



# Lontar Newsletter

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February, 2025

## Greetings from the ED

When the new government of President Prabowo Subianto divided the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research and Technology into three separate entities, including the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, there was a wave of optimism among artists, filmmakers, musician writers, and managers of galleries and museums, to name but a few in the culture business. No longer was “culture” conjoined with education and science, at least where government funding was concerned.

The newly-formed Ministry of Culture is now busy combining the many existing rules into a simpler, more structured and integrated legal framework called the Omnibus Law on Culture. According to Fadli Zon, the Minister of Culture, the law is expected to streamline regulations applicable to the preservation and promotion of Indonesian art and culture. In the past 100 days in office, he has made the obligatory rounds of reaching out to the relevant groups and associations to explain his policy and priorities. His scope of work, given the diversity of Indonesia’s multi-ethnic society, will not be easy, particularly with a yearly budget of just IDR2.37 trillion (US\$150 million).

Given that the nation’s cultural wealth has yet to be recorded comprehensively, one of the ministry’s priorities will be to conduct an inventory of collections from national as well as regional museums. Minister Fadli is particularly concerned about the nation’s 450 public museums, stressing that they needed to be transformed into centers of education and information.

## Ruminations

### Bang Ben #2 — Lessons in Translation

No doubt, had I been aware of Ben Anderson’s fame in Indonesianist circles when I first met him in the summer of 1975, I would have shied from getting to know him. Surprisingly, however, after Arief Budiman told him of my interest in the subjects of *wayang kulit* and translation, Ben himself appeared eager to get to know me. The fact that I was “out” may have been a factor but I believe it was primarily my interest in translation that piqued his curiosity. He was a polyglot, after all, fluent in Indonesian, Javanese, several European languages and (in later years) Thai and Tagalog as well. Further, he had, through his editorship of *Indonesia*, ushered into print a fair number of translations of Indonesian short stories. Although the time we spent together in Madison was very brief, he urged me to write to him, and thus began a correspondence between us that continued for years to come, a large portion of which was devoted to the subject of “translation” and, related to that, “Pramoedya Ananta Toer” (about whom I will write more in future “Ruminations”).

I have in my possession just 16 of the letters Ben wrote to me, the first one dating back to December 10, 1975. Thanks to Ben Abel, curator of Ben Anderson’s letters at Cornell University, I have copies of 20 of the letters I wrote to “Bang Ben,” though none dating from that year. Apparently, however, after our brief meeting in Madison, I had sent him a copy of a working manuscript for an anthology of Indonesian short stories in translation, one that contains all of the thus-far published translations I had managed to track down, collect, and retype.

About this effort, Ben wrote, “I am delighted that you are so enthusiastic about pushing ahead on the anthology of Indonesian stories. [...] When you have time, do let me know how things are coming and I will be glad to help you in any way I can.” It seems, I also sent him a partial translation of the classical Malay tale, *Syair Burung Pungguk*, hoping that he might consider it for publication in *Indonesia*. About this, he wrote, “I like the translation very much but it is technically outside Indonesia and we haven’t been imperialistic enough to annex Malaya yet.” I don’t know for sure but I suspect it was Ben who, without knowledge, submitted that early translation to the Australian journal, *RIMA (Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs)*, but I was delighted when it was published under the title “Song of the Night Owl: A Partial Translation

## DANA INDO&ESIANA

He hopes to raise public awareness and induce the private sector to endow funds for their preservation. The Ministry of Culture also plans to expand the cultural village program to revive culture across the country, including in remote regions by mobilizing cultural actors in the area of traditional arts, fine arts, music, and the performing arts by funding their various projects. Started under the Joko Widodo government, the Indonesian Cultural Fund (*Dana Indonesiana*) has enabled organizations, Lontar included, to stage public performances and, in general, promote Indonesian culture. For that, we are most grateful, however, much more assistance is needed if Indonesia is to persevere and grow to fulfill its mission to preserve and promote its heritage.

Yuli Ismartono  
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of *Syair Burung Pungguk*” in the journal’s June 1976 edition. My first bonafide publication!

On May 31, 1976 I first stepped into the clove-infused air of Halim Perdanakusuma Airport in Jakarta. In the afternoon of the following day, I made my way to Kemayoran Domestic Airport for a flight to Surabaya and then a Colt-ride to Malang where, after ten weeks of intensive advanced Indonesian language study, I intended to go to Yogyakarta to study *wayang* performance technique. A fluke of fate caused me to change my plans, in 1977, where I pursued further study of Indonesian language and literature.

One author whose work I admired was Umar Kayam. In fact, even before my arrival in Indonesia, I had already translated a number of his stories from his 1972 collection, *Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan (A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan)*. Set in New York City, these stories were short and fairly light in tone. Not so, the two near-novella-length stories of *Sri Sumarah and Bawuk*, that were published in 1975. Both of them, set in the cataclysmic period following the so-called abortive Communist coup of 1965, were both history-laden and heart-wrenching in tone, with eye-opening truths of which the foreign public was largely unaware. In the first half of 1977, I worked on their translation but it was not until mid 1978, I dared to share my drafts with Ben.

In a letter dated July 9, 1978, Ben commented on my translation of the story “Bawuk.” He began his critique with a note of praise, but then added, “At the same time, your Bawuk needs a lot of work. I hope you’ll forgive me for being frank. I am because I have great confidence in your ability and sensitivity. I would never write in this brutal vein to [others]. I enclose two pages of detailed criticism of your first 5 pages of translation. I don’t right now have the time and energy to go through the whole thing. But I hope you will get the idea of how to proceed with the revising of the rest of the text.”

He outlined the problems inherent in my translation, which I slightly abridge below:

- “There are plenty of places where you have simply misunderstood what Kayam is saying: sometimes out of carelessness; sometimes because the Indonesian is actually rather difficult.
- “Kayam’s style is largely ignored. It is very sophisticated, a sort



In that letter of July 9, 1978 Ben speaks of his good friend, Charnvit Kasetsiri, who took that photo of me at Hotel Indonesia in June 1978.

## AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Photo by JHM)

Born 100 years ago on February 6, 1925, this year is, in Indonesia, “The Year of Pramoedya,” with commemorative events being held around the country. As there will be much more written about this author in future Lontar newsletters, this column provides just a glimpse of this remarkable author’s life.

Born in Bora, Central Java, Pramoedya’s works span the colonial period, Indonesia’s struggle for independence, its occupation by Japan during World War II, as well as the post-colonial authoritarian regimes of Sukarno and Soeharto and are infused with personal and national history.

First gaining national fame in 1950 with his novel, *Perburuan* (published in English under the title *The Fugitive*), the author would go on to publish in the decades ahead, by rough account, more than 20 novels and novellas, a half dozen collections of short stories, and more than a dozen non-fiction titles. He also served as editor for several landmark anthologies and translated at least one dozen full length books into Indonesian.

Today, Pramoedya is best known around the world for “The Buru Quartet,” four novels set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time of rising nationalism, but his oeuvre is incomparable in its richness, with everything from fanciful tales to works of a feminist nature.

1. 1 satu sendia, not pada waktu sendia ... one twilight. It may be a boy, probably is, but Kayam only says anak not anak laki2. *What do you mean? Indeed.*  
 1. 2 nothin\_g about "out of breath"  
 1. 3 pesan isnt reply it's "message" of "instruction."  
 1. 6 not the kid had sudah "left" but was "too far away" to be got back  
 1. 7 nothing about "chanced" in the text  
 1. 8 sederhana = simple, not terse.  
 para 2 1. 1 nothing about "hand"  
 1.2-5 keep same word as Kayam does, asing...asing... not foreign/odd. Key idea is "unlike her." Begitu bukan nada: keep it short as Kayam does. "Not such/so was Bawuk's style."  
 1. 6 perempuan periang: keep it simple, high-spirited girl/woman  
 1. 8 bertanda omitted: mocking, teasing.  
 1.10 kotania not "the city" but "her town" or "the town where she was." Nothing about "introduction" in text.  
 1.11-12. Sense is wrong. Something like: "only then came the real purpose of her letter. That too for just a few sentences, to which were then appended more nonsensical tales, which she felt she'd left out before and had to be added in."  
 Next lines are wrong too: Whole point is *knowing* contrast between the penting of 1.11-12, and this: Not a single one of these added-on tales were at all penting(important) or of any direct use to the readers of her letters.  
 para 3 1.7 "or a wish to harm anyone" not in text. I think too often you

One section of the five pages of corrections on my translation of “Bawuk” Ben sent to me.

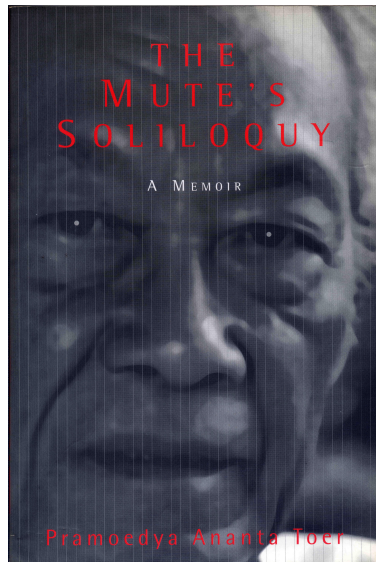
of ‘knowing’, humorous false-simplicity. Its charm comes from the juxtaposition of the knowingness and the simplicity. This means that the translation must be as simple as you can make it. You have a tendency to reduplicate—if Kayam says ‘membosankan’ you’ll give ‘tedious and dreary’. It’s not exactly wrong, but it ruins Kayam’s effect. Another part of the sophistication is the subtle use of foreign words. The Dutch words are used to give a flavor of the pre-war times, to show the Dutch-mindedness of the Suryos etc., and sometimes for irony. English words such as ‘flair’ are deliberate anachronisms, i.e. in the 1930s no one knew or used the word. This is Kayam’s knowing wink to his 1970s’ English understanding readers.

- “You tend to ‘expand’ Kayam in unlucky ways: sometimes by turning one of his sentences into two of yours, and thereby losing his density and force, sometimes by inserting words, phrases, adjectives, and so forth of your own which absolutely do not exist in the text. Very rarely are these additions useful or positive. Mostly they are redundant or distracting. [...]
- “A good bit of carelessness. Words of Kayam’s omitted, imprecise translations which I know you know-better than.”

Brutal, indeed, Ben’s words were for me a needed slap on the cheek by a loved one, advice an older brother might give a younger brother, delivered in a straight-forward manner that demonstrated not dismissal of my efforts but gave me encouragement to try harder instead.

Ben ended his critique with lasting advice, “Go over the whole thing with a tooth-comb, being very strict with yourself, submitting yourself to Kayam—try reading passages aloud and you’ll feel how teasing he is—checking difficult passages with friends because there are some lovely touches in your translation, and with the proper hard work and loving attention to detail, it could be very fine.” I would remember his words often in the years ahead.

John McGlynn ([john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org))



Pramoedya Ananta Toer never penned an autobiography but this book closely resembles one.

In 1965, the author was detained by Indonesian authorities and eventually exiled to the penal island of Buru. There, for the next 11 years, he survived under brutal conditions, somehow managing to produce his masterwork, the four novels of the Buru Quartet, as well as the remarkable journal entries, essays, and letters that comprise *The Mute's Soliloquy*.

First published in 1999 by Hyperion-New York and Lontar (in cooperation with Hasta Mitra), the *New York Times Book Review* called it “A haunting record of a great writer’s attempt to keep his imagination and his humanity alive.” In a front page review, the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote, “A story too vast and serious to ignore.”

Unfortunately, Lontar’s edition is out of print and only a hard-cover edition is available online but negotiations are underway with Hachette Publishers (who acquired Hyperion) to reprint a new edition. Cross your fingers for a new Indonesia edition in this “Year of Pramoedya.”

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### PRAM

Kawan Moer,

Aku mulai membaca karya-karya Pramoedya Ananta Toer ketika aku kuliah pada akhir 1980-an. Dasawarsa itu adalah tahun-tahun terbitnya tetralogi Pulau Buru. Saat itu rezim Orde Baru melarang peredaran buku-buku Pram. Orang yang kedapatan menjual buku Pram bisa dicokok ke kantor polisi. Karena itu, jika kita membaca dan menjual buku-buku Pram saat itu tak urung kita akan diselimuti oleh semacam heroisme tipis-tipis.

Karena buku-buku Pram tidak beredar di toko-toko buku besar, maka peran penjual buku alternatif—perorangan maupun kelompok—menjadi penting. Atau, jika kita cukup beruntung, buku-buku Pram ada pula yang terdampar di lapak-lapak pedagang buku loak. Seorang temanku mendapatkan novel *Bumi Manusia* keluaran Hasta Mitra lama di sebuah lapak buku loak di bilangan Glodok hanya dengan harga seribu rupiah. Belakangan aku juga mendapatkan dari loakan yang sama sebuah buku suntingan Pramoedya *Tempo Doeloe* (1982) dengan harga tidak lebih mahal dari harga semangkok bakso.

Namun, ketika aku mulai bekerja sebagai wartawan pada tengah 1990an, akses terhadap buku-buku Pram aku dapatkan bukan dari pasar loak, tetapi dari penerbitnya langsung, Hasta Mitra. Saat itu Hasjim Rachman, salah satu pendiri Hasta Mitra (selain Pramoedya dan Joesoef Isak), menjual buku-buku terbitannya dari rumahnya di kawasan Kayu Putih, Jakarta Timur. Bersama seorang temanku yang menggemari Pram, kami beberapa kali ke rumahnya. Dia senang ada anak muda yang membaca karya-karya Pram.

Bahkan, ketika peluncuran novel *Arus Balik* (1995) aku dan temanku itu datang ke acara peluncuran buku tersebut di kediaman Pram di bilangan Utan Kayu, Jakarta Timur. Kami membeli novel setebal bantal itu dan ditandatangani langsung oleh penulisnya. Senang juga. Kami membikin wawancara kecil untuk majalah kami. Aku tidak ingat lagi, apakah wawancara kami dimuat atau tidak.

Di lain waktu, aku kembali lagi ke rumah Pram itu. Kali ini juga untuk sebuah wawancara. Saat itu kami berdua, dan Pramoedya menyuguhi kami minuman bersirop merah di cawan anggur. Sebelum kami minum dia bilang, “Tenang, Bung. Tidak ada racunnya.” Aku suka humor hitamnya.

Sekali waktu aku menemani seorang penulis untuk membikin wawancara Pramoedya di rumahnya yang baru di Bojong Gede. Kami naik kereta dari Cikini dan turun di stasiun Bojong Gede. Ketika kami datang, jika tidak salah ingat, Pram sedang menyapu dan membakar sampah. Menyapu dan membakar sampah adalah kegiatan harian yang penting dalam kehidupan keseharian seorang Pramoedya.

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Since the advent of modern Indonesian literature, Indonesian writers have produced work emblematic of the zeitgeist of their times but issues raised in literary works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are not necessarily the same as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And as for the themes of the works that translators and publishers are choosing, do they too differ from those of the past? These are two of the questions Lontar will explore in a forthcoming collection of translations of Indonesian short fiction from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

During the past 24 years, Lontar has published translations of several hundred short stories dating from the year 2000 and beyond, but we are now looking for “non-Lontar” published translations to include in this anthology as well. We invite translators and publisher from around the world to submit for consideration the short stories you have published.

Rules for consideration of a story include:

- The story must have been first published in Indonesian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and
- The party that submits a story must hold the reprint rights to that story.

In the anthology, every year of the first quarter of the century will be represented but with no more than three stories for a given year. No more than one story per author will be chosen. While quality of the literary work selected is of utmost importance, consideration will also be given to gender equality and ethnic diversity. Finally, special consideration will be given to Indonesia’s younger generations, authors, who came of age in or emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Send your submissions and/or queries to: [john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org)

Setelah itu, aku tidak pernah lagi bertemu dengan Pram. Ketika kematiannya pada 2006 aku telah bekerja di tempat lain lagi. Tetapi, saat mengenang kematiannya di Teater Kecil, Taman Ismail Marzuki, aku datang. Selain sambutan ini dan itu, diputar pula sebuah video tentang detik-detik terakhir Pramoedya di Rumah Sakit St. Carolus. Yang masih kuingat dari video itu adalah Pram dikelilingi oleh sejumlah seniman. Seorang seniman membimbingnya mengucapkan istigfar dan syahadat. Dengan kata lain, melalui bimbingan seniman y.b.s. Pram berpulang dalam keadaan, mudah-mudahan, *husnul khotimah*.

Setelah kematiannya, aku tidak lagi membaca karya-karya Pramoedya dengan minat ketika aku masih kuliah dulu. Semakin dewasa, perasaanku terhadap karya-karyanya semakin berubah. Ya, buatku karya-karyanya adalah realisme yang biasa saja. Memang, Pramoedya adalah pengarang realis yang mahir memainkan perincian atau mengolah psikologi tokoh, bahkan menampilkan ironi yang tajam. Tetapi, semua itu lebih banyak kudapatkan dalam karya-karyanya yang terbit pada 1950-an.

Novel-novel Pramoedya, bagiku, agak membosankan. Apalagi jika ia sudah mulai berpanjang-panjang. Cobalah, apakah kau bisa menuntaskan *Arus Balik* dengan keasyikan yang sama saat kau membaca *Bukan Pasar Malam* atau *Perburuan*? Atau, saat kau membaca cerita pendek semisal “Subuh” atau “Lemari Antik”?

Jadi, harus kukatakan begini, Bung. Untuk sebuah penelitian mungkin kita perlu membaca sebuah kompleks karya seorang pengarang. Tetapi, untuk kesenangan, kita boleh memilih hanya satu-dua saja, yang benar-benar bernilai dan menarik hati. Sebab, dalam hidup yang singkat ini, kita perlu memilih mana-mana yang menjadi kesukaan kita, yang mendukung perkembangan minat dan kekaryaan kita—jika si kita adalah juga seorang pengarang.

Jika ingin lebih lagi, kita perlu pertolongan pembacaan jua. **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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