LONTAR

Lontar Newsletter

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December 2019

Greetings from the Executive Director

Of all the new ministers in President Joko Widodo's second government, none has sparked more debate and controversy than the 35-year-old Harvard-educated Nadiem Makarim, Indonesia's new education and culture minister. Barely two months into his new job, Nadiem shocked parents and teachers alike by announcing that the country's National Examination (*Ujian Nasional*), a former prerequisite for high school graduates intending to work or go to universities, was antiquated and would be abolished. After serving for many years as the standard evaluation system of primary and secondary education in Indonesia, the test will be replaced by a minimum competency assessment aimed primarily at evaluating students' literacy and numerical competence.

"Literacy is not only about reading capability but the ability to analyze reading materials and to understand the concepts behind the words," said Nadiem, founder of the successful online motorcycle taxi company Gojek. Most of all, the competency assessment will be held not just at the end of the students' secondary year, but three times during their entire 12 years at school. The reasoning for the radical change, according to Nadiem, is to allow schools, teachers and students to make necessary improvements long before graduating.

Arguably, the National Examination has been problematic right from the start in 2003. As the only acceptable secondary school accreditation, the exams were often subject to cheating, fraud, and, inevitably, corruption. Copies of leaked answers, for

Ruminations by John McGlynn:

Love Letters

With ten children in my family and limited private space in our home, the attic was a favorite haunt for me, especially in inclement weather when it was impossible to play outside and otherwise difficult to get beyond calling reach of a parent or nagging distance from a sibling. With the attic's jumble of peculiar objects—a milk separator, a Victrola phonograph, a notary stamp device, wash boards, corn huskers, and so on—there were plenty of things with which to make up games.

One item that often drew my attention was a large and roughly-hewn wooden box containing the love letters my parents exchanged during their long courtship, most all of which were written during the years of World War II (1939–1945). I could spend hours perusing the letters' contents, fascinated by the plight of these two who were separated for most of that time by the war.

I was sometimes bemused by my father's frustration with the recalcitrant love of his life, other times baffled by my mother's reluctance to readily commit to marriage.

- *"I hate to be kicking all the time,"* John remarked in a letter dated June 19, 1939, "*but I don't for the life of me see why you always have to be trying to see how much you can hurt the feelings of a guy that loves you as much as I do you."*
- *"Forget me! Think what a traitor I was to you,"* Anna Marie wrote to in a letter dated July 8, 1940. *"If you meet some nice girl, treat her as well as you did me. I just want you to be happy."*

With Pramoedya Ananta Toer and my mother in April 1999.

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example, would be sold by touts to students prior to taking the exam. Previous education ministers have attempted to initiate reforms, but they faced opposition from the bureaucracy and the political elite, anxious to preserve the status quo. A 2018 study by the Sydney, Australia-based Lowy Institute titled *Beyond Access: Making Indonesia's Education System Work* traced the failures of Indonesia's education system to "politics and power", helping the elite to accumulate resources, distribute patronage, mobilize political support and exercise political control.

The question now is whether the new education minister can succeed where others before him have failed. We certainly need changes that would make teaching at Indonesian schools less theoretical, authoritarian, and bureaucratic and open up more opportunities for creative and critical thinking—skills needed to build problem-solving capabilities. It will be a major challenge, given the vast differences in the quality of teachers and the diversity of schools, from one province to another. But Indonesia's low scores in the latest PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) report issued by OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) make it essential for the education ministry to initiate a forward-looking program that will raise the quality of education in Indonesia. Yayasan Lontar stands ready to help in this important project.

As 2019 winds down and a new decade begins, we at Lontar wish all our friends and supporters a peaceful and productive 2020.

Yuli Ismartono

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That box of letters remained in the attic until the mid 1990s when my sister, Mary, removed its contents, arranged the letters in roughly chronological order, made duplicate photocopies of the letters, and then sent one set of photocopies to me.

In the coming years, I would spend snippets of spare time creating digital transcripts of the letters and, by the time of my father's death in January 1999, I had transcribed about half of the letters. When my father's death was nigh, I flew home, arriving the night of January 29, and carrying with me printouts of the transcripts. In the hours ahead, my siblings and I took turns reading aloud the letters, toasting our mother and father for their love with glasses of wine after each letter we read. Through the night, we cried but also laughed, even as my father passed.

In the period 1997–1998, while intermittently transcribing my parent's letters and trying to keep Lontar afloat following the detrimental impact of the Asian Economic Crisis, I was also spending large hunks of time translating material that Pramoedya Ananta Toer had written during his seventeen-year incarceration on Buru Island: more than a thousand pages of notes, essays, and letters that he had written to his children. In time, this translated material would be winnowed down to become a 375-page book titled *The Mute's Soliloquy*.

I greatly respected Pramoedya as a writer long before I first met him in 1982 but I think it was because of how much he reminded me of my father that I so rapidly came to feel true affection for him as a person. Physical similarities between "Pak Pram" and my father were slight but the glint in Pram's eyes, the ever-present cigarette in his hand, and his voracious reading habit made him, for me, my father's doppelganger. Many were the days and thousands were the hours in the years ahead that I would spend time with Pramoedya at his home on Jalan Multikarya II.

In 1989, when his editor, Joesoef Isak, presented me with a typescript of all the materials that had been smuggled out of Buru and requested that I not only translate the thousand plus pages of raw text but that I also edit and shape the material in such a way as to make it more easily accessible to the English-language reader, I first hesitated, unsure as to whether I could shape the material into a cohesive text, but I will always be glad that I did accept the challenge. In the eight years that it took for me to produce a final manuscript I spent countless hours talking to Pram about his childhood, his marriages, his children, his role as a writer, and his life as a political prisoner. His constant readiness to assist me gave me the necessary willpower to transform his Indonesian words of hope and despair into English-language siblings.

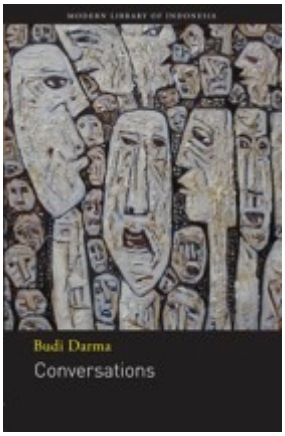
The Mute's Soliloquy was published in the spring of 1999. With the tremendous changes that had taken place in Indonesia's political landscape after Soeharto stepped down from power the previous year, it was now possible for Pramoedya to go abroad and thus, in conjunction with the book's publication, I helped to arrange a U.S. tour for the author. One of

Author of the Month

Budi Darma

Budi Darma (Rembang, Central Java, April 25, 1937) is a professor emeritus at Surabaya State University. He writes short stories, novels and essays, and he is also a translator. He has been a guest lecturer at several universities and has served as the editor of *Modern Literature of ASEAN* (2000). His short stories are collected in *Orang-Orang Bloomington* (1981), *Kritikus Adinan* (2002) and *Fofo dan Senggring* (2005). His novels are *Olenka* (1983), which won first prize in a Fiction Writing Competition sponsored by the Jakarta Arts Council; *Rafilus* (1988); and *Ny. Talis* (1996). His essay collections include *Solilokui* (1981), *Sejumlah Esai Sastra* (1984) and *Harmonium* (1995). He has received several literary awards, including the SEA Write Award (1984), an award for Achievement in the Arts from the Indonesian government (1993), the Satya Lencana Award for Culture (2003) and the Achmad Bakrie Award for Literature (2005).

Book of the Month



Conversations
By Budi Darma
Translated by Andy Fuller
Rp. 150.000,00
Book order: contact@lontar.org

his stops was Madison, Wisconsin, home to a center for Indonesian studies at the University of Wisconsin, and only 68 miles from my family home.

On Saturday, April 8, two-days short of the 100-day anniversary of my father's death (a very important time-marker in Indonesia), Pramoedya visited Glynnspring with his wife, Maimunah; Joesoef Isak; and several students and faculty from U.W. Following a walking tour of the farm, the group gathered inside my family home for a home-cooked meal and to listen to readings from *The Mute's Soliloquy*. Many of my siblings and relatives were present. With the time being so soon after my father's death, as I read a letter that Pramoedya had written to one of his children, my eyes began to well and my throat to catch from the love that was so apparent in his words. Pram's letters had become my parent's love letters and soon everyone, Pramoedya included, was clearing their throats or dabbing their eyes. There was no laughter that day but the tears that were shed spoke of a love that would never die.

John McGlynn
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PS: *In May 2002, on the very day that the transcription of my parent's letters was completed, I was again called home, this time because of my mother's imminent death. A later word count revealed that their collection, with its 1,258 separate items, contains a total of 735,839 words, the equivalent of approximately 2,400 pages of text. According to information obtained from Andrew Carroll, Founding Director of the Center for American War Letters, this makes my parent's collection of "World War II letters" the second largest known private collection in the United States.*

November Activities

Kamoro Art: Exhibition and Sale

The Lontar in ccoperation with Yayasan Maramowe Weaiku Kamorowe and PT Freeport Indonesia held a Kamoro Art Exhibition and Auction on December 5 at the Dharmawangsa Residences . The exhibition, open to the public on December 6-7, featured the arts and culture of the Kamoro tribe in Papua's southern coast of Mimika district.

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KAMORO ART

Freeport Peduli

An article by Lara Norgaard, Luce Fellowship at Lontar, at The Jakarta Post, December 8, 2019

TheJakartaPost HEADLINES 3

The Latin American literature connection

Can Indonesian authors have same influence on counterparts in Americas?

Upcoming Activities

We wish you a very Happy Holiday season and a peaceful and prosperous New Year.

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