nasional*: Ibu (mother) Kartini. In some ways, Sukarno's usage of the term indicated his admiration for Kartini as the 'Mother' of Indonesia, as well as his attempt to break through the class stratification of old Indonesia, defining her in familial terms rather than aristocratic. Suharto's definition of Kartini as *ibu*, however, clearly connotes a domestication--the already established power of Kartini as a symbol, cemented by her status as a national heroine, meant that by changing the rhetoric around her, Kartini could become Suharto's model for ideal womanhood and motherhood<sup>57</sup>.

The myth of Kartini as it had been built to this point portrayed an exceptional young woman, one who had been idealized to the point of perfection. Neither the Dutch, the Old Order, nor the New Order ever chose to see Kartini as the rebellious thinker that her letters suggest, editing her image as they saw fit. Even the Old Order, whose narrative focused on progress,

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<sup>57</sup> The irony of Kartini as *ibu* is striking when one remembers that she was a mother for only a few days before her death. The term *ibu* in Bahasa Indonesia is also a term of respect for older women, but once again, Kartini was only 25 years old.



harnessed Kartini's energy to the cause of the people; a woman who pushed the boundaries could not exist within Indonesia's patriarchal power structures without a non-gendered excuse. The New Order's construction of Kartini avoided her confrontations with the traditions that informed Suharto's conservatism. Kartini, who announced in her letters that she would never marry, was adjusted so that she seemed to say she would never want to be *forced* to marry. Rutherford, in her article "...", contrasts the progressive Kartini in Pramoedya Anata Toer's biography with the Kartini of the New Order, documented in Sitisemandari Soeroto's *Kartini, Sebuah Biografi (Kartini, a Biography)* published in 1977. Soeroto depicts a version of Kartini that fits neatly within Suharto's gender ideology. She attempts to make an identifiable, struggling human being out of the myth of Kartini, but by highlighting Kartini's flaws, Soeroto makes her triumphs look even more astounding. While Toer writes of tensions within Kartini's family, Soeroto draws a picture of perfect domestic harmony, a la New Order ideal. Soeroto's Kartini was not tempted by new ideas and the Dutch, but rather followed the ancient traditions of her people.<sup>58</sup>

Penultimately, Kartini sacrifices her chance to study in Holland for the sake of her family, especially her ailing father. This too echoes with the discourse of Suharto's presidency--he often depicted his relation to Indonesia as paternal. And if the ultimate female hero of Indonesia could sacrifice her studies for her father, then didn't it logically follow that women owed the sort of duty to the now 'fatherly' state? Historians have suggested that had Kartini not given up her scholarship to Holland and eventually returned to family, following tradition, she would not have been declared a hero in modern Indonesia.

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<sup>58</sup> Rutherford, "Unpacking a National Heroine," 35

Soeroto shows that Kartini cared for the people (*bangsa*) of Indonesia, but in a feudalistic, *noblesse oblige* way, revealing the importance of the re-stratification of society necessary for Suharto's totalitarian power. He moved Kartini back into a position where she could know better than her people what has best for them. Suharto's government reinstated the feelings of patronizing *priyayi* responsibility that the Old Order had worked to distance Kartini from. In this way, Suharto used Kartini to validate his new regime's move away from egalitarian dialogue to a paternalistic view of the 'people' inherently lower, that only an aristocratic, powerful figure could give, so that Suharto could more legitimately, with the backing of history, enjoy this role himself. Sylvia Tiwon argues that during the New Order, the re-feudalization of Kartini and the singular model of womanhood Suharto constructed her to portray, "the image of Kartini thus fashioned has created a new kind of prison for women."<sup>59</sup> Women must demonstrate the level of domestic order and perfection of Suharto's Kartini, or risk association with demonized, marginalized women like the Gerwani--and yet this pressing standard prevented women from ever being able to fully achieve it and being freed from stipulations on their womanhood.

The event that most fully encompasses the appearance of the New Order's Kartini is *Hari Kartini*, or Kartini Day, April 21st. While Kartini Day was celebrated once Kartini officially became a hero under the last few years of the Old Order, and unofficially celebrated even before then,<sup>60</sup> during Suharto's presidency it took on its most public characteristics. Meant to celebrate Kartini's birthday, and women's progress in general, *Hari Kartini* in the New Order focused

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<sup>59</sup> Tiwon, "Models and Maniacs," 54.

<sup>60</sup> The Gerwani were known to have organized celebrations for Kartini Day before their dissolution by Suharto. It is ironic that Kartini and the Gerwani were posed as opposites within New Order ideology, when the woman's group had looked to Kartini as an inspirational figure.

increasingly less on Kartini's ideologies and more on women's activities. Newspapers of the time declared that there was no conflict in ideas between celebrating Ibu Kartini and the requirement of women to wear constricting traditional outfits of a lacy blouse, *kebaya Kartini*, a tightly wrapped batik sarong, that restricted one's steps, and a traditional hairpiece, or *konde*, that modeled Kartini's picture. Modeling competitions, cooking competitions, and other often traditionally and domestically focused celebrations that continue to today took on prevalence during this time, organized by many towns' branches of Dharma Wanita and the PKK. Under Suharto, the recognition of women's progress in Indonesia could not go without a reaffirmation of their *kodrat*. One newspaper in Kartini Day editorial "argued that women's emancipation had allowed women to become doctors and engineers but they must also be good wives and good mothers."<sup>61</sup>

In the case of *Hari Kartini* as well as in daily life, Kartini during the New Order came to symbolize the submissive role of women in society, through selective editing of her image by Suharto's regime. She embodied the ideal of this type of woman, while also providing a model for Suharto to follow in a *priyayi*-like, stratifying but supposedly affectionate, gaze toward the people. Rutherford, in her comparison, goes on to explain, "[The Old and New Order representations of Kartini] call to mind the languages employed by Sukarno and Suharto, one signifying perpetual revolution, the other motionless order."<sup>62</sup> While Sukarno's Kartini was of and for the fight of the people, Suharto's narrative of the memory of Kartini benefited the

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<sup>61</sup> Mahy, 'Being Kartini.'

<sup>62</sup> Rutherford, "Unpacking a National Heroine," 36.

conservative politics of his presidency. And in the not quite two decades since the fall of Suharto, Kartini's memory within the public sphere is once again up for debate.

### **Modern Considerations of Kartini**

In the post-Suharto years termed the Reformasi, now over 100 years since Kartini's death, her status as a legend and historical figure remain strong in Indonesia. Current perceptions of Kartini and her memory within the collective sphere continue to be shaped not only her the story of her life and letters, but also by accumulated depictions of her, dating back to the Dutch. Overwhelmingly, most of the informants that I spoke with maintained the view of Kartini as a mythic figure in present-day Indonesia, but dissent and critique, both in academia and the public sphere appear to be becoming more common. Kartini in the 21st century appears to not only act as a symbol, but also as an indicator of other pertinent issues at large in Indonesian society.

Kartini, as a general rule, continues to represent women's rights in modern Indonesia, though most of the details of her ideologies have been lost to time and politicized narratives of her history. My informants in the village of M----- P-----, in the regency of Tabanan, Bali, a mix of current university students, all English majors, and local residents, have not had the occasion to learn more about Ibu Kartini than what they were taught beginning in SD through SMA, elementary through high school. They were shy about their limited knowledge, but spoke unanimously about Kartini leading the fight for women's rights and women's emancipation, though somewhat anachronistically. Students Dewi and Yunita told me that because of Kartini,

“women have education and emancipation... otherwise it’s just men, otherwise it’s limited.”<sup>63</sup>

They are thankful to Kartini for motivating young girls. Yerikha explained that she’d learned Kartini was a part of the first movement for women’s rights, “an inspiration to act no matter whether a man or woman.”<sup>64</sup> Although Kartini did not struggle for equal working rights or even emancipation for working class women, she has gained these attributes in common knowledge.

At approximately age 19, they could not remember, however, many specific details about Kartini from their schooling any more than residents of the village, Ibu Agung and Ketut Watini at ages 48 and 29 respectively. They each provided nearly identical answers to the set of questions that I asked them, including where they had first learned about Ibu Kartini and how they celebrated Kartini day. Both of the older women used to exact same word to describe Kartini as a woman with *semangat* (spirit). The professionals and professors I had a chance to interview in Bali’s capital city, Denpasar, had generally had more occasion to continue learning about Kartini past SMA and into university. The trend I witnessed in historical knowledge of Kartini in Indonesia today seems to indicate a confluence of the legend of Kartini and the loss of specificity of knowledge to time. Much similar to the way that U.S. ‘heroes’ such as George Washington have retained their place in American consciousness although general history classes provide only brief sketches of the ‘facts’ of their lives. The details of Kartini’s life have generalized to the public by the force of time, but in this case, also combined with the fact that those details have been manipulated by various parties over the years.

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<sup>63</sup> Dewi Utami, Surya Saputra, and Yunita Putri (university students), interview with the author, October 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Yerikha Nada Pertiwi (university student), interview with the author, October 2015.

Knowledge of Kartini today comes from three main sources: from school, from Kartini Day, and from the *lagu wajib*, or obligatory songs, one of which is about Kartini.<sup>65</sup> Like the national anthem, Kartini's song is required at certain events, and the first stanza runs as follows:

*Ibu kita Kartini*, (Our mother Kartini)

*Putri sejati*, (a true princess)

*Putri Indonesia*, (princess of Indonesia)

*Harum namanya* (fragrant is her name)

Professor Darma Putra explained to me, "We have more, other songs, including *Ibu Kita Kartini*, 'Our Mother is Kartini'. So that's very strong phrase. Our mother is Kartini....Not necessarily interpreted as no one else is our mother, but how great Kartini was."<sup>66</sup> Kartini is almost irreproachable as a hero, regardless of one's educational background. She seems to combine the people's hero quality of the Sukarno era with the exceptionalism first imbued in her by the Dutch. Some say that Kartini is significant to Indonesian history as the leader of the first Indonesian women's movement, or as Indonesia's first feminist. As the *Reformasi* progresses, the avenue for women's heroes also begins to open up, not quite as limited as under the New Order for the perfect model of womanhood. Educational Director of Renon, Denpasar, Luh Agreni explains, "Kartini was unique because of her fighting spirit, but there were other women who had that too, but Kartini was special because she put it into writing."<sup>67</sup> Within her exceptionalism, there is a growing acknowledgement of Kartini's limitations and advantages.

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<sup>65</sup> The *lagu wajib* include songs like the Indonesian National Anthem. Kartini's song is unique, however, because she is the one of few heroes with her own song, as well as her own holiday.

<sup>66</sup> Professor Darma Putra, interview with the author, November 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Luh Agreni, interview with the author, November 2015.

Sari Richardson likewise defended the status of Kartini, despite her circumstances: “So a woman, she can be limited by her circumstances, but that doesn’t mean that she is stupid. That’s what I thought of this, about Kartini. So, she can see what’s right and what’s wrong even though she’s limited.”<sup>68</sup> Kartini did not take direct action in many ways that other female heroes have, but she leaves behind a eloquent and impactful body of work, an evident historical record that detailed her ideologies that others such as Cut Nyah Dhien<sup>69</sup> did not. Her thoughtfulness, captured forever by Abendanon, counts for just as much as direct action in the eyes of some. The fact that Kartini remains a relevant and discussed figure suggests that to this day, issues of women’s rights and education continue to pose problems to Indonesia.

This opening of a wider dialogue has slowly begun to affect *Hari Kartini* events. Universities and women’s groups have begun to host seminars and readings every 21st of April in honor of Kartini’s birthday, attempts to further the limited education of the public about Kartini’s life. Darma Putra recalls the combination of the celebrations of Kartini’s birthday and the death of famous poet Chairil Anwar into a festival of literary figures at his university. Sari Richardson and Luh Agreni both discuss the lectures they have seen and the newspaper articles, now often editorials, that appear every year in April. Luh Agreni in particular recalls the changes to *Hari Kartini* that began as the end to Suharto’s power neared: “women activists became more interested in her letters and wanted to change her image, the image of Kartini Day for more substance in the 90s.... Starting around the Presidency of Gus Dur, or around 2002, it got more

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<sup>68</sup> Sari Richardson, interview with the author, November 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Cut Nyah Dhien is another Indonesian heroine from Aceh, Sumatra. She is famous for having fought beside her husband against the Dutch, and later becoming the head of the resistance movement after his death. She is extremely popular in Aceh still, where Kartini is largely ignored.

government attention. The government started giving training about gender, which wasn't about Kartini, but influenced it, influenced the women's organizations."<sup>70</sup>

However in many ways, Kartini Day still remains unaffected by the changes of *Reformasi*. The women of M----- P----- could not think of any ways in which the celebrations have changed, and though Professor Darma Putra, as a man, is not directly involved in most Kartini Day events, he says, "they remain the same in spirit."<sup>71</sup> Beauty and look-alike competitions, requiring participants to dress in a Kartini costume and act with refinement still continue, as do the parades, cooking competitions, and dances that often have little to do with Kartini herself. This is the focus of many contemporary criticisms. Writers note that these traditions focus on a narrow window of femininity and do not allow for women to break out of these roles. Still others note how even the wearing of the traditional *kebaya Kartini* is irrelevant to the meaningful side of Kartini's memory, which are her ideas. And after all, they claim, there is little evidence that this combination of batik sarong and *kebaya* is ever what Kartini wore in any case. Poet Cok Sawitri laughed as she told me, "Women now have to rent the *konde* (hairpiece) they use to dress as Kartini. How ridiculous!" In a 2010 Kartini Day article in the Jakarta Post titled, "Is celebrating Kartini's Day still relevant today?", Vissia Ita Yulianto announces that "besides, it is a fact that the majority of post-colonial Indonesia has a wrong understanding of Kartini's thoughts,"<sup>72</sup> thanks to the political positions of both the New and Old Orders.

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<sup>70</sup> Luh Agreni, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Darma Putra, interview.

<sup>72</sup> Vissia Ita Yulianto, "Is celebrating Kartini's Day still relevant today?" *The Jakarta Post*, April 21, 2010, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/04/21/is-celebrating-kartini%E2%80%99s-day-still-relevant-today.html>.



But there is also increased criticism of Kartini herself beyond the representations of Kartini. Some, like Cok Sawitri, have begun to question her status as a national hero. Cok Sawitri, during our interview, argued that Kartini made progress “only for herself”<sup>73</sup> through her writing, unlike Indonesian educational reformer and female hero, Dewi Sartika. Kartini, she explained, was not famous because of her own merit, “but because of the Dutch.” In her opinion, most Indonesians feel guilty to speak against Kartini, but Ibu Sawitri points out the irony in this by noting that very few Indonesians today even read Kartini’s letters anymore. In this case, Kartini represents not something positive, but rather the ignorance of the public and the failure of the Indonesian educational system to teach critical thinking alongside history. “No one learns about history anymore,” she told me. “It’s all superheroes like Batman and Cat Woman. The popularity of Kartini because of a book... it’s just like Harry Potter. Everyone knows Harry Potter because of a book. Kartini is the same.”

In academia, especially among Indonesian historians, there is a frustration about the continued fascination that especially Western academics have with Kartini. She is a legendary figure who has been washed of her original meaning by translations, perceptions, and analyses. Beyond that, she represents an obvious choice for a hero that maintains many current power dynamics. Where is the hero who is not from the upper class? these critics ask. Where is the woman who made a physical impact on Indonesia herself, not through reputation? And most pressing, where is the hero who is not from Java? While Sari Richardson estimates about 60 percent of Indonesia’s population resides on the island of Java, ‘Javanization’, or the positioning of Indonesia with Java as its center politically, culturally, and socially, remains a significant

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<sup>73</sup> Cok Sawitri, interview with the author, November 2015.

problem that marginalizes those who come from other parts of the archipelago and denies them much representation. Despite the choices for other female *pahlawan nasional* to celebrate, Kartini, and thus Java, remain at the top.

In the end, it is yet to be seen what Kartini means to today's public. Her image has been influenced heavily by the interpretations of the past and that political memory bleeds still into the present. Her place as a national hero is almost certainly assured, but new approaches and growing critiques confront the traditional views. Contemporary Kartini is created through a strange combination of forgetting, an educational system that emphasizes little discussion of history, new studies and academics discovering her uneven impact on Indonesian history. Collective memory maintains that Kartini is a legend beyond mere history, but who is to say what comes next for her usage by others? Everyone has a different way of remembering.

## **Conclusion**

Although her life spanned only a brief 25 years from 1879 to 1904, Kartini has become one of the most significant female figures in Indonesian history. It is the weight attributed to her by others, however, that has made her memory last with such durability. Kartini's life, as told to us by her letters, was one of both small, intellectual triumphs, and personal tragedy. But such was nearly inevitable due the system of Dutch imperialism that reigned over the Dutch East Indies at that time, with its history of 'reluctant' campaigns to control the archipelago, and its far more subtle, but equally violent, introduction of racial codification to the islands. These were the places from which the context of Kartini's letters--and thus possibly a sense of her reality--were

derived. She struggled her entire life to find a balance between tradition and her own ambitions, between Java and the West, her sense of autonomy and colonial inferiority, her gender, her class.

Over time, after the publication and the popularity of her letters, Kartini's context, her ideas, and her 'reality' came to matter less than the ways in which her identities made her usable as a political and historical figure. Even our baseline for our analysis of Kartini has been shaped by Abendanon's editing to include the letters he found favorable and remove those ideas which might contradict the colonial power. His version of the letters, published as *Door Dusternis Tot Licht*, or *From Darkness, Into Light*, became a rallying point for supporters of the Ethical Policy, 'enlightened' colonialism that required the unification of the archipelago, and an 'oriental romanticism' that represented Kartini as the perfect Dutch fantasy: an europeanized, but still exotic, woman.

In reclaiming Kartini as their own hero from the Dutch, the Indonesian people have made her into a symbol in their own right. After Indonesia gained its independence, Kartini played an important role in cementing the young country as a nation, acting as a nationalist symbol that provided ideological stability for Indonesia in history. President Sukarno used Kartini's gender as a representation of all womanhood in the new state, making it clear that women were meant to support the nation through their work. She dropped her titles, become a symbol of the people, with direct ties drawn by Pramoedya Anata Toer to the people, and similarly to the Dutch, represented continuing progress--though the type of progress Kartini meant to Indonesia was quite the opposite of what she had meant to the Netherlands. Following the coup of September 30, 1965, Kartini retained her status as a national hero, but it entailed very different results under the conservative shift in gender rhetoric by President Suharto. A more radical departure from

any of the previous versions of Kartini, Suharto used the politics of memory to depict in her a obedient, traditional Javanese girl who modeled ideal, submissive womanhood against the backdrop of support for the state. She was not the girl who broke seclusion and rebelled against marriage, she was the woman who eventually returned to tradition and her family, the fact the her time as a mother was cut short, tragic, but unfortunate. She had only been trying to fulfill her duty.

In contemporary Indonesia, not yet 20 years after Suharto's fall from power, opinions are still divided and somewhat hesitant about Kartini's role as a historical figure, a national hero, and a symbol. The atmosphere for debate is somewhat more liberal in the *Reformasi*, but many people do not even doubt that Kartini is the single most visible signal of women's right in Indonesia, even today. On *Hari Kartini*, her portrait can be found everywhere, imitated by young women in *kebaya* and batik, her song in the air. It is still the day the government uses to announce policies and launch programs that have to do with gender. Though she is still widely celebrated--more so in certain regions of Java than on Bali or any other island with their own heroines--common knowledge about her is not extensive. By history and the forces of politically dependent memory, Kartini has become quite generalized, now a feminine figure who can stand in for any women's rights topic. Others who have studied her further do not always think so. There is a growing critique of Kartini and her real impact on Indonesia, flamed by class and ethnic tensions, as well as colonial connotations.

Somehow, Kartini manages to be both none of and all of these things. The ambiguity of her historical record has left her open over the past century for manipulation to fit the memory of multiple time periods, but it has also prompted particularly Western historians to search for the

truth behind the myths that made her superhuman. Her critiques are well-deserved and pertinent, but so are her praises. She was, despite her biases and failure to create major change on her own, an extraordinary young woman, a gifted writer, and had the noble aspirations of education, women's welfare, and racial equality. Her circumstance within the colonial world trapped her, and her death at 25 limited her chances to make change herself. But it's important, particularly for Indonesia's future to keep in perspective both the deliberate changes that have been made in her name, as with *Hari Kartini* events, as well as the identities of privilege that lift her memory above other important Indonesian women's movement, such as her Javanese ethnicity and her aristocratic status. Undoubtedly, as long as Kartini remains within the public pantheon, she will garner perceptions of issues symbolically linked to her name, images that both create and are created by the power of memory within history.

## Appendix I: Interviews

### Interview: Luh Agreni 11/11/15

Q: What can you tell me about Ibu Kartini?

Ibu Kartini is a *pahlawan nasional* or *tokoh perempuan*, who is an inspiration for many. She was able to get an education, sent to school by her family, which was not usual for the time period (*jaman*). She worked for education (*pendidikan*) for girls and fought against polygamy (*tidak setuju*). She resisted tradition (*melawan tradisi*) by writing to her Dutch friends.

Q: What did she struggle for/want to achieve?

Kartini's ideal was for girls to have access to education (*pendidikan perempuan*). She was against polygamy because when a man married multiple wives, they were powerless, and she thought education could help them avoid this, though in her time, parents ordered the marriages of the girls. In the past (*jaman dulu*) if the Raja saw a girl he thought was *cantik*, and wanted to marry her, the parents had to give their daughter to him – it was seen as a privilege (elevating her status).

Q: What made Kartini famous?

The letters she wrote to her Dutch friends (*surat belanda*) that got published. I don't really know how that happened. When Indonesians read them, she became famous.

Q: Do you think Kartini was exceptional for her time?

Kartini was unique because of her fighting spirit, but there were other women who had that too, but Kartini was special because she put it into writing. She had the opportunity to do that. Other women (*pahlawan perempuan*), like Cut Nyak Dhien fought in the Aceh War with their husbands. They were each shaped by the time and situations they lived in.

Q: When and where did you first learn about Kartini?

In school, from reading history books, and from her painting. (*Sekolah, dari buku-buku sejarah dan lukisan.*) Also from Kartini Day contests based on clothes, looks, hair like Kartini. I learned more from seminars on Ibu Kartini given on Kartini Day at Udayana by Cok Sawitri and Bu Sita. Before that, I never thought about what would be in her letters.

Q: Have you ever taken part in Kartini Day Celebrations?

Kartini Day is mostly ceremonial, there's not much about her life. The younger generation (*generasi muda*) should know more about her, there should be organized events for high schools, they should read her letters. Nowadays, people have to rent the clothes and hairpieces for Kartini Day.

Also, a few years ago, a lawyer started the "Kartini Network" to preserve Kartini's name. Several women's organizations in Southeast Asia joined it, not just in Indonesia. Indonesia wants to show that it has female heroes such as Kartini. (Kartini goes international!). Lots of women came from everywhere to it. I had a little problem with the language.

Q: Have the celebrations changed since you started taking part in them/since you remember? How?

Before, Kartini Day was all about how to dress. Then women activists became more interested in her letters, wanted to change her image, the image of Kartini Day for more substance in the 90s, 'gender mainstreaming'. Starting around the Presidency of Gus Dur, or around 2002, it got more government attention. The government started giving training about gender, which wasn't about Kartini, but influenced it, influenced the women's organizations.

Q: According to you, does Kartini deserve to be the first female national hero? Why?

Who else? (*Siapa lagi?*) Yes, she deserves it. Up to now, education for girls is important. Kartini, girls' education is empowering. She inspires *pendidikan perempuan*. It's still an issue.

Q: What does Kartini mean personally to you?

My father was a civil servant in the Department of Education. He passed away in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of junior high school, when I was 14. He helped me when I was in school. He told my mother to prioritize the education of the kids. My mother had to sell *hujak* to support us, I was not sure I would be able to go to college when I finished high school. My inspiration was my father. In university I did activities for income, like being a school journalist. Looking back, I had to have the fighting spirit of Kartini. I was always first in class in school. I thought, 'I can compete with the rich kids'. I hung out with mostly boys. I grew up in Singaraja, in Buleleng, which is more egalitarian than some parts of Bali. More ethnically mixed, less gender division. So when I came to Denpasar for my studies I felt equal to everyone else. Education is important.

Q: Is it important to keep Kartini's memory alive? In what ways?

Yes, Kartini is still important (*masih penting*). She's a historical icon, instead of artists, people on the TV that people look up to now. Don't forget history. We easily forget the past. We must make it relevant to the *generasi muda*. They focus on things like their *HP*, music, do things (related to Kartini Day) their own way.

**Interview: Sari Richardson 11/24/15**

Q: What do you know about Ibu Kartini?

What do I know? Just general things, that she was, uh, one of the royalties, and that she aspired to [...] liberated. She's actually in my opinion a very intelligent woman, even though her circumstances limit her, but you know, just like, behind the veil of all the circumstances, she actually, uh, understood what's going on. And that is transpired on her letter. So a woman, she can be limited by her circumstances, but that doesn't mean that she is stupid. That's what I thought of this, about Kartini. So, she can see what's right and what's wrong even though she's limited. So that's the inspiration from Kartini.

Q: Can you tell me about what she struggled for or what she wanted to achieve?

Um... I don't know much about her, but, uh... she, she wanted women to have the same rights, actually like women now in Indonesia. Same rights, same... I guess to be treated the same. But to be honest, I don't know much about her. Uh-huh. Not in detail, I just know that she wants to... to be treated equally as man. But to what extent, I don't know.

Q: So what do you think made Kartini famous, do you know?

Made Kartitni famous? Because she is a symbol, she is... she fits the bill, she is, um, royalty and she has a lot of Dutch friends. I think her friends were actually the ones who promoted her, and also after getting independence, the government politically need a figure, maybe like enigma, so... That's...uh, because there are a lot of other Indonesian women also that are famous. So... but she fit the bill: Javanese, woman, royalty, so she just fit the bill. It's easier for people to accept, in my opinion. Other than like, Cut Nyah Dhien, Aceh woman, you know, Indonesian population 60% Javanese. So that's probably the reason.

Q: When and where did you first learn about Ibu Kartini?

In elementary school. Also, there is famous Kartini song. And her birthday, 21<sup>st</sup> of April. I think she is part, part of the new generation, uh, of the *Orde Baru* heroes. People need heroes, mmhmm, to aspire.



Q: Have you ever taken part in a Kartini Day celebration?

Yes. In high school, um, wearing a traditional dress. That's the first time I did.

Q: What do you usually do for Kartini Day celebrations?

Um... Gather with women organization. Like, uh, last year, this year, with Biwa. Indonesia is very community living, so not probably like in the UK, where like, you know, very individual, Indonesia more living in the community. So, I say 80%, you will be involved in Kartini somehow. You can't avoid that.

Q: Have these celebrations, the way that they're celebrated changed over time? Do you remember differences between high school and now?

No, mostly the same. Yeah, wearing traditional dress, mmhmm, singing the national anthem.

Q: And does your organization do anything special for...?

We did. Uh-huh. We have a parade with... we gather together and we have a parade with... of Kartini with traditional dresses, and we learn from Sita, what's, who is Kartini, she is the expert... Yeah, and she's from the Netherlands as well, so she knows the history, so, appreciate what Kartini means.

Q: In your opinion, do you think that Kartini deserves the first female Indonesian hero, or the best remembered?

Yeah, I guess so. Because you cannot be too judgmental toward her. She has her limitations, as I said, but behind the limitations, through the letters, it shows, she actually woman who understood a lot of things. So... and that's transpired in her letters. So I think, yes.

Q: Does Kartini mean anything to you personally? Has she inspired you at all during your life?

I'm half-Javanese, and from Yogyakarta royal family as well. My mother, uh-huh. So I understood actually, yes, she inspired me because actually, even though, um, woman... man feel they are in charge, but behind that, actually, woman controls. And that's more power actually. It's called... well, girl power you can say. Yeah, so actually, behind that there is power, the power that cannot be seen, that is more powerful. They think they are in charge, but actually we are in charge. That's, uh, actually to be woman is easier than to be man. Woman has more power in my opinion. So, she inspire me that way, through her um... diplomacy, through her looking at circumstances, she understood what to do,

when to attack, when to use power or not to use power. Now that's harder than to be seen in a way that's open.

Q: Do you think that it's important to keep Kartini's memory alive?

Yeah. People need hero, she is one of the hero. She has inspired people, so keep it alive.

Q: In what ways do you think are most important to keep her alive?

In her letters. Yeah.

Q: Do lots of people read her letters?

No. They know one paragraph, like 'after darkness there is a bright light, after the tunnel', that's all, I think that's all people, all I know. Only from Sita recently I know something about her.... But she's actually embodiment of Indonesian woman, supporting the man, so... But now it's changing, Indonesian women want more rights, equality, that's why in order divorces happens, and society is still trying to adjust to that.

Q: Do you think that's difficult? Do you think that's hard for society?

Uh... It's still difficult, because there's tradition as well as background. I think what Indonesian experience now is what maybe about what in the Western world, the Baby Boomers, in the 60s, 70s, you know when they want just fun and all, so it's changing now, but this is becoming modern world.

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### **Suggestions for Further Study**

Further studies would be beneficial to furthering the field of post-colonial and women's and gender histories in Indonesia. A focus on the intersectionality of identity could be especially important, given the amount of social spaces that women are required and/or desire to fill. The significance of class, ethnicity, religion, and gender coalesce in many combinations affected by the particular historical moment. Kartini represents one version of many of these, but there are many other Indonesian female figures who deserve further in-depth historical study, such as Cut Nyah Dhien or Dewi Sartika. Temporal and spacial changes to perceptions of these women, potentially in comparison with Kartini, could illuminate further insights on both parties.

Further studies are needed on the silences that still linger around Indonesian history. The politics of memory have played a heavy role in the events of the last 100 years in Indonesia, and both these events and the rhetorics creating their current depiction, such as the events of 1965, should be further analyzed. Marginalized groups, whether non-Javanese, women, the laboring classes, LGBT peoples, etc., have been often left out of larger narratives, and a richer, more comprehensive Indonesian history could be revealed through their agency.