Introduction

The twin subjects of nation-building and ethnicity have been much exercising observers during the past decade, largely as a consequence of recent developments in Europe. The end of the Cold War, the fragmentation of the USSR, the reintegration of Germany, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the consolidation of the European Union have all served to focus the mind on what are the necessary conditions for the creation and maintenance of nations. There has also been a great deal of discussion of the new nations in Africa and Asia and the very different conditions that have given rise to their emergence. Much of the analysis has, however, been in terms of historical events, specific political circumstances, and technological and economic preconditions for nationhood. Valuable as this work has been, in particular where connections have been made between historical circumstances and collective representations of the nation that emerge as a response to social and economic change (e.g., Anderson 1983), it often lacks a dimension of close focus on how change was perceived from within by members of the would-be or newly formed nation.

In broad terms this book, using the example of Indonesia, a nation only since 1945, tries in part to redress the balance. It offers an example of how a scrutiny of one literary genre, autobiography, composed from within the nation enables sympathetic readers to develop a different perspective from those currently available to them in the form of, for example, standard histories. This approach to issues of nationalism through autobiography should have wide appeal. It should, for example, be welcomed by interpretive anthropologists who have long worried about the issue of representation.
and the methodological problems of interpreting and translating the informants' own views of their social circumstances: autobiography, as Wilhelm Dilthey and his colleague Max Weber both appreciated, offered privileged though not unproblematic access to an understanding (Verstehen) of other minds. It should also appeal to historians who, though they frequently make reference to autobiographies, often seem uneasy about how to make best use of what are, at first sight at least, personal and often idiosyncratic accounts.

Literary critics, especially those with a taste for close criticism, will find much that is familiar to them in the way I select passages for criticism and through textual analysis elucidate the tensions between what is said and what is implied in the writing. The exploration of this tension has after all become a familiar technique in the study of Western autobiography. By extending the repertoire to non-Western autobiography I am suggesting that the intellectual excitement we have derived from comprehensive accounts of, for example, Latin, French, British, and American autobiographical writing can be reproduced by an equally close attention to modern autobiographies written by Asian and African writers whose works have often not received the attention they deserve.

Finally, I am hoping that the book is sufficiently accessible to readers with only an initial interest in modern Indonesia so that by reading it in conjunction with or in contrast to the standard textbooks, they will acquire a broader and perhaps more humane knowledge of those actions and passions that have brought Indonesia into being and sustain it as a nation.

Enough has already been written about the origins and history of early Malay and Indonesian autobiography to make it unnecessary for me to go into much detail here. Interested readers can refer to an earlier study of my own (1989) and to important works by Sweeney (1980) and Rodgers (1995), which provide a chronology of modern autobiography. More germane to this book is some explanation of its structure and the reasons underlying my selection of autobiographies.

As far as the structure of the book is concerned, the eight chapters on different autobiographical works are arranged chronologically by year of publication. Underlying this arrangement is an assumption of a historical development in the way in which the idea of an Indonesian nation is conceived and the way in which
individuals come to think of themselves as Indonesian. Consequently, reading the autobiographies in sequence (and looking at the specific concerns of individuals at the time of writing) allows one to balance and adjust one's perspective on how a sense of Indonesia has developed. Although postmodernist critics may sometimes go to extremes in denying the existence of facts, they are surely right in their insistence that it is not the facts per se that are important but how they are interpreted and that those interpretations have consequences. Reading autobiographical accounts separated by two decades but describing the same ostensible facts and events in different ways, as we find here in these Indonesian autobiographies, reveals a great deal about the way in which collective debates about the nation have progressed.

The difference in the accounts must also of course be partially attributable to the individual personalities of the writers, their different life experiences, and their different statuses and positions within Indonesian society. No writer can be considered wholly representative of the society at large, nor am I making any claim that the writers I have selected constitute a better historical filter than others. My selection has been determined partly by the availability of autobiographical accounts—there are, for example, few in the period 1900–1930—and partly by a knowledge of how the writers as national personalities are or were understood and read by Indonesians today and Indonesians who were their contemporaries. The book was not written at one stretch; indeed, it has been written piecemeal over a number of years. The initial inspiration for it was a perception that for many of the writers whose autobiographies I had read, their work could be taken as a dialogue between themselves and the nation.

With this in mind I decided to select for study autobiographies by personalities who represented different domains in Indonesian public life, as writers, politicians, national heroes, and religious figures, and whose accounts could be placed into the chronological scheme I had devised. There is, therefore, a logical consistency to the selection that can be brought out in various ways.

Beginning with Kartini, the subject of the first chapter of this book, the immediate point to note in any chronology of the nation is that she would not have recognized herself as Indonesian. In 1900 she was a member of the Javanese aristocracy, which at that transitional time was becoming more and more caught up in the
Dutch colonial administration’s plans to reorganize the government of the Netherlands East Indies. The word “Indonesia” was hardly used at the time outside specialist circles of geographers who occasionally employed it to make reference to the archipelago of islands in the region. Even the Malay language, which was used at that time for administrative purposes or for simple communication across ethnic groups and would in the 1930s develop into the language now known as Indonesian, would not have been so familiar to Kartini as Dutch. She spoke Javanese as a first language, and it was in the overlapping space of the encounter between aristocratic Javanese high culture and Dutch and European civilization that she felt the need to create a personal identity for herself. No thought then of being Indonesian.

Writing almost ninety years later than Kartini, the young contributors to *Mencari Islam*, the subject of the last chapter of the book, are also concerned with questions of identity; but for them the issue is whether being Indonesian and committed to the idea of a distinctively national ideology symbolized in the Pancasila, the Five Principles of the Indonesian state, is consistent with membership of a wider Muslim community. Although they come from different regions of the postcolonial state of the Republic of Indonesia, they all happily write in Indonesian, even though it is the second language for most of them. Their regional cultural backgrounds are important, but it is clear that they think of themselves in terms of national and global discourses of identities and allegiances. Very much Indonesian, then, but now tentatively beginning to discuss the relevance of that label for themselves.

A lot happened, then, in the ninety years from the entrenchment of Dutch colonialism in the first three decades of the century through to the Japanese occupation of 1942–1945, the violent struggle for Indonesian independence between 1945 and 1950, and the consolidation of the republic in the years that followed, including the major watershed of the nationwide killings of 1965–1966, which marked the division between the “Old Order” government of President Sukarno and the “New Order” of President Suharto. From the same aristocratic background, a near contemporary of Kartini, Achmad Djajadiningrat, writing his memoirs in the late 1930s, had witnessed those changes Kartini foresaw. His addressee too are the enlightened Dutch liberals, but by the time he is writing the debates and discussions have altered, and there is now a greater
self-consciousness about the distance that separates the Dutch from even the most Dutch-educated native aristocrat. Djajadininingrat’s purpose is to indicate the damage that this division is causing and to argue for more rapprochement and less suspicion, greater cooperation and more trust. At the same time that Djajadininingrat is addressing the Dutch reader, however, he is fully aware of a view of the future that runs counter both to the Dutch and to his own vision of things. In the twenty-five years or so before the publication of his memoirs, a nationalist movement has developed that has learned from the international anticolonial debates of the time and has translated them into terms specifically applicable to the Dutch East Indies, or Indonesia, as it is now called in these nationalist circles from the late 1920s on. A new category has come into the common currency of the debate, the Indonesian colonial subject. Djajadininingrat recognizes the existence of the category but is disinclined to consider the matter seriously.

One of those within the nationalist movement whom Djajadininingrat would certainly have known about, given the publicity that surrounded his Communist activities in the 1920s and his expulsion from Indonesia, was the Sumatran Tan Malaka. Sent with a scholarship to the Netherlands just before World War I, Tan Malaka had become a Marxist, and this coupled with his experiences after his return to the Indies in 1919 had led him to become a strong opponent of colonial government. In particular he rejected those notions of the colonial subject that the Dutch were trying to make acceptable to the population at large. The category of Indonesia, which in their turn the Dutch refused, was, however, important for him. With the experience of his own childhood years, his stay in the Netherlands, and his later work in Java, he was familiar with the components of local cultures and how they differed from one another. At the same time, as a Marxist, he accepted the concept of universal historical categories and the evolutionary scheme of materialist history. As he perceived it, at that particular revolutionary moment the task was to make use of all the resources to hand, creating a specific Indonesian national identity in which Islam would have its place, in order to mobilize the forces of the anticolonial movement prior to the establishment of socialism. When he came to write his autobiography in 1948 the political situation was in turmoil, but he felt it more important than ever to use his autobiography to establish what the project of creating the
Indonesian nation should include. His intended readers are not Dutch but the highly politicized Indonesian youth of the time, idealistic and energetic, and hungry for the kind of intellectual leadership that men like Tan Malaka and his principal political opponent at the time, Sutan Sjahrir, could give them. His autobiography, then, uses the form to make statements not about the category “Indonesian,” which is now well established, but about what Indonesians may become; and the personal narrative incorporated within it is intended to legitimize his authority to make such statements.

The two autobiographers considered next are also concerned with legitimation but from a different tendency, although still from within nationalist discourse. Both are religious figures. The first, Hamka, a near contemporary of Tan Malaka’s and brought up like him in the central highlands of West Sumatra, was from early youth influenced by his father’s modernist approach to Islam. In the period of the 1920s and 1930s the modernists had already conceived of a religious movement in the Indies that would be inter-ethnic and archipelagic and not confined to reforms and changes in local practice. To this end they had developed Malay-Indonesian as the language that would best facilitate interethnic communication and serve as a vehicle for their ideas. The very fact that it was so widespread and making its appeal to the category “Indonesians” made religious modernism an object of suspicion to the Dutch. Initially, however, Hamka’s own contribution to this growing sense of Indonesianness lay not in his religious proselytizing but in his journalism and the popular novels he wrote in Indonesian. A strong argument can in fact be made that it was precisely in these years and through the works of Hamka and his fellow journalists that the notion of an Indonesian identity proclaimed by the political figures began to gel with the general public. As a consequence of the development of communications and the production of printed materials that carried news of national and international affairs, readers throughout the archipelago could feel that they were part of a general community of newly literate people. Not only did they share common political interests, but they now had a good knowledge of a common language that brought them a fellowship from which the Dutch were excluded. Before that period there had of course been a general consciousness of the geographical extent of the Dutch East Indies, but other than being equally subjects of
this colonial empire, little bound the peoples of the archipelago together. Now there came into existence a community created simultaneously by the proselytization of the Muslim modernist movement, with preachers moving from area to area establishing schools and branch organizations, and by the sharing of common political symbols and an awareness of how colonial policy was affecting all Indonesians. Colonial subjects in the archipelago could now associate more closely, and the vocabulary of Indonesia and Indonesianness facilitated the process in a unique and unprecedented way without causing any of the pain frequently associated with language revolutions in nonhomogenous colonial populations.

Saifuddin Zuhri, the writer considered in chapter 5, also comes to the writing of an autobiography from a religious background, this time that of the world of Javanese kiyai, the teachers of the Muslim schools still wedded to traditional scholarship and hostile to the new ideas imported by the modernists. In Saifuddin Zuhri’s account, this world of the kiyai, although self-contained and well defined, was equally committed to fostering the idea of an Indonesian nation. Structurally, his narrative is an account of the formation of the protagonist gradually moving out into wider and wider cultural circles until, like Hamka, through journalism he acquires a perspective from which he can situate a notion of Indonesia within national and, to a lesser extent, global discourse.

Journalism is also the point of entry of Sitor Situmorang into the nationalist movement, but with Sitor we move back to Sumatra and to the world of the Dutch educated elite. Because he is not a politician and does not want to exercise political power, justification and legitimation are not important issues for him. Belonging to the first generation of Indonesian writers with direct access to European and American literature, he becomes a professional writer himself. Like Saifuddin Zuhri, he is writing in the late 1970s, at a time when a knowledge of nationalist versions of history is one of the constituent features of a sense of Indonesian identity; influenced by these accounts of the nation and aware of his readers, he wishes to position himself within Indonesian history. At the same time, however, we see in his personal narrative that some places in the text—both minor points of discontinuity in the argument and disruptions to the whole structure of the narrative—do not quite square with that history. Much of the anomaly of Sitor’s account has to do with his personal circumstances, and these are of the kind
inherent in any autobiography that sets out to be representative of a movement or a group or an ideal while at the same time recording the serendipitous quality of the individual's life. One element in the autobiography certainly has a more generic quality and does seem unconsciously to be moving the debate about self and the nation a stage further beyond its earlier limits.

The autobiographical tradition, at least as it developed after Kartini, deliberately suppressed the notion of an ethnic identity separate from a national one. To the extent that local ethnicity is represented in the autobiographies it appears as one of the elements of childhood experience and is brought up in the context of descriptions of the vivid and colorful memories of that time. But the point of incorporating much of this description of childhood within the autobiography in the first place has been to show how the later, more adult, more significant, and more acceptable experiences of becoming Indonesian transcend that early experience in every way. The child's world, enjoyable as it is to remember, can never be wholly satisfactory for the writers, who take up their position in the adult world of Indonesian experience in which they are properly able to fulfill themselves through their access to a new national and international knowledge. In such a scheme the attachment to local ethnicity must be severed; the autobiography is after all about an Indonesian and it is for Indonesians. But for Sitor the wheel appears to have come full circle: at the end of his autobiography he challenges that incorporation of the self within an Indonesian history, and in a quiet but implicitly radical way he undermines the notion of an Indonesian identity by reinstating his Batak tradition and culture as central to his own sense of self. Why he chooses to do so and whether it is a genuine expression of a new orientation in his self-understanding is deliberately left vague, but there can be no doubt that the notion of the nation, if not being discarded, is being interrogated in new ways.

Nh Dini, the only other woman besides Kartini considered in the book, is also seeking to undermine the tradition, but she does this not from the perspective of a regional tradition but from the position of a woman who simply rejects that notion of public history that has been the common point of reference for all the other autobiographers, even, as in the case of Sitor, when they were challenging the details. Dini's autobiography is almost embarrassing in the manner in which it so completely conforms to the model suggested
by some of the theory of women's autobiography (Friedman 1988). Much of this theoretical interest lies not in discovering or uncovering the lost voices of women in history but in revealing the degree to which these autobiographies offer radically alternative interpretations of the experiencing of the times. Women, this theoretical position states, create their histories in different sites from men, in the home rather than in the public arena. A reading of Dini's autobiography indicates very forcefully that she is aware of the construction of the Indonesian personality that links it closely to men and to the history of the nation. Like Kartini she finds that a woman can play only a subservient role within these constructions, one where she is ancillary to the man, but she refuses to subscribe to that masculine version of being Indonesian. She instead seeks to demonstrate an alternative and equally valid form of Indonesian being-in-the-world.

The last volume of autobiography that I consider is very different again from Dini’s. Although concerned with history and belief, it owes little to specifically Indonesian literary traditions. It is a collection of intellectual autobiographies written by young Indonesian students born in the 1960s and here reflecting on their religious beliefs and how they have arrived at them in the context both of their own family traditions and of the history of the last decade in Indonesia. Published in 1990 the book describes reactions to a very different set of political and economic circumstances from those that constitute the background of the earlier autobiographies. It is not, however, so much the physical circumstances that are the subject of the autobiographical reflections of the contributors but their own intellectual development. To this extent their accounts are self-conscious and deliberately self-interrogatory in a style unprecedented in modern Indonesian literature. It is no accident that this is the case because it had been the avowed purpose of the editors when they solicited contributions to follow the model of religious confessions of the kind established in Western literature by St. Augustine. At one and the same time, then, these autobiographies introduce into Indonesian autobiography a greater degree of self-awareness and a set of sophisticated accounts of personal religious experience that are not to be found elsewhere; the earlier autobiographies of the two well-known religious leaders, Hamka and Saifuddin Zuhri, were secular stories. But the writing of religious autobiography by its very nature calls into question the
salience or at least the primacy of other categories of experience, which are implicitly judged to be transient and ephemeral. In fact, however, all these young writers are working within a modernist tradition that views engagement with the immediate material world of one's environment as the only way in which religious commitment can be properly articulated. Consequently, the debate that most concerns them is how one can be both Muslim and Indonesian; the answer to that question, which they all in some measure put to themselves, requires an examination of Indonesian history and society and their role within it.

These then are the issues that the analysis of the following pages takes up in greater detail. What I am proposing is that a careful reading of Indonesian autobiographies, both these and others I could have chosen, allow one to understand the manner in which Indonesia has been conceived and represented and how those representations have become part of an ongoing tradition of reflection among Indonesians themselves, responding at different times and in different circumstances to available constructions of the nation. By their responses they contribute in their turn to how others in the future will imagine it. The object of critical analysis, however, is not so much the ostensible content of the narratives but the manner in which that content is formulated within the narratives. Since the procedure and its justification may at first sight seem a little confusing, I need to make one or two preliminary remarks on how precisely I have engaged with the texts.

Reading Autobiographies

Of the several critical ways of reading autobiography, two have a direct bearing on my approach to Indonesian autobiographies. The first sees autobiographies as a source of information about the culture and society of which the narrator is a member. The reader's interest is limited to information about the observable realities of the society as recalled by the autobiographer. Neither the actual form that the autobiography takes—whether, for example, it is orally related or written down—nor even the structure of the narrative—how it is composed and put together—is of particular interest. The reader simply uses the text in a raiding operation, taking from it whatever is useful for immediate purposes as evidence for an argument or description. The text is rarely considered
as something worthy of study in itself. This is of course a legitimate way to make use of textual material, and one can have no quarrel with historians or anthropologists who read personal documents to supplement their understanding of a period and a culture. This is after all their metier, piecing together disparate types of information to produce an overall generalizing account that will be their narrative.

Autobiographies, if they are going to be used in this way, however, present special problems of interpretation to scholars. The principal one, and in some ways the only one of importance, since most of the other problems derive from it, is how do we know the narrator is telling the truth? Historians have their own methods of answering this and do so usually in terms of internal consistency and correspondence with information and evidence obtained from other sources. Anthropologists faced with oral autobiographies, which they themselves frequently elicit and in the production of which they collaborate, face the issue of the degree to which their own involvement in the production of the text has led at best to some distortion and at worst to fabrication and falsehood. (For some recent discussion on the issue of anthropology and autobiography—both that of the anthropologists and of their informants—see Okely 1992.) There is now, for example, a great deal of criticism concerning the way in which Boasian anthropologists collected such autobiographies, since however sincere and well motivated they may have been in their desire to record a vanishing way of life, their promptings and their directions to the narrators led often to skewed and unreliable accounts of the past (Carr 1988). The point is well taken, as is the criticism that historians, too, are often naive in their appropriation of material from personal documents and literary texts. In fact, both criticisms proceed from the same premise, namely, that before using the text, one has to establish the context of the text itself—that is, one has to determine what kind of narrative it is and what are the underlying structural assumptions, what is the tradition of writing to which it is implicitly referring and in line with which it needs to be judged.

Questions such as these—expanded, explained, and exemplified with great sophistication—have been forced upon social scientists by the skepticism of literary critics, who have developed exceedingly meticulous techniques for looking at texts and who are often taken aback by the antediluvian approach of social scientists when
they deal with similar material. This criticism has had positive effects, and the “literary turn” in anthropology and history has led to more convincing descriptions of societies in other times and places (see Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988). In my own case here, the criticism has led to an attempt to pose certain questions to those texts that on first reading I have found interesting for one reason or another, and implicitly it has been the search for answers that has given shape to my critical response to the texts. What has frequently happened in my rereadings of the autobiographies is that the issues thrown up by methodological problems have displaced an interest in the ostensible content of the texts. This shift of focus from content to form does not worry me, as perhaps at first glance it should, because in fact by looking closely at the text to determine its nature, one is immediately denying any distinction between form and content: they are inseparable, and the close attention to structure leads to a more detailed and deeper understanding of the text that allows the reader to reinsert it more securely in the context of the culture from which it emerges. Perhaps I can explain this by example and at the same time alert my readers to how in general terms I approach all the texts in this book.

Modern literary criticism having grown dissatisfied with what falls under the label of the “new criticism”—which argued that only the words on the page and the information conveyed by them alone mattered—insists that attention is paid to certain key relationships: that between the writer and reader (what do author and reader expect of each other?), that between the writer and other writers (with which literary genre is the writing to be identified?), that between the writers and their times (to what extent are writers implicitly responding in their writing to particular historical or social issues?). For the study of autobiography add two supplementary relationships: that of the autobiographer or writer to the narrator of the story of the autobiography, and the further relationship of both to the protagonist or central figure of the story. (For further discussion of these and other points relating to the study of autobiography see Benstock 1988; Bruss 1974; Eakin 1985; Lejeune 1975 and 1982; Olney 1980; Pascal 1960; Pilling 1981; Spengemann 1980.) A study of just these relationships informs my analysis of the Indonesian autobiographies.

Take for example Sitor Situmorang’s autobiography, Sitor Situmorang: Seorang Sastrawan 45 (Sitor Situmorang: Literary
Figure of the 45 Generation) and consider the relationship between writer and reader. Sitor is known as one of the finest Indonesian poets writing today. Readers who pick up the autobiography know this, and Sitor knows that they know it; nevertheless, to avoid even the slightest misunderstanding, the title of the book announces that it is about a literary figure of the 45 Generation. In addition the reader will know from Sitor’s name that he is a Batak from Sumatra, and given the strength of the cultures of ethnic groups in Indonesia, there may be some expectation of references to, and reflections on, Batak tradition. And, finally, many readers will know that Sitor was imprisoned under the New Order government for a number of years. This foreknowledge creates expectations of which the writer is fully aware, and he can respond in a number of ways: by entirely satisfying those expectations, by refusing to meet them altogether, and by satisfying some and frustrating others. What his reaction will be and how he responds will in turn depend upon his perceptions of himself, his sense of what the purpose of the autobiography should be, and what he chooses to reveal or hide. My approach to the text is consequently to select what I regard as interesting episodes in the narrative and by a close reading to show how the form of the descriptions has been dictated by Sitor’s attempting to write at the same time both for himself and for readers and unwittingly revealing the lack of congruence between his expectations and theirs. The description of colonial school days, for example, does not turn out quite as expected, and in the description of the first Japanese soldier whom Sitor encounters in Batavia in 1942 there is something not quite right about the story as it is told. The elucidation of these anomalies in the narrative, I argue, is far more enlightening for the reader with respect to Sitor and his location within Indonesian culture and history than any straightforward summary of the contents of the autobiography.

Close analytical attention of this kind having as its intention the explication of those critical relationships within the autobiographical accounts is what I am striving for. I am also, however, trying to be a little more ambitious. I mentioned above that there were two common approaches to autobiographical texts. The one I have not described yet is essentially a literary approach. If historians and anthropologists are interested in the texts for their relationship to what lies beyond them in the physical world, literary critics are interested in the texts as texts and their relationship to other texts.
In critical writing about autobiography, this view has frequently led to an examination of the history of autobiographical narrative in the Western literary tradition. (Scholars have looked at non-Western traditions of self-representation, and there seems to be a consensus that the kind of reflective prose narrative that becomes established in European literature with the publication of St. Augustine's *Confessions* is unique; Gusdorf 1980 and Schipper and Schmitz 1991:12; but see Friedman 1988 for a refutation of the argument.) What this criticism establishes is that as autobiography evolves it develops distinctive subgenres, for example historical, philosophical, and poetic autobiography in one classification (Spengemann 1980). One critical enterprise, then, is to identify the transformations and when they occur and why. A variant of that approach is not to distinguish between genres so much as to describe the way in which a changing sense of self emerges in the Western tradition and how that change is articulated in autobiographical narrative, as for example when God is displaced by Reason in autobiographies written after the Enlightenment, or when there is a rupture with previous traditions of the kind signaled by Rousseau's *Conféessions* that are indicative of a different kind of self-consciousness or of the emergence of what is often called a sense of individualism.

Another and more recent approach to autobiography as a genre has been the focusing on national traditions of autobiography, where the argument runs that within cultures there is a high degree of intertextuality and that each autobiography is in one way or another responding to, or taking up issues raised by, previous autobiographies within that linguistic-cultural tradition. A lot of recent work on French autobiography has been of this kind.

In writing about Indonesian autobiography, I find the usefulness of these approaches limited because there does not exist that corpus of autobiographies that exists in European literatures. Second, and closely related to this point, is that there has not been enough time for an autobiographical tradition or a philosophical debate about the nature of the self to have developed within Indonesia. Nonetheless, although the usefulness of those approaches is limited, it is possible to take advantage of some of their insights. Although Indonesian prose autobiography is of a recent date, it has borrowed from world traditions, and consequently there is a genealogy that connects them to different subgenres of the form. The idea of a national tradition of autobiography I have found particu-
larly valuable, not in the sense of ongoing exploration of the nature of self so much, but in the way in which autobiographical narratives in Indonesia all to a degree position themselves in relation to the evolution of the nation in the last ninety years. James Cox (1989) and Robert Sayre (1980) in their discussions of American autobiography have pointed to a similar phenomenon in the writing of American autobiographies, and the explanations of why this should be so are compelling: in the creation of modern nations, individuals who are the new citizens of those nations invest more of themselves in this new institution, which displaces other points of reference as the locus of their identity. And since the nation is there for the creating, writers know that they are not simply reacting to a preexisting cultural and historical tradition taken over or brought in from outside but are actively contributing to the making of something new and unique.

I am making the same argument for Indonesian autobiography. Implicit within all the narratives examined here is a sense of contributing to the definition of a nation. Sometimes, as in the biographies of political figures, this is made explicit. Tan Malaka and Djajadiningrat talk specifically about future possibilities for the nation. In other cases, Dini for example, the deliberate turning away from history indicates by its very refusal to participate in one particular discourse of the nation a desire to seek alternative constructions of what Indonesia is. And in Sitor’s autobiography we see by implication an address to Indonesian readers to be mindful of the persistence of a local cultural identity against which a notion of Indonesia has constantly to be measured and adjusted.

It is for others to judge whether I have made a convincing case for the existence of a distinctively Indonesian consciousness informing the texts I examine. Where the argument seems weak or where the evidence is insubstantial I would ask readers, where they can, to go directly to the autobiographies themselves. Indeed, I would urge that of all readers, since this book is intended to encourage those with interests in autobiography and Indonesia to take a critical interest in an unusual and provocative set of accounts of self and the nation.