The Indonesian phrase, 'Gotong royong', has played a very important role in Indonesia's social, political, economic and cultural fields. In the social field the phrase means reciprocity. In the economic field it means community service. In the cultural field it means convention in the villages. In Indonesian politics, the term represents the spirit of Indonesian nationalism. Though 'Gotong royong' is a polysemous word, however, there is no study on how it evolved into these various concepts.

The Republic of Indonesia became independent of the Netherlands in 1945. Before the Dutch colonial period, there were many realms in the area of Indonesia. Thus when the nation state Indonesia was born in 1945, the Indonesian nation, at least, must have been conceived by Indonesian nationalists. However there has been little study on the thinking of these nationalists in the invention of an Indonesian nation.
The aim of this dissertation is to explain the process of the transformed ‘Gotong royong’ concept and in doing so it examines ‘Gotong royong’ thought as a foundational element in the invention of the Indonesian nation. In explaining the process, this paper applies the method of political historical perspective advanced by Dr. Q. Skinner, has been applied. Briefly, the explanation makes much of the context that ‘Gotong royong’ was formally written and expressed as a doctrine.

The formal definition of ‘Gotong royong’ originated in became known in a Javanese dictionary published in 1938. The essential meaning of ‘Gotong royong’ was that several persons work together to carry a large and heavy object. Dr. Koentjaraningrat wrote in a published article that ‘Gotong royong’ was noticed in a Dutch book of unwritten law that a scholar had written in 1937. But this statement is incorrect. ‘Gotong royong’ was not in the book, but it did contain the Dutch term ‘wederkeerig hulpbetoon’ which meant mutual help.

During the period of Japanese occupation in the area of Indonesia from 1942 to 1945, ‘Gotong royong’ was used as ways and means to rule over the region. At this time ‘Gotong royong’ meant traditional mutual cooperation among villagers and between the villagers and the village administration.

At the Investigating Committee for the Preparation of Indonesian Independence on June 1, 1945, Soekarno, who became the first president of the Republic of Indonesia, advocated five principles known as ‘Pancasila’. At that time he suggested compressing ‘Pancasila’ into one principle, namely ‘Gotong royong’. It was adapted as an essential element of thought in the invention of an Indonesian nation. For Soekarno, the new Indonesian nation was understood as a nation which embraced the spirit of ‘Gotong royong’. At this stage ‘Gotong royong’ thought implied both the spirit of commonality and ‘Weltbürger’, the spirit of “cosmopolitan”.

It has been generally proposed by scholars that the traditional characteristic of ‘Gotong royong’ was initiated by Soekarno, but this assertion is also incorrect. Before Indonesian independence, Soekarno never referred to the traditional peculiarity of ‘Gotong royong’. Rather, he showed ‘Gotong royong’ as a new thought in the social and cultural transformation of Indonesian’s people.
The republic of Indonesia completed its struggle for independence against the Dutch army in 1949. From that point on 1950, ‘Gotong royong’ gradually began to function as a slogan of national integration during Soekarno’s period of Guided Democracy. In 1953 Soetardjo, a moderate nationalist and a politician under the Soekarno regime, published the book ‘Desa’, which explained the concept of the Javanese village. In this publication he analyzed the characteristics of traditional village culture as it applied to ‘Gotong royong’. It should be noted that during this period, ‘Gotong royong’ had already been taking on traditional village conventions.

When Soeharto replaced Soekarno in 1967, as president of Indonesia, ‘Pancasila’ became the only basic ideology of national integration. During the period of the Soeharto’s regime — that is to say under the New Order — ‘Pancasila’ justified the legitimacy of Soeharto’s authority as successor to Soekarno on one hand, while on the other hand, the meaning of ‘Gotong royong’ transformed the senses of free labour for public works in village development projects, the community service and the help within the household. Accordingly Soeharto’s regime promoted the practice of ‘Gotong royong’.

Dr.Koentjaraningrat, who was Indonesia’s most famous anthropologist, studied ‘Gotong royong’ and provided the background for the ideological position of ‘Gotong royong’ under the New Order. At first he divided the ‘Gotong royong’ concept into custom and spirit or thought. As for custom, he followed Soetardjo’s view of ‘Gotong royong’. According to Dr.Koentjaraningrat, the spirit of ‘Gotong royong’ had two characteristic in common: sympathy for others and sympathy for other nations. Therefore, his notion of ‘Gotong royong’ was nearly the same as Soekarno’s.

Through the above discussion, I am suggesting that ‘Gotong royong’ thought was encompassed the Indonesian idea of nationalism and was the invention of the Indonesian nation itself. It is also suggested that ‘Gotong royong’ was an idea held in common with ‘Welthüner’, or ‘cosmopolitan’.

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