

**Nationalism, essentialism and the yearning for national  
"wholeness": Post-colonial constructions of "nation" in  
Indonesia**

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**Introduction**

Post-colonialist narratives have tended to reject the idea of nationalism as a totalising discourse and to allow for it to encompass a number of different - even competing - ideologies. In late 1990s Indonesia, however, in the midst of what some may see as the "Balkanisation" of the nation, essentialist nationalism still appears to occupy a significant space. Take for example the August 1997 editorial of the journal *media karya budaya*, which asked its readers to

*consider the difficulty of ... encouraging (our children) to forsake McDonalds or Dunkin Donuts and go back to Nyonya Suharti's fried chicken or Palembang fish cakes. When everything that smacks of being "Indonesian" is marginalised, can we still in all sincerity, in our 17 August ceremonies, give honour to the sacrifice made by our national heroes who died in the battle against colonialism and who returned Indonesia to her people?*<sup>1</sup>

It is a plea that seeks to privilege an "authentic" form of nationalist sentiment over the vulgar commercialism of globalisation, and to achieve an identity 'uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images'. (During 1988, 114)

My paper examines a particular manifestation of this yearning for national wholeness: the concern with what Boehmer (1993, 273) calls 'maternal plenitude'. Heng (1997, 359n) has pointed out the potent symbolism in the appropriation by nationalist movements of women, the feminine and figures of gender to anchor nationalist imagery to serve their need for self-representational vocabulary:

The would-be nation is represented, perhaps as a cherished "motherland" to be protected and renewed; an essential "mother tongue" is recovered and promulgated in the nationalist cause; or a selective configuration of womanhood, or traditional "mother culture", is posited, then defended, by those who eventually become the "founding fathers" of the nation (which is subsequently "born").

My study focuses on a contemporary example of what may be regarded as a potentially recuperative maternalising gesture - Megawati Soekarnoputri. Her symbolic wholeness resides largely in the fact that she is the daughter of Soekarno - the self-styled "father of the nation". As such Megawati can be seen to represent a return to what the people see as the "true" values of the Indonesian nation, her maternal plenitude expected to save her from the sins of her father.

However, as my paper will show, the maternalising gesture signalled by the 'Megastar phenomenon' is ultimately abrogated by her very femaleness. Megawati's name symbolises her status: 'Soekarnoputri' means 'the daughter of Soekarno'. She is thereby understood to be an extension of the ideology and politics of her famous father rather than a leader in her own right. Furthermore, the prospect of her becoming Indonesia's next leader engendered a lively debate in Indonesia on the issue of a female President, particularly in the context of Islamic law.

What does this suggest about the place of essentialist nationalism in a fractured postmodernist age? I argue that ultimately it cannot deliver what it promises: in the late twentieth century the concept of national

"wholeness" is too fragile and illusory to survive under the weight of entrenched ideologies and historical baggage.

### **Kartini**

Shadowing post-colonial essentialist constructions of nationalism in Indonesia is the "master narrative" of feminised nationalism - the story of Kartini, whose life and thoughts shape the way many Indonesians think about both feminism and nationalism. As Sulastin Sutrisno says in her introduction to the Indonesian version of Kartini's letters, '*the spirit of Kartini continues to inspire Indonesian women of today and the future.*'<sup>2</sup> (Sutrisno 1985, XXII) Jean Gelman Taylor (1997, xiii) describes as 'obligatory' the linking of the name of Kartini with twentieth century nationalist discourse. To quote Danilyn Rutherford (1994, 23), 'Kartini has sparked a conversation which seems unlikely to cease.'

Born in 1879, the daughter of a high-ranking Javanese civil servant in the Dutch colonial government, Raden Ajeng Kartini was granted by her father the unusual privilege of attending a colonial elementary school until the age of twelve when she had to follow the Javanese custom and remain in seclusion in her father's house. She spent the next four years reading and engaging in prolific correspondence with her Dutch friends, learning in the process about the emerging feminist movement in Europe. Her three passions were the education of women, the provision of Dutch language education and the provision of technical or vocational education as a vehicle for self-development. Her greatest ambition was to establish a school for girls, a project for which she had the support of her family. However, not long after her arranged marriage she died soon after giving birth to her first child in 1904, at the age of 21. She never saw her dream realised. Her project was taken up by her Dutch patrons who established the Kartini Foundation and Kartini schools for girls were indeed established, the first in Semarang in 1913.

Kartini has come to symbolise many things in contemporary Indonesia. She represents the ideal wife and mother, even though she was a wife for a very short period of time and during her time in seclusion had been vehemently opposed to marriage, and even though she was only a mother for five days (though in her letters she did frequently declare her intention to have many children). She is always referred to as *Ibu* (mother) Kartini, despite her very young age at death. She ‘embodied the purity of the young Indonesian nation’ (Locher-Scholten and Niehof 1987, 5) and was granted the honorary title of *ibu bangsa* (mother of the nation). (*ibid.*, 7) In the Indonesian context, the word *ibu* covers a wider range of meanings than does the word “mother” in English and in fact implies an authority transgressing domestic boundaries – as long as the benefits accrued from that authority are returned to the family. It is however an unambiguously female authority which is inextricably linked to woman’s role as the backstop and supporter of the family, as caretaker of the household, as producer of future generations and as the family’s prime socialiser. (Sullivan 1991, 64) This authority derives from an ideology which sanctions a woman’s actions as long as she does it as ‘a mother who is looking after her family, a group, a class, a company or the state, without demanding power or prestige in return.’ (Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, 1991, 44) It is an ideology which has underpinned nationalist women’s organisations in Indonesia since early in the century. As Kathryn Robinson (1997, 147) points out:

The specific concerns of the nationalist’s women’s organisations tended to focus on women’s rights as wives and mothers, manifested in an abiding concern with women’s rights in marriage...This focus has been deepened and extended under the New Order...in that the predominant trend in policies for women has been to focus on their rights and duties as wives and mothers, indeed their citizenship being defined in terms of their wifely and maternal roles...

April 21, Kartini's birthday, is a national holiday and young girls are encouraged to dress in traditional Javanese costume in honour of the occasion and sing the Kartini anthem *Ibu Kita Kartini*. Soekarno (who officially inaugurated Kartini as a national heroine in 1964) apparently changed the name of the song from *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, indicating her unmarried state, to *Ibu Kita Kartini*, stressing her status as a married woman.<sup>3</sup> Kartini Day is also celebrated with 'healthy baby competitions, or quizzes testing women's "wifely" and "motherly" knowledge.' (Robinson 1997, 69)

Discourses on nationalism and feminism in Indonesia are inextricably linked with Kartini's name. She was, to quote Sitismandari Soeroto, the 'mother of nationalism', 'a fact which should not upset men because, after all, "mothers gave birth to us."' (cited in Rutherford 1994, 34) For many Indonesians Kartini is not simply 'a symbolic reference point' in discussions of national identity and meaning (Cote 1992, ix); she is **the** reference point. She has an invisible franchise over the domain.

However in the last decade there have been suggestions from some Indonesian historians that in post-colonial Indonesia it is perhaps inappropriate to continue to idolise as a nationalist icon a woman who, after all, gleaned her ideas almost exclusively from reading Dutch literature and corresponding with her Dutch friend Stella Zeehandelaar. In the late 1980s the historian Harsja Bachtiar sparked a polemical debate when he suggested that Kartini's letters gave an image of her as an educated Dutch woman. Furthermore she was a woman who betrayed her own vehement opposition to polygamy and arranged marriages by marrying, at her father's request, a man who already had several wives. This particular debate led to President Suharto himself stepping in to defend Kartini's status as a national heroine:

*Haven't we all unqananimously agreed on her status as a national heroine<sup>4</sup>?*

In short, it appears that Kartini is beginning to be de-essentialised. In her 1994 article, Danilyn Rutherford examines the ambiguity of Kartini's place in her own writing, an ambiguity which has led to quite different reconstructions of her by, among others, Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Sitisoesmandari Soeroto. As Rutherford points out (38), Kartini's early death and the lack of an 'unequivocal origin' in her writing makes her accessible to and a symbol of, 'any number of collectivities.' Selective cutting and pasting of Kartini's writings can turn her into whatever we want her to be.

### **Megawati Soekarnoputri**

When Megawati assumed the role of vice-President of Indonesia on October 21 1999, she stood on the podium and said to her followers,

*To my children throughout our homeland, I urge you to resume your duties in a spirit of honesty. Don't get carried away by your emotions, because your mother stands before you here on this podium.*<sup>5</sup>

Her words represent a continuation of both the "mother of the nation" idiom symbolised by Kartini and Megawati's own ideological stance: during the election campaign she frequently referred to her followers as her 'children'. She felt obliged to decline persistent invitations to have a meal with her supporters in Jakarta, for example, saying, '*It will cause too much trouble for my children to wait on me.*'<sup>6</sup>

Like the Kartini legend, the story of Megawati Soekarnoputri has its genesis in a yearning for an "authentic" national identity. In case you have missed the media coverage of the Megawati phenomenon, this is Megawati Soekarnoputri (**photo of Soekarno**). If you need more proof, consider the following lively exchange in letters to the editor in July 1999's *Jakarta Post*. The veteran political commentator Herb Feith set the ball rolling by suggesting that the Megawati-Amien Rais ticket could be seen as a replication of the *dwi-tunggal* (two-but-one) Soekarno-Hatta team in pre-

Independence Indonesia, with Megawati representing Soekarno and Amien Rais Hatta. (Wahyuni, 1999) This led to a heated response from a reader who declared that 'the only ingredient Megawati has in common with her father is her genes' and that furthermore 'Mega will destroy the myth of Soekarno when she fails'. This in turn led to an outcry from another reader who asked, 'How could Megawati destroy the myth of Soekarno, her being his daughter....she is the reincarnation of her father.' As an article in the *Bali Post* put it, '*There is no denying that Mega's leadership is an extension of that of her father.*'<sup>7</sup> In a comparison with other female leaders, one commentator suggested that she was destined to be a far greater leader than Cory Aquino, because she '*has inherited the charisma of her father, Bung Karno.*'<sup>8</sup>

There are two things going on here. First, Soekarno is being reinstated as the "authentic" voice of Indonesian nationalism, the intervening 35 or so years being sufficient to sanitise some of the less successful aspects of his leadership. Second, he is being given a female voice through his daughter. There seems to be a sense that being a woman, Mega will not be guilty of her father's greatest personal flaw, his womanising. (Soekarno married five times and had innumerable affairs. The fact that Megawati has been married three times is rarely mentioned.) Her steadfast, womanly nature is emphasised by references to her in the press as being 'mature' (McBeth 1993), 'matronly'<sup>9</sup> and 'mild-mannered'. (McBeth 1994)

The most significant points for the case of my argument for the existence of an essentialist feminised nationalist discourse is that she is the daughter of the founder of the Indonesian nation. The symbolism is transparent. Just as discussions of Kartini are variously embedded in references to her genealogical links with Javanese kings, her roots in the Majapahit empire and her inheritance of the spirit of resistance from her

Mataram forefathers<sup>10</sup>, discussions of Megawati in the media almost always invoke references to her parentage - and both her gender and her parentage of course are signalled in her very name 'Soekarnoputri', the daughter of Soekarno. She is rarely just 'Megawati'; she is 'Bung Karno's eldest daughter', 'the daughter of the Proclamator of the Indonesian Republic', 'the daughter of former President Soekarno'. She was originally approached by PDI leaders because they 'wanted to use Bung Karno's name to attract the masses.'<sup>11</sup> (Levi 1997, 19) (However, this strategy eventually backfired. Soerjadi, the PDI leader wanted Soekarno's name but did not expect Megawati herself to present any threat to his leadership - he thought she was a humble housewife who didn't understand political machinations. Megawati's popularity eventually led to the split of the party with Megawati leading the vastly more popular PDI-P). This underestimation of Megawati's popular support and potential power is a symptom of Sylvia Tiwon's claim (1996, 65), that female power is routinely suppressed in Indonesia out of fear of its maniacal force. 'The notion of female participation in power is feared and therefore silenced' she says, adding,

It is this suppressed background of the maniac force of femaleness that may help to explain the function of so many modern women's organisations in Indonesia with their insistence on rankings, the emphasis on Ibu as the only appropriate title for women. This channeling of women taps their energy and turns them into "motors for development" without unleashing the power of the female.

Since late 1998, prospects of a coalition government between PDI-P and Abdurrahman Wahid's PKB foregrounded Megawati's gender. There is considerable disagreement among Muslims and individual *ulamas* about interpretations of the Koran, or more correctly, the Hadith (Mohammad's utterances), on the issue of female leadership.

The Third Islamic Congress on 6 October recommended that '*the President and the vice president should be male and Islamic, bearing in mind the fact that the majority of Indonesians are Islamic.*'<sup>12</sup> A vigorous

dialectic ensued, with various factions within Islam in Indonesia – including women’s and intellectuals’ organisations – offering diverse interpretation of the Quran on the issue. The most persuasive verse from the Quran (An-Nisa’: 34 RS1-302) states that ‘*Allah decrees that men are the leaders of women*’.<sup>13</sup> Those using this as a reason for not allowing a female President extrapolated from the Islamic decree forbidding a woman to be an *imam* (a religious leader) over a man to avow that therefore a woman must be forbidden to rule over a largely Islamic country, half of whose population are men.

A view put forward by, among others, Nuraini Lubis, chairwoman of Muslimah Al-Washiliyah, and Amien Rais, chairman of Partai Amanat Nasional was that ‘*a woman can become president if there is no male suitable for the position.*’<sup>14</sup> ‘*What we need to ask ourselves at this point in time,*’ said Rais in November 1998, ‘*is whether in fact there is no male capable of doing the job.*’<sup>15</sup> The chairman of Dakwah Islamiyah, Chaidir Fadhil, maintained that if a devout Muslim woman were offered the Presidential position, she should refuse it.<sup>16</sup>

The Islamic women’s organisation Muslimah Al-Washiliyah also appealed to a broader argument for denying such a leadership role to a woman, suggesting that ‘Eastern’ cultures like Indonesia aren’t yet ready to take such a step.<sup>17</sup> Ohan Sudjana, the leader of Partai Syarikat Islam Indonesia, unambiguously stated that a woman cannot become leader of Indonesia:

*But she can become number two....the president must be a male, while the vice -president can be a woman.*<sup>18</sup>

The leaders of Nahdatul Ulama, Abudrrahman Wahid's Islamic support group, were also engaged in intense discussions about the moral and religious implications of a female president right up until the MPR

session in October 1999. A regional PKB leader told *Media Indonesia* in August 1999:

*It could well be that the leaders will give the 'uncertain' decision to the issue of a female president. And if that is the case it will give the go-ahead for a woman to pursue the presidency. It will become like the issue of bank interest. Previously a number of leaders regarded bank interest as haram, now they accept it even though they still regard it as haram.*

Significantly Wahid himself had earlier denounced the decision of the October 1998 Islamic congress as 'very weak' (*sangat lemah*) and 'indefensible' (*tidak dapat dipertahankan*) and went as far as suggesting that the decision was politically motivated with a view to dividing Islamic support for Megawati. Wahid's own position was that '*in practice it is still difficult for a woman to become leader, but theoretically it is possible.*'<sup>20</sup>

There is also evidence that the notion of female authority remains essentially domestic in character. There has been some support within Islamic organisations for a female President on the grounds that female, nurturing qualities would transform the position and the country:

*Because a woman is superior in many respects, such as her diligence, her patience, her motherliness, so that within our society we would have a situation of calmness, tranquility and serenity.*<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

I have suggested in my paper the existence in Indonesia of a particular strain of essentialist nationalism, namely the notion that a nurturing, maternal nationalist figure will be Indonesia's saviour. I have argued that the 'Mega-star' phenomenon may be read as an extension of a nationalist trope which has its origins in the cult of Kartini. It is a trope which, however, seems to beg to be dismantled. Kartini's status as a nationalist icon is increasingly being questioned and discussions about Megawati's suitability to take up a leadership position have been couched in

terms of the desirability or otherwise of a female leader of a country whose population is 90% Islamic.

It can be argued that the nationalist essentialism represented by Kartini stood the test of time because it was untainted by praxis; she was given the status of a national heroine because of her rhetoric rather than because of her achievements. When it started to become clear that Megawati represented more than a symbol of a potentially nurturing maternal power, when it appeared that she may well assume real power, her gender became perhaps the most vexatious issue in her leadership ambitions. We can never know how Kartini's gender would have affected the implementation of some of her far-reaching plans. Some have gone so far as to suggest that it is just as well she died at a young age: she can thus be a heroine without representing a threat to orthodox power structures in Indonesia.

In Megawati's case the essentialist nature of her support may well work against her. The spectre of Soekarno is not a welcome sight to everyone in Indonesia; outside Java in particular many in fact fear the rise of 'Soekarnoism'. Others have expressed cynicism about the emotional impetus behind the 'Megastar' phenomenon:

*...the support, partisanship and mass sympathy for Megawati's candidacy for the presidency seems to be emotional and irrational, a manifestation of support for a figure who was tortured and oppressed by the New Order regime.<sup>22</sup>*

It is a cynicism encapsulated in Goenawan Mohamad's rather caustic comment, 'Suppose she was not the daughter of Bung Karno, she wouldn't be anyone at all: only a housewife with simple thoughts.' (cited in McIntyre 1997, 2)

Furthermore, if she fails to live up to the expectations enshrined in her father's name she may be shunned by her own supporters. Essentialism is an unforgiving discourse. The name from which she may be seen to

derive her credibility, 'Soekarnoputri', signalling her gender and her genealogy, may well prove to be her Achilles heel.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> membayangkan betapa sulitnya mengajak (anak muda) meninggalkan McDonalds atau Dunkin Donut untuk kembali pada ayam goreng Nyonya Suharti atau mpek-mpek Palembang. Kalau semua yang berbau Indonesia semakin menepi masih beranikah kita mengheningkan cipta mengenang jasa para pahlawan yang gugur dalam mengusir kolonialis-imperialis untuk mengembalikan Indonesia pada rakyat, saat upacara 17 Agustus?'

<sup>2</sup> semangat Kartini tetap menjiwai perempuan Indonesia masa kini dan masa mendatang

<sup>4</sup> Bukankah kita sudah sepakat menetapkan Kartini sebagai pahlawan nasional?

For a full discussion of the polemics see 'Ayunda tidak pernah menyerah' *Tempo* 12 December 1987

<sup>5</sup> Kepada anak-anakku di seluruh Tanah Air, saya minta untuk bekerja kembali dengan tulus. Jangan melakukan hal-hal yang bersifat emosional, karena di dalam mimbar ini, kamu melihat ibumu berdiri di sini... *Kompas* 22 October 1999

<sup>6</sup> Anak-anak saya pasti akan dibuat kerepotan melayani saya. *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Harus diakui kepemimpinan Mega sekarang tak bisa lepas dari bayang-bayang Soekarno. 'Mega, silakan jadi capres', *Bali Post* 7 November 1998

<sup>8</sup> mewarisi kharisma ayahandanya, Bung Karno "Presiden" Megawati, selangkah lagi...'

*Bali Post* 11 November 1998.

<sup>9</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review* August 8 1996

<sup>10</sup> See Rutherford 1994, 27

<sup>11</sup> ingin memanfaatkan nama Bung Karno supaya menarik massa ('Rakyat berharap

Megawati muncul')

<sup>12</sup> presiden dan wakil presiden (wapres) seorang pria dan beragama Islam. Hal ini mengingat mayoritas masyarakat Indonesia yang sebaigian besar muslim. *Kompas* 7

November 1998

<sup>13</sup> Allah berfirman: Kaum laki-laki itu pemimpin bagi wanita. *Terbit* 10 November 1998

<sup>14</sup> Wanita boleh saja jadi presiden kalau tidak ada pria yang mampu untuk jabatan itu.' *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Persoalannya, apakah sekarang memang tak ada tokoh yang becus. *Bali Post* 8

November 1998

<sup>16</sup> *Terbit* 28 October 1998

<sup>17</sup> *Terbit* 10 November 1998

<sup>18</sup> Tapi kalau nomor dua bisa. Presiden...harus laki-laki, sedangkan wakil presiden boleh

dijabat wanita.

<sup>19</sup> Bisa jadi, soal presiden wanita ini, ulama akan mengatakan *filafiah* (ragu-ragu-red). Karena keputusan itu *filafiah*, maka keinginan wanita jadi presiden bisa terus dijalankan.

Seperti soal bunga bank, sejumlah ulama yang dulunya memandang bunga bank itu haram, kini bisa menerima kendati tetap berpendapat itu haram.

<sup>20</sup> dalam praktiknya memang sulit wanita jadi pemimpin, tetapi dalam teori hal ini bisa

dilakukan. *Bali Post* 10 November 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Karena banyak kelebihan, misalnya ketekunan, ketelatenan, keibuan, sehingga di tengah-

tengah masyarakat akan muncul suatu situasi yang adem, tenang dan sejuk *Suara Merdeka* 1 December 1998

<sup>22</sup> ...dukungan, keberpihakan, dan simpati massa kepada Megawati untuk menuju ke kursi

kepresidenan sekarang ini tampak lebih bersifat emosional, irasional, dan merupakan

keberpihakan kepada yang dahulu di era rezim Soeharto merupakan sosok yang digencet

dan ditindas oleh rezim Orde Baru. ("Ismail Suny: Tak ada larangan bagi mega jadi

presiden')

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