

Adventure, Data Gathering, and Building Network in Indonesia

Abdulwahid PANGANTING

*Development Management Officer
National Council on Muslim Filipinos
wahidhgp@gmail.com*

On October 2019, a day after my panel members accepted my research proposal, I immediately started drafting an itinerary for a fieldwork in Indonesia. Intended to be completed in less than a month (from 16 November until 12 December), the itinerary was tight and involved five cities: Surabaya, Malang, Jogjakarta, Ambon, and Manado. While the allocated time was quite short to explore all of them well, I was confident, believing that one is baptized as a true Asian Studies student when you have travelled to and around Asia.

The transit from Manila to Indonesia—with a layover in Kuala Lumpur—took almost 24 hours. I decided to spend a night in Surabaya, where I landed, before going to Malang. The next day, I headed to the train station near my bedspace accommodation to catch the train to the residence of one of my respondents.

Malang's *probinsya-like* (like the province) ambiance welcomed me. Unlike Jakarta's sprawling metropolis, it is surrounded by refreshing scenery, and a quite convenient transportation system. The picturesque houses exemplified the Dutch architectural style, and the church amidst the suburb—distinct from the grandiose mosques outside the exclusive village—revealed the remnants of Dutch colonization of the city.

In Malang, and across Indonesia, motorcycles were everywhere. While I should not be stunned by this aspect of Indonesian culture, I was still enthralled because everyone—elderly, young, men, and women—was comfortable with it. In fact, my teacher toured me around using her motorcycle.

After staying for a week, I bade adieu to Malang to travel to Jogjakarta, which is the only province in Indonesia that is still ruled by a sultan, who also stands as governor. The city also houses various tourist spots such as the Prambanan and Borobudur Temples and the Gadjah Mada University, one of Indonesia's topnotch universities, where I did my research. Unfortunately, I was unable to visit these temples, but I was still lucky to visit the official residence of the Sultan and the presidential palace. My stay in Jogjakarta was cut short because I needed to proceed to Ambon.

I went back to Surabaya to catch a flight to Ambon via Makassar. For many reasons, I felt uncomfortable going to Ambon, the locale of my research. Ambon is frequently jolted by earthquakes, with a total of 145 in Maluku and nearby areas during my entire stay in Indonesia. In fact, a day before my flight, a tsunami alert was issued because of the tremors (thankfully, there was no tsunami). Upon arrival, I was welcomed by an earthquake-damaged airport and cracked buildings.

Formerly a Dutch-controlled city, Ambon, situated in Central Maluku, east of Indonesia, is a spice-rich island. It is also a melting pot of diverse ethnolinguistic and religious groups in Maluku Province and nearby islands, including Makassar. However, there are limited flights to and from Ambon, making it inaccessible to tourists. Transportation was also inefficient: there were no taxis or ride-hailing services, and only motorcycles and few jeep-like vehicles roamed the city. Despite this, a serenity, amplified by the rhythmic lull of the waves, enveloped the city.

But this lack of infrastructure is only a marginal point compared to Ambon's tumultuous past. Two decades back, it had gone through a bloody ethnic-cum-religious conflict that claimed thousands of lives and destroyed houses, properties, and places of worship. This bitter past runs alongside,

and appears to be belied by, the city's slogan, "Ambon manise" or "pretty Ambon," exemplified indeed by truly pretty, sweet, and congenial locals. Contrary to my biases, the people of Ambon are in fact the most welcoming and accommodating among other ethnolinguistic groups in Indonesia. I was able to interview all the professors I needed just by introducing myself as a researcher from the Philippines. One professor even invited me to his office and, upon knowing the title of my research, arranged a meeting for me with the dean, who generously gave me a brief yet substantial presentation on my research topic, together with supplementary materials such as books and a copy of his master's thesis.

The students were equally helpful. Despite the city's lack of accessible transportation, they occasionally gave me a ride and a tour. We visited various restaurants, beaches, and other tourist spots. We hung out near the beach and watched the sunset together, while talking about Filipino artists. In the evening, we went around the city on their motorcycles. They were also of great help to my research, particularly in interviews with my respondents in and outside the city. The relationship we built and have, and the camaraderie, were the experiences in my travels I treasured the most.

My last destination was Manado. Surprisingly, it closely resembled Filipino communities, giving me a feeling of serenity. I was unable to explore much of the city because I only spent a couple of days there, but I was glad to have had a peek of its environs. I hung out in the mall for hours strolling around and looking for *batik*.

As I look back on these memories, I realized were it not for the Asian Center and my panel members who pushed me to go beyond my comfort zone, I would not have had this experience. Indeed, studying at the Asian Center opened the doors for me to the world.

About the Author

Abdulwahid H.G. Panganting (wahidhgp@gmail.com) graduated from the Asian Center in 2020 with a degree in MA in Asian Studies. He is currently working at the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos-Central Office, a government agency based in Quezon City. This essay chronicles his fieldwork experience for his thesis, “The Converging Role of Traditional Leaders and Non-Traditional Leaders in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Mindanao, Philippines, and Maluku, Indonesia.”

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