

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Bijl, Grace V. S. Chin (Eds.). *Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, National and Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020.

Published online: 25 July 2022

To cite this article: Hawkins, M. C. 2022. Book review: Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, national and transnational memories of an Indonesian icon. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 18 (2): 347–349. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2022.18.2.15>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2022.18.2.15>

Examining the lives and legacies of national heroes is always a fraught endeavour. The iconic status of these figures combined with the deep-seated meanings and associations embedded in them automatically raises emotions and creates an almost transgressive scholarly project. Such examinations require tact and courage. Paul Bijl and Grace V. S. Chin’s recent edited volume, *Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, National and Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon*, provides a wonderful example of just how such projects should be carried out. The editors bring together an artful collection of eight concise essays exploring the multifaceted life and legacy of Raden Adjeng Kartini, the Indonesian aristocrat, educator, and women’s rights activist.

The editors are explicit that this is not a biographical work, but rather an examination of how Kartini’s life and legacy have been appropriated by a complex array of interested parties over time. Dutch imperialists, Indonesian nationalists, feminists, Islamicists, politicians, scholars, and others have all used Kartini’s legacy as a framework for furthering particular agendas. This appropriation occurred during her life and beyond. The editors explain their work as follows, “Significantly, this volume interrogates the discursive underpinnings of the multiple appropriations of Kartini by exploring the ways in which the ideologies and practices of power, both formal and informal, shape how she is remembered by Indonesia and the world ... appropriations of Kartini tap into underlying political,

social, and cultural investments and agendas which can be viewed as responses to the needs or anxieties of those constructing her” (p. 4). Thus, this book is essentially a kind of indirect history, uncovering the motives and methods of those that appropriate Kartini, rather than a history of Kartini herself. In this sense, it presents a unique contribution to the historiography.

The subsequent essays in this volume provide a rich examination of Kartini’s appearances in discourses across the globe over a significant span of time. The various authors track Kartini’s function and usefulness as a “floating signifier” (p. 131) to the Dutch empire, post-colonial Indonesian politics, feminists cause, Islamic identity, and elite efforts to frame perceptions of empire and colonial legacies in the West. The collective articles are given insightful theoretical context by Jean Gelman Taylor’s outstanding afterword, which provides historiographical and cultural context as well as a thoughtful consideration of “appropriation” as a subject of analysis. The book covers a surprising breath of space and time and aptly demonstrates Kartini’s “rich afterlife” (p. 3) in previously unexplored dimensions.

Certainly, one of the major strengths of the book is a pervasive undercurrent exploring Kartini’s complex participation in constructing and representing her own identity. One of the primary struggles in Southeast Asian studies is incorporating indigenous voices. Typically, a lack of direct sources and biased archives blunt these efforts. Kartini, however, provides a glaring exception. Her voluminous writings and uncommon candour give scholars an unprecedented access point into the minds of the colonised. Many essays in this volume make effective use of this unprecedented access. Joost Cote’s article, “Crafting Reform: Kartini and the Imperial Imagination, 1898–1911”, for example, explores Kartini’s deep ambivalence at her own usefulness to Dutch empire as a symbol of the model native and “a monument of self-congratulatory imperialism” (p. 38). In perhaps one of the most unique and thought-provoking pieces in this book, Grace V. S. Chin analyses Kartini’s strategic silence regarding the status of native women to control her appropriation and protect her socioeconomic position, which deeply problematises her subsequent legacy as a feminist icon and complicates her iconic position in modern Indonesian politics (pp. 73–102). Danilyn Rutherford’s article, “Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People”, touches on similar themes, provocatively probing the actual beneficiaries of Kartini’s posthumous representation.

This overall line of inquiry provides one of the strongest and most valuable aspects of *Appropriating Kartini*. Despite her passing 118 years ago, Kartini continues to inform and negotiate her legacy with those who would appropriate her life and writings.

In sum, *Appropriating Kartini* is a much-needed volume in the field. It offers a fresh and interesting contribution to the historiography and a launching point for further research. This book is recommended for anyone interested in the life and legacy of Kartini, studies of empire, Indonesian politics, the appropriation of national icons, or constructions of post-colonial feminism. It is an appropriate volume for scholars, graduate students, and upper division undergraduates.

Michael C. Hawkins

Department of History, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, United States