

# TLS

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## Beyond Java

JEAN GELMAN TAYLOR

**Norman Lewis**

**AN EMPIRE OF THE EAST**

**Travels in Indonesia**

**216pp. Eland. Paperback, £12.99 (US \$34).**

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**Elizabeth Pisani**

**INDONESIA ETC.**

**Exploring the improbable nation**

**404pp. Granta. £18.99.**

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Elizabeth Pisani, 2008 Photograph: ©Pascal Saez/Writer Pictures

< i>An Empire of the East by the late Norman Lewis, veteran of many travels, books and environmental causes, was first published in 1993. This reprint brings to new readers impressions of places and people drawn from a visit to Indonesia made when Lewis was eighty-three years old. But much of Indonesia is strangely missing from Lewis's narrative. He chose to confine his travels to regions on the outermost peripheries of the archipelago state, bypassing its densely inhabited heartland of Java. Instead he goes to Aceh, East Timor and Papua, places that, in 1991, were in contentious relations with the national capital. Uniting these very different regions was a common experience of harsh rule by Indonesia's national army.

Graham Greene called Lewis the finest writer in English of his generation, and Lewis writes powerfully of the destruction of rainforest by loggers and miners, the ghastly sight of charred stumps and tailings where once there was profusion of trees, creepers and ferns, butterflies, orchids and monkeys. He pretends to naivety. His aim was to go without history, to see the surface, but his perspective is antiquated. It leads him to hunt for “simple”, time-bound villagers with bare breasts and penis sheaths (what are we to make of his characterization of a man “so westernised that his eyes seemed to be changing shape”?). The cover image of a naked boy standing before a waterfall and tropical foliage captures the book’s essence, but it could never be said to represent the world’s largest Muslim country. And while Lewis travels in the company of two young men, he fails to see Indonesia through their eyes; and he manages not to talk to a single intellectual equal. It is as if, for him, the genre of travel writing demands a shunning of interaction, a preference for places in which communication is rendered barely possible by the absence of a common language and the wide gulf of class.

In *Indonesia Etc.: Exploring the improbable nation*, Elizabeth Pisani opens her narrative with the exotic too – she’s in a remote corner of eastern Indonesia, paying her respects in a mourning ritual shared by less than 1 per cent of Indonesia’s 250 million people. She stays away from Indonesia’s heartland for three-quarters of the book. Unlike Lewis, however, she is determined to understand the country. She brings to her quest a history of close engagement with Indonesian society over a twenty-year period. She began as a Reuters reporter travelling widely across the archipelago between 1988 and 1991. A career change took her back to Indonesia in 2001 as an epidemiologist on a five-year contract with the Ministry of Health working on AIDS projects. She had developed the journalist’s network of informants – politicians, soldiers, diplomats, bankers and Jakarta literati. Now she was working with health ministry bureaucrats, NGO activists and sex workers. Through these years and short return visits Pisani acquired fluency in Indonesian, a marked Jakarta accent, and Indonesian friends who felt equally at home in New York or London, but did not share her interest in visiting small-town Indonesia.

So in *Indonesia Etc.* she sets out alone on travels whose destinations and means of transport would be guided by the moment and the chance encounter. She journeys by motorbike; squeezes into buses without air conditioning packed with people and parcels; and beds down on the dangerously overcrowded decks of ferries. Her manners and fluency bring invitations to stay from people she meets, to take a meal, visit their business, attend their festivals. In some towns she gauges the changes since a first visit twenty years previously; development money has brought SUVs, grand government offices and impressive mansions, but not much evidence of start-up money for new businesses. She records snatches of dialogue and gives her colloquial translation. Each chapter focuses on a theme and region, and opens with a map.

Whereas Lewis perceived a simple life threatened by mass tourism, Pisani knows that young Indonesians who live in villages without electricity walk up the nearest hill to get reception for their mobile phones and check Facebook. National television gives Indonesians everywhere a sense of Jakarta and Java, of other Indonesian lives and places. While, in Lewis’s understanding, Indonesia is hundreds of disparate ethnic groups subjected to an empire of the Javanese, for Pisani it is polyglot peoples bound together by their national language. Her journeys on inter-island ferries reveal its capacity to bind:

A man from Maluku chats to a Timorese woman; there’s an Acehnese talking to a West Sumatran; people from different parts of Papua are comparing notes on their time in Java . . .

. When I stepped onto a Pelni [state-run ferry], a little floating Indonesia, dependent on the national language, I could suddenly eavesdrop on every conversation.

There is nothing romantic in Pisani's narrative. She observes, asks questions, analyses. Tuna fishermen can't expand their operations because of unreliable electricity service for refrigeration; buffalo are slaughtered for communal village feasts instead of being sold to finance a college education. Everywhere there are bad roads, and public servants not at their desks. Government funds that could generate jobs for the thousands of unemployed young men are squandered. Large-scale felling of the rainforest has terrible, lasting effects on the environment and is destroying an ancient way of life for the Rimba people of central Sumatra, who now raise rubber for cash. But a mother of young children whispers to Pisani that it is much easier travelling by motorbike than walking through the jungle. Pisani introduces the woman's husband, an NGO activist and product of Indonesia's school system, fluent in the national language; his education has enabled him – a Rimba man – to blend into the nation of Indonesia. It has given him the concepts and vocabulary of rights, the skills to fight multinational corporations and corrupt government officials to protect his own small ethnic group. Pisani does not find Noble Savages beyond Java, but people who value their ethnicity while having an appreciation of the other communities that make up their nation.

In thirteen months, Pisani visited twenty of Indonesia's thirty-four provinces. How did she do it? She includes herself in a chapter on Indonesia's misfits. In Muslim Indonesia, where marriage and child-bearing are universal, where all must follow a monotheistic religion and where that religion is stamped on identity cards, she is a divorced, childless atheist. Her outsider status gave her leeway. Still, to be accepted, to be invited into people's lives and homes, Pisani had to maintain a pretence of being married and Catholic. Only with her worldly Jakarta friends could she be herself, but even with them she could not admit her atheism.

It is the author's atheism, it seems to me, which shaped the journey and the questions she asked. It explains why Pisani spent so much of her travels in Indonesia's non-Muslim regions. Indonesians everywhere complained to her of corruption and poor infrastructure. They did not volunteer comment on the very visible changes the rise of Islamic power has brought to their lives, or speak of Indonesia's own terrorists who act in the name of Islam. Pisani is convinced that Indonesia is a tolerant society, but she acknowledges that her big-city liberal activist friends don't rally against thugs who attack those they deem "deviant". It's easy to be against corruption in Indonesia. Everyone is against it, but no one, high or low, publicly condemns attacks on Christians and other religious minorities.

Because the author moves between the separate worlds of men and women, talks to young and old, rich and poor, she brings multiple perspectives to the issues she raises. Indonesians come alive to us in all their contradictions and humanity: Elizabeth Pisani persuades us that Indonesia is indeed an improbable nation.