

HOW INDONESIA SHOULD DEAL WITH THE US: VALUABLE LESSONS FROM AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE

Abstract

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This paper will not talk much about the relationship between Indonesia and the US officially but will explore more the ways to deal with the US culturally. Like the other countries, Indonesia cannot escape from the American influence: be it politically, economically, technologically and even culturally. The three factors that usually become the important issues are the identity, geographically strategic Indonesian position for the US, and also religion. Unfortunately, Indonesia is unable to deal with the US in equity as two great nations. This fact only shows inferiority and the ‘doubled-standard policy’ conducted by the US make it worse.

In the US perspective, there is no such a policy since all policies are for the US domestic interest and benefit. Therefore, Indonesia must be able to deal with the US using Indonesian perspective, for the sake of Indonesian domestic need. The most effective way to deal with the US in equity as the two great and respected nations is the cultural way, which is often neglected by the Indonesian governments. The cultural way to deal with the US has been significantly done by the American Indian people. After being invaded by the Europeans which was ceaseless and finally led to their destruction by the end of the 18th century and losing their identity as the Indian among the white society, in the end of the twentieth century they tried to gain back their identity and try to communicate and bargain with the US, their own official government in their culturally unique way. This is best exemplified in the globally-read-and-awarded American Indian literature which explore that identity is the core of a nation, of a people, to survive and to be respected by others. The American Indian experience is the best lesson for the Indonesian to deal with the US.

Key words: dealing with the US, lesson from the American Indian literature, equally respected communication, Indonesian cultural values and identity

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I. Introduction

Slank's song title "I miss you but I hate you" may apply to Indonesia and the US relationship. Even, historians call it this way. The fluctuations of the political relationship of both countries has been going since the preceding of the Indonesian revolutionary period, in the Cold War Era, and after 911 attack, and today in the era of the leadership of Obama. Cultural relationship is usually shown officially since there is no direct connection between the two countries. Moreover, in literary world, there is almost not relationship at all. In Yogyakarta about five years ago Ayu Utami failed to explain satisfactorily the American setting in her novels. And Prof Egan also gave a flat response on Toer's novels in his American perspective. However, culturally especially in terms of popular culture, we cannot escape the fact that we 'live in American way': see the bottle of coke in your refrigerator and the jeans you wear. The same thing happens through the world: European, Asian, and African continent.

Nonetheless, we cannot ignore that the "good" relationship between the two countries always becomes the major concern of all Indonesian government and the US government as well. Especially recently, this is supported more by the fact that the US is now led by the Afro-American man once lived in Jakarta, though he might prefer calling himself as an American not an Afro-American. Freshly, both leaders are like "reading a limerick in response one-another." Obama gave speech in Egypt few months ago concerning American or Western approach toward Moslem World and he tried to build mutual relationship and understanding, while Yudhoyono gave speech in at Harvard University concerning his idea against Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilization, and Indonesia would be at front to communicate with the western world representing the Moslem world. Both try to maintain good relationship.

Are we "equal" to the US? Of course "not", since we are developing countries and the US is a super power. Even Indonesia is a poor country, as seen in a documentary film on Obama's biography: how he lived in slum area of Jakarta surrounded by dirty environment. Once I asked my students, is our government dictated by the US? Mostly they answer: yes. Further, I asked: How is it? Mostly they answer: not directly, but obvious, especially as exposed through the talk show on TV. Recently, what makes them 'smile' is the way Indonesians celebrate American presidential election and Obama's victory, it is too much. Yes, though located far and away, the US seems very important for us: economically, politically, militarily, and also technologically. Compare it to our reaction toward Malaysia, our small 'naughty' neighbor: our government seems too weak. What about with the US? We seemingly cannot equally communicate with the US. Remember how Yudhoyono administration prepared a helicopter pad costing millions for Bush, who arrogantly does not use that? This only shows how Indonesian government waste people's money for *inferiority*.

Every Indonesian government, especially the ministry of foreign affairs does not effectively communicate with the US, perhaps, because they forget the cultural way which will be effective to 'fight against' Malaysia. Culturally, the best lesson is from the Native American people. They have been invaded and destructed since the arrival of Columbus up to now. And in the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century they try to get back what they have lost in the past: one of which is through literature. Among the noted Native

American texts, Sherman Alexie's is the best in showing their cultural struggle against the US domination, their own government.

II. Indonesia for the US and vice versa: A Complicated Problem

Why does the US think about us? The three factors are significant: geographical, demographical and social factors. All of them cannot be ignored by the US, but some significant obstacles exist: identity, religion, and way of life.

The origins of the US are from European continent especially English (WASP). Though being multiracial country but the whites are still dominant. Those facts indeed influence the US policy especially its foreign policy, which is usually coercive. Historically, did they take side on Indonesia in the revolutionary period? They did not. They did that for their own sakes: for their existence and influence during the Cold War Era. Our independence is not because of the US but due to our hard struggle against colonialism and international support. They do not play role in our independence.

The second problem is religion. The Protestant people were coming to the US as the Puritan. They wanted to purify the Church. They went to the US for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But, the religious freedom they yelled in Europe stopped in America. When they were in the US they were after the other denominations. They became the invader for other Christian denominations. They think they are the chosen people. They exist for God and what they do is based on God's willing. They are higher than any other nations. Simple logical thought might say: they are hard with other Christian denominations, what about non-Christian, specifically Islam religion?

"You are either with us, or with the terrorist" by Bush makes Indonesia as a country with Moslem majority must make decision. After 911 attack in 2001, the US government declared to fight terrorism not Islam but the wrong use of the term "either or" which is supposed to offer a choice obviously does not give any choices. The phrase was addressed to all countries all over the world. It is a repressive statement which shows domination. Moreover, the Christian religious feeling becomes stronger and it gives problem for the Moslem in and outside the US. However, the US ambassador denied it in his speech at UGM saying that after 911 attacks the American people in fact want to know more about Islam, and it is positive. Though the facts show different thing like what is shown on Hollywood movies: the negative stereotype of the Moslem. Therefore, the US want to make sure that Indonesia is under their control. This is called as the process of Americanization, like what happened in Afghanistan as shown in *Kite Runner*, and also like what happened to the Catholic Churches in the past, and this happens all over the world.

And the last problem is probably the way of life. Pancasila and the American Creed are different. Pancasila looks for the harmony in life. But American individualism has another perspective where individual is main center of everything.

III. The US and the Invasion Experience: A Short Cultural Observation

Like what history has recorded, the development of human kind is full of expansion, invasion, battle, warfare and survival of a people and a nation, whether it happened in the eastern, middle-eastern, or western world. Specifically talking about the western world it was started in the Greek world, European, and specifically British and also the development of the US of America.

In relation to the topic, which is about the US or the New World, it cannot be separated from the Old World or European continent especially British or Anglo Saxon culture. Since the US develops through invasion and expansion, probably they believe it the best to deal with other nations, like what is seen today. America influences every country,

people, culture all over the world, including Indonesia. “American domestic policy is one of the best in the world, but its foreign policy is the worst,” said the late political expert of UGM, Sugiyono, few years ago.

a. America in Indonesian Perspectives

Freeport, Exxon, Unilever, McDonald, KFC, Hollywood, Harley, Jeans, Coca Cola and may others are what is in the mind of Indonesian common people. Those who work in American companies are higher than those who do not. Those who eat American food and beverages feel so American and higher than those who drink local or Indonesian beverages. Those who watch Hollywood movies and rides Harley Davidson are those having social privilege. Hotels and resorts are mostly owned by Americans. We are dominated by the US almost in every aspect of our life.

Routine issues in Indonesia are always related to America: be it politics, economy, and also culture. The just held presidential election was colored by the Washington connection. Protests against the US always occur in the US embassy concerning the US policy toward Middle Eastern countries, South-Asian countries, and Islamic issues. Other issues are the great investment of the US in Indonesia but those do not bring prosperity for the many local people, say it in Papua, Kalimantan, Riau, Sulawesi, and many other places. Then they feel that the problem is the government: they do not have great confidence to bargain with the US. Other issues closely related to the assumed American values like pornography (read: Playboy), human rights, irresponsible freedom, and many others always causes protests. Not only in the Middle-Eastern and African world, but also in Indonesia has the US policy built fundamentalism, which the US always fights for.

The republican and conservative approach shown by, mostly, Bush has built anger and hates all over the world including Indonesia as shown in the video games of shoe throwing. The response toward Bush administration gets worse and worse along with decline of the American economy as the result of the global crisis cause by its uncontrolled property business and banking in 2009. In the crisis has come a new hope in January 2009. The American people have chosen Barrack Obama as the president of the US. By contrasting his image to Bush he successfully get supports from the US citizen and even throughout the world including the ‘romantic’ people Indonesians. Romanticism comes up considering Obama’s experience living in Indonesia for several years. Indonesians seems to be included in the celebration of Obama. Moreover, Indonesian government demands for ‘closer relationship’ between the two countries. This is too much, because the US is not Obama alone but he is supported by the system which has been working for centuries in America. WASP myth is broken, superficially, because the statement, from Amien Rais, if I am not mistaken, “Obama is *whiter* than white man.” What is mostly memorable for Indonesia is his promise of his unquestionable support for the Israel in his speech in the Israeli community in the US. Yes, Israeli-Palestinian conflicts are the most sensitive issues in Indonesia concerning the US, though actually there are more significant issues that Indonesians must response like our own business: poverty, education, health, corruption, children, and many others.

b. America’s Invasion: A Brief Cultural Perspective

The US develops into a great nation through many kinds of invasions: (1) European invasion toward the New World invading the Native American people (2) American Protestantism toward the American churches (3) Euro-American invasion toward the Afro-American people (4) Euro-American invasion toward the western world of the US, destructing the Native American people, (5) American invasion toward the rest of the world.

1). Writing Culture vs. Oral Culture

In *Columbus Announces His Discovery (1493)* can be obviously seen the invasion of the western culture toward the Native American people as the first inhabitants of the continent.

To the first island I discovered *I gave the name of San Salvador* [an island in the Bahamas], in commemoration of His Divine Majesty, who has wonderfully granted all this. The Indians call it Guanaham. The second *I named the Island of Santa Maria de Concepcion*; the third, Fernandina; the fourth, Isabella; the fifth, *Juana* [Cuba]; and thus *to each one I gave a new name* (my italics).

Renaming the places seems to simple thing but it is not, it is great thing because it represents the invasion of written culture toward oral culture. Those renamed by Columbus have got already names given by Indian, but they do not write it. This journal becomes world-wide reading so those known by the world are names given by Columbus. Take for example: what is more familiar: San Salvador or Guanaham? I am sure the first is.

That renaming marked the beginning of the European invasion and the opening of the destruction of the Native American civilization. And up to the present time, there are problems concerning the authorship of the Native American works because these works are printed and written by the whites or a least retold by them.

2). Colonial America and the Wilderness

The development of the American colonies has brought problems for the existence of the Native American people. They lost lands since the European people open the wilderness and they were finally involved in wars, especially when the European nations fought one another. For instance, France and British fought for the land, and the Native American people were involved for each of them, fought for those taking their own lands: what an irony.

3). Moving West: Invasion of the New Frontier, the World and the Universe

After the end of the Civil War which indicates the end of the White domination of the Black people, there is no more challenge for the American people. Therefore, then they moved to the west. This is best exemplified in Whitman's "Passage to India."

Written in 19th century, this poem shows the spirit of American expansion of the US after their business with slavery which ended by the end of the Civil War. Being united, then there is no more challenge: everything needs challenge to survive. Like what is seen in *the Dances with the Wolves*, the veteran of the Civil War goes to the West to see the frontier: the West. Though he finally sympathizes with them but he sees his self the destruction of the Lakota people of the Great Sioux Nation. This is also best described in the Black Elk Speaks. The poem also shows the spirit of dominating other nations, all over the world, even the whole universe. After their victory in the Cold War, they need other challenges. China is one of these as shown in their fight in the outer space. Finally, the Moslem World is the next target: one of which is Indonesia.

O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!
Passage to you!

IV. Native American Culture in the Whites' Eye

Native American people or American Indians play important roles in American history.. Unfortunately, some American historians say that even a minimal consideration of Indian societies and achievements is all too frequently omitted from courses in American history. This fact has made the students of North American Indian culture tend to remain at the level of myth that have been questionably collected and inadequately explored.

The first fallacy is the white's conception of the single Indian is of great false for, in fact, the Indian are as various as the European nations. The Indians in America are as different from each other as French, Scots, Poles, English, and Irish; even, they are more different. The second fallacy is related to the white's way in seeing the Indian culture. The white men develop stereotype since their first arrival America. The stereotype has been spreading in almost all fields whether academic or non-academic, like in literature, popular culture. The third fallacy is best seen in how the white men view Indians based on their own needs. This has resulted in the contradictive and changing images of the Indian in white men's eyes. Unfortunately, the negative stereotypes dominate on the American people rather than the good ones.

III. Native American in Twentieth Century America: the Problems of Poverty and Assimilation

As the twentieth century opened, the Indians were faced with many new problems. The disappearance of the buffalo (affected by hunters and traders) and the loss of land had rendered their previous lifestyles impossible. The reservations they were forced to occupy possessed meager resources. Their land, water, fishing and mineral rights were (and continue to be) abrogated at will by the federal and state governments. While the standard of living rose astronomically for white society during the twentieth century, the Indians were consigned to a life of poverty. David (1972:136) describes the deficiency in Native Americans' life, as follows:

- 1) The worst economic situation
- 2) The problem of unemployment
- 3) The problem of alcoholism
- 4) The disease and life-expectancy problem

Equally damaging to the collective life of the Indian in America during the twentieth century has been the government's press for total assimilation into white society. From the beginning of the century Indian children have been sent away to government boarding schools to be taught to become white. In the 1950 'relocation' became a government policy. Under this program Indians were shipped to the cities to assimilate and disappear.

In the second half of the twentieth century there has been a growing articulation by Indians of their own needs and rights. While the specific proposals of these groups may vary, it is their common goal to assert their cultural and legal independence as Indians and to work for a better life for their people. The relationship between the Indian and the white in America has demanded the assimilation of the Indian, *the denial of his culture*. Rather than capitulating, the Indians have insisted on treatment as a separate people, having their own customs, cultures, and laws.

IV. How do Native American People Survive in the dominant White society of the US

1. Native American's Self-Recognition in Anna Lee Walters' *The Warriors*

Anna Lee Walter's Uncle Ralph spent a good majority of his life as a "warrior." However, the increasing influence of Western customs and lifestyle has caused a number of

Native American to forget who they are. Uncle Ralph harbors such a strong belief in the quality of his people that he comes to believe his fight to be “just, worthy, and beautiful.”

To believe in something alone is not enough to be considered beautiful, only when one is faithfully chooses to believe in an ideal even in times when this particular may result in inconvenience or offer no rewards to the believer can it be considered an act of beauty. Uncle Ralph holds fast in his traditional Indian values even when times were hard for people like him. Unfortunately, he begins to give way to the negative habits of Western culture when he realized that he is only one warrior who could not win his fight by himself. His alcoholism has pushed him into a life with the hobos that he has often spoken as people who “see things differently.”

Perhaps these are his warriors after all, for they may have given up their fights just as he does. As the hobos steer clear of cooperating with the American system, Uncle Ralph may have done the same in an effort to retain his American identity.

“Beauty,” she said to me.” Our battle is for beauty. It’s what Uncle Ralph fought for, too. He often said that everyone else just wanted to go to the Moon. But remember, Sister, you and I done been there. Don’t forget, after all we’re children of the stars. (p. 403)

To truly know one-self is as important as it is beautiful when one is surrounded in a world dominated by humans who will stop at nothing to hide the beauty of their own identity.

2. Native American’s Regaining of Self-Identity in Alexie *The Toughest Indian in the World*.

Sherman Alexie’s *The Toughest Indian in the World* proposes an idea of how the Spokane Indian reporter lives in the white society. In his childhood and teenage life, he lived among his Indian family, and he was taught not to live in a white society. He used to pick up Indian hitchhikers with his father who always believed that the salmon might be stars. This signifies the Indian values and identity his father still believes. As a child, he still had a great and strong Indian identity because of his father’s beliefs and lessons.

Separation from Indian life happens in his adult life. As the times passed, he finally decides to leave the Indian society and he lives among the white society. He follows the life style and the value of the white. However, he still picks up Indian hitchhiker, things which his father used to do, in his spare time or during his working time on reporting. The nostalgia of the memories of hitchhiking the Indians with his father always lies in his heart and mind.

“...I loved the smell of the Indians, and of the Indian hitchhikers in particular...” (p. 98)

In this phase of life, his position is between the two great different worlds, the white and the Indian world. Unfortunately, the white’s value, lifestyle, society and culture do not fit him because the people always underestimate, disrespect and often laugh at him. In the office, he works as a features writer and the only Indian on that. He gets so bored by all the *shit jobs* (Alexie’s term). This is because he has to write the articles designed to please the eye, ear, and heart (of the whites).

Situation changes when, one day, he meets an Indian hitchhiker in his way on writing some stories for the newspaper. He is a *Lummi* Indian fighter who tells him that he fights from one reservation to another until he finally meet a huge Flathead Indian kid whom he beats him as hard as he could but he never get him down. He lost the fight, but he thinks that he is not as stronger than he is for he never fought back but too strong to fall down; he is not “the toughest Indian in the world.” During the way, he recalls the old memories about the smell of the Indian. He seems to enjoy this nostalgia of hitchhiking Indians.

During the travel, the reporter is excited by the stories of the fighter and he silently admires his brave and his strength as if he was “a warrior.” The Spokane reporter is actually “leaving” his white society. This is signified and symbolized by his travel along with the *Lummi* fighter. This travel represents the way toward his regaining his identity as an Indian.

Because the fighter does have any place to stay, he asks him to stay with him in a small hotel Pony Soldier Motel when the day goes dark. Both stay in the same room, the reporter sleep on the bed while the fighter sleeps on the floor. Unexpectedly, both are involved in a homosexual interrelationship. Although he is not a gay, he does nothing to stop. In his lovemaking, he feels that he wants the fighter to save him. He says:

Believe me. I wanted him to save me. (p. 104)

After taking a shower and wondering if he was a warrior in this life and had been a warrior in the previous life, he falls asleep. The next morning he goes out and he walks past his car and steps onto the warm pavement. He starts walking in bare feet toward the place where he was born and will someday die. His heart is filled with thin white skeleton of a thousand salmons (p. 104) He has left the car which is the symbol the white culture. The salmons symbolize his Indian identity. He has regained back the most important thing for an Indian--the Indian identity.

3. Native American's Struggle against White's Dominant Culture in Louise Erdrich's *The Red Convertible*

In this story, Erdrich offers a unique perspective on a kind of maturation process and coming to terms with a discriminatory world. The main character and narrator, Lyman Lamartine, is a young Chippewa Indian trying to define who he is and what is important to him. The environment where he lives offers him two alternative lifestyles: his own native culture and the white culture.

Lyman begins by favoring the more affluent white culture, and Henry, his brother, does, too. The white culture is clearly the empowered society, and perhaps this is what initially attracts Lyman. The natives appear to live in less than ideal conditions; Lyman observes that the reservation roads are full of holes, as are the promises made by the government. The television, which the young Lyman buys with enthusiasm but later destroys, exemplifies the presence of white values in the native community; in particular, the artificial images of television anaesthetize Henry from the pain of war and capture; he shuts himself from his own family and community (the photograph of Henry suggests that his spirit is already dead). (p. 237)

Henry experiences a bad process of way of his life. He moves from an acceptable life to a completely distressed life. Henry is associated with blood (he bites through his lip and his own blood runs down into his food (p. 235), and with the color red (he has a nose like the Red Tomahawk Indian on all the road signs (p. 234), and he ultimately chooses to drown in the Red River. Thus, Erdrich associates the notion of blood with the "red" race (a white label). The red convertible is a symbol of marginalization for both Henry and Lyman. However, both men are willing to give it up for more important values (Henry gives it to Lyman when he leaves for the war, and Lyman damages it in an effort to bring Henry back to health; in the end, Lyman erases any evidence of its presence).

The Native American people are clearly disempowered in this story. However, despite the oppression, Lyman ultimately chooses to embrace his native heritage, not the white. Lyman and Henry both indicate that the ownership of the red car is not important to

them. Lyman destroys the car in the end because it no longer represents success and good times to him. On the contrary, it represents the white world, which has destroyed Henry. He recognizes the enormous sacrifice that Henry has made on behalf of the whites (he has paid for his connection to the white world with his life).

The story concludes that minorities within a dominant culture are often confronted with two choices: to assimilate or to be annihilated. Clearly, Henry has been annihilated, and Lyman, too, finally decides to disconnect his white society, which is symbolized by the drowned car.

V. A Short Concluding Remark: Small Precious Values to Learn

Though different in context but Indonesian and Native Americans happens to experience the same thing: dominated by the whites (the US), even theirs is worse. Both experience stereotyping, poverty, being globalized and Americanized, and health problem, terrible education, and many others. However, they do not give up after losing almost everything important for them: lands, culture, and identity. Those three stories exemplify that identity is one thing they have to regain, get back, and revitalized. Like what Sherman Alexie explain in “Superman and Me,”

A smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike. ... I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky. I read books late into the night, until I could barely keep my eyes open. I read books at recess, then during lunch, and in the few minutes left after I had finished my classroom assignments. I read books in the car when my family traveled to powwows or basketball games. In shopping malls, I ran to the bookstores and read bits and pieces of as many books as I could. I read the books my father brought home from the pawnshops and secondhand. I read the books I borrowed from the library. I read the backs of cereal boxes. I read the newspaper. I read the bulletins posted on the walls of the school, the clinic, the tribal offices, the post office. I read junk mail. I read auto-repair manuals. I read magazines. I read anything that had words and paragraphs. I read with equal parts joy and desperation. I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life. ... These days, I write novels, short stories, and poems. I visit schools and teach creative writing to Indian kids. In all my years in the reservation school system, I was never taught how to write poetry, short stories or novels. I was certainly never taught that Indians wrote poetry, short stories and novels. Writing was something beyond Indians. I cannot recall a single time that a guest teacher visited the reservation. There must have been visiting teachers. Who were they? Where are they now? Do they exist? I visit the schools as often as possible. The Indian kids crowd the classroom. Many are writing their own poems, short stories and novels. They have read my books. They have read many other books. They look at me with bright eyes and arrogant wonder. They are trying to save their lives. Then there are the sullen and already defeated Indian kids who sit in the back rows and ignore me with theatrical precision. The pages of their notebooks are empty. They carry neither pencil nor pen. They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. "Books," I say to them. "Books," I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save our lives.

Alexie's tone is a warrior tone, just like Soekarno's "... digembleng hancur lebur bangkit kembali, digembleng hancur lebur bangkit kembali..." Combined with the three stories previously mentioned, the values important to bear in mind is deconstructing the whole values especially those not ours and created by others and keep redefining and revitalizing the original character of our culture, though we are dominated by the US in every aspect of life. In his latest work *War Dances* (2009), Alexie's brain is called beautiful by the dominant culture in. We must start to learn to reinvent this kind of local wisdom which we are rich of and spread them all over the world, through books. Otherwise, we will soon see our destruction.