

R. B. Cribb. *Digital Atlas Of Indonesian History*. Copenhagen: NIAS, 2005. 64 pp. DVD and paperback guide. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-87-91114-66-3.



Reviewed by Stein Tonnesson

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Commissioned by Eva M. Stolberg (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

In Greek mythology Atlas was condemned to hold the heavens all alone. Yet most atlases are team work; if one scholar writes the text, the maps at least are drawn by teams of professionals. Not so with Robert Cribb's *Atlas of Indonesian History*, first published by NIAS Press in 2000. It was a titanic one-man project worthy of Atlas himself. Cribb drew all the maps on his computer and connected them intimately with his own precisely balanced text. Now Cribb and NIAS Press have achieved another huge endeavor by adapting the atlas to a digital world, while thoroughly revising and updating it. It sells as a package with three components: a DVD with a user-friendly 2010 version of the atlas as a whole; a printed user guide; and privileged access to a Web site where it is being updated, and is searchable with familiar Google software. The *Digital Atlas* itself has five components: introductory material, a digital user guide, six text chapters going through the history of Indonesia; the maps themselves, interspersed within the text while also being accessible through a list, an index, and the Web-based

search facility; and extra material such as maps from Van Gelder's classic school atlas from 1909 and two base maps free for use by anyone who wants to draw new maps.

The package is well organized, the user guide comprehensive and clear, and the DVD case has a registration number to be used by the buyer when registering the purchase online to ensure access to the Web-based searchable version. The author and publisher are generous in allowing users to reproduce a limited number of individual maps in presentations or publications for free, on certain very reasonable conditions, explained in the user guide.

The text is of vintage Cribb quality, building on his expertise as a historian specializing in contemporary Indonesian political history and long-term environmental history, with studies of the 1965 killings (edited volume, 1990), *Gangsters and Revolutionaries* (1991), and environmental history (*Indonesia beyond the Water's Edge*, with Michele Ford, 2009). Cribb has also written a short

textbook on the history of modern Indonesia, jointly with Colin Brown (1995), and a historical dictionary of Indonesia (2004). He now works on a digital atlas of northeast Asia as well as a history of the orangutan. Cribb is a detached historian, with no apparent agenda except the scientific one, and perhaps environmental protection. Yet he is not the kind of historian who lists one damn fact after the other. He asks pertinent questions, dismisses flawed answers one after one, and concludes with a sound and clear judgment. The text in the *Digital Atlas* covers environmental, social, and economic history with almost the same weight and with additional focus on politics, but cultural history in a narrow sense is mostly missing. Wayang is discussed within the context of religion. Art and literature is mostly left out.

The section on political history before 1800 is not organized chronologically for Indonesia as a whole since the archipelago was only briefly assembled in one political unit. Instead it is organized in separate sections for Sumatra, Java, Borneo, the eastern islands, Maluku, Papua, Sulawesi, and Timor, and it ends with sections on “Imagining the archipelago” (on old European maps) and the growing European presence. The chapter on the Netherlands East Indies contains a huge number of maps with administrative divisions, useful above all for historians delving into local history. The text is so fluent, coherent, and well structured that it could, with small modifications, have been published as a book even without the maps. When discussing the lasting effect of colonial rule he says in the text that the most important development happened “in the minds of people” and therefore is difficult to map: “In the course of colonial rule, the indigenous subjects of the Netherlands Indies became Indonesians. There was no Indonesian state until 1945 ... but ... the consciousness of a great many people changed so that independence as citizens of a single archipelagic state became their central political goal.”

The treatment of Indonesia’s natural history is superb and also topical since it serves as a background for a detailed examination of the 2004 tsunami and the latest earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

The maps can be viewed together with the chapters since they appear on your screen while you scroll through the text. If you click on them, they are enlarged and have additional explanatory text and suggestions for further reading. The maps are not in themselves experimental or particularly creative. All are drawn from the normal birds-eye perspective. Land is yellow and water blue. There is a clear outline of coasts, a good amount but not too many place names, and text boxes inside the maps with more text than in most atlases. These texts often provide information provoking second thoughts concerning the impressions gained from reading the chapter text.

The Indonesian archipelago with its estimated 18,108 islands, and 63 percent of its territory consisting of water lends itself to this kind of presentation since the water areas (and sometimes Kalimantan’s interior) give space for explanatory text. A nice albeit somewhat special example may be found in the map “Distribution of modern Indic scripts, prior to the impact of Western printing technology,” where samples of various scripts are displayed. The historical year(s) each map means to represent is marked clearly in the upper right corner. Historians will appreciate this. Too many historical atlases are vague or imprecise with their timing, and this may lead to anachronism. This is not the case with Cribb’s.

Among his most illuminating maps are the ones showing female and male literacy in various years from 1920 onward, and infant mortality in 1990: of all children born alive in West Java only 21 years ago, 9 percent died within one year, and 14 percent in West Nusantara. Other memorable maps show the spread of new local Islamic law in the years 2000-06, and the revival of local traditional monarchies, 1999-2007. There is also a

counterfactual map with borders between the various nations that could have emerged if Indonesia had fallen apart in 1999. This map is the most extreme example of a thesis expressed by the author in the introduction: "A good map stops the reader dead in his or her tracks, subverting the narrative drive which lies at the heart of most history-writing." Cribb does not want his maps to just underpin his text. Instead they should engage in a kind of subversive dialogue. The atlas also has some figures that are not maps: a diagram of human evolution; models of Borobudur, a wayang kulit; the mosque in Kudus; a Portuguese ship; the VOC "logo"; a model of terraces for rice cultivation; a hunt for the orangutan; a graph showing number of speakers of the most used languages.

The *Digital Atlas* is not entirely flawless. A few maps may be slightly misleading, and there are some misspellings and also a few errors of fact. But then the Web version has an update facility. Buyers who register will be notified of all updates, and users are invited to send in suggestions for corrections, improvements, and ideas for new maps.

Perhaps the best of all is that the maps are available not just in a high-quality preview version, but also as PDF files (good for printing) and JPEG files of four different sizes (number of pixels). The JPEG files can be imported directly into any normal presentation program, and seem eminently suitable for reproduction in books or magazines. For pedagogical purposes, however, it is a problem that there is so much text inside the maps. This may draw attention away from the visual impression and distract students by making them read instead of listening. Reading out to students the same text they see on the map is not of course recommendable. Teachers may therefore need copies of the maps where the text boxes are removed.

The big question is how much the *Digital Atlas of Indonesian History* is going to be used. It represents an elaborate effort to make the slow

world of scholarly concentration, which we normally associate with the printed volume, accessible to the fast world of digital communication. The question is if Cribb's atlas is fast enough. It does not include any film clips, music or sound. It is not interactive in the way of Wikipedia, although users are encouraged to submit suggestions for additions and improvements. It does not provide the kind of simple and quickly accessible maps that are used by news agencies or TV stations. Each map contains too much information for such purposes, and the font used in the texts is rather small. The atlas is user-friendly. Yet it does require concentration. The hope must be that teachers, professors, and students can find the necessary time to familiarize themselves with this rich, high-quality atlas, and discover how easy it really is to insert its maps in lectures, presentations, and course work.

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