



# Lontar Newsletter

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## Greetings

Education in Indonesia is on its way to full digitalization. Following President Prabowo's vow to improve the quality of education during his speech commemorating Indonesia's 80<sup>th</sup> independence anniversary on August 17, the Ministry of Elementary, Middle and High School Education distributed the first batch of 288,000 smart screens to schools around the country. This overall digitalizing process will cost some Rp 2 trillion (US\$121 million), including the procurement of the screens and the training of teachers on how to operate them. The cost of these screens for 15,000 schools will come from the national budget; the government hopes the corporate sector will pitch in to cover the cost of the remaining 222,000 screens.

Predictably, the program has elicited much criticism from educators and laypeople alike. Foremost among the objections is the absence of proper due diligence on the varying lacks and needs of schools in urban and rural areas and those in the outer regions. Critics maintain that the principle of one-size-fits all cannot be applied to schools with differing socio-economic development. For many schools in isolated regions, for instance, the priority, they say, should be on fixing and repairing school buildings and providing them with sufficient electricity before they can even begin to use smart screens and other high-tech gadgets. In response, the government has reportedly allocated Rp 150 trillion to upgrade facilities at schools and

## Ruminations

### Soliloquy

In early 1996, after having ushered into publication *The Fugitive* and the first three titles in the Buru Quartet, Will Schwalbe, suggested the time was coming for publication of Pramoedya's life story. Reviews of the author's books had people talking and readers now wanted to know more about the man. With the fourth and final title in the Quartet scheduled for release in 1997, Will thought the next title should be Pramoedya's biography. "Might Pramoedya be willing to write an autobiography?" he asked. Although certain of Pram's answer—I now addressed the author as "Pak Pram"—I called Ibu Maemunah, his wife, to tell her that I'd be coming to see Pram the following Saturday morning.

When arriving at Pram's home that day, I expected to find Pram in his favored white undershirt and faded blue and white checkered sarong burning trash in the empty lot adjacent to his house. He wasn't there. "He's upstairs with Pak Joesoef," Ibu Maemunah told me at the door.

I was glad Pram's editor was there. When the two men were together, their mutual presence always promised to yield new stories about their lives and the times they'd witnessed for me to listen to.

Upstairs, in Pram's office, I conveyed Will's query in short order and just as quickly got the answer I expected: "Nggak mau, nggak bisa. Don't want to, I can't."

"How about *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu: Catatan Pulau Buru*," Joesoef immediately suggested. Literally translated as the "Silent Song of a Mute: Notes from Buru Island" (henceforth referred to as "*Nyanyi Sunyi*") that title had been published the year before, on February 6, Pramoedya's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and his and Maemunah's 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The book contained notes, essays, and thought pieces Pram had written in the Buru Island penal colony which, like his other writings, had been smuggled from the island. This 344 page book was fascinating in its details but was not, to my mind, a stand-alone book, much less an autobiography. I was frank with the two men in my assessment of the book and the possibility of its acceptance as an English language publication.

"But there's more!" Joesoef interjected. Pram then explained that publication of *Nyanyi Sunyi* had become a clarion call which prompted keepers of other smuggled writings to send them back to him. Now, Joesoef said, they had more than twice as much material as had been

universities and plans to renovate at least 13,800 public schools and 1,400 madrasahs.

Another effort at equalizing education for all in Indonesia was the launch of People's Schools (*Sekolah Rakyat*) aimed at providing free quality education for children from low-income families. As of July, 100 free boarding schools across the country opened their doors, offering not just elementary, middle and secondary classes but also free meals. The government's long-term plan is to establish at least one such school in every regency or city, meaning more than 500 boarding schools nationwide.

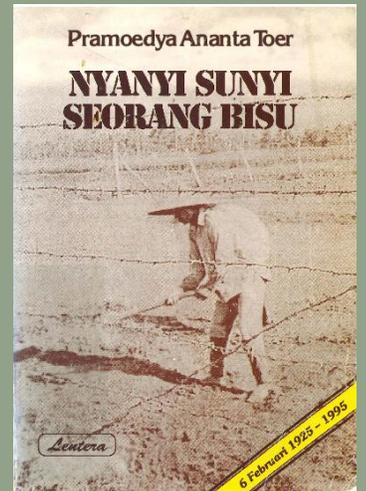
We applaud these efforts and hope that being digital does not mean forsaking basic reading and writing skills and that schools will also be equipped with libraries and reading rooms.

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included in *Nyanyi Sunyi*. In fact, he was now in the process of retyping all the newly-received materials and planned to publish a second volume of Pram's Buru-Island notes in 1997.

"Well, maybe we do have something there," I remarked, but stressed I would need to see this cat in a box (*kucing dalam karung*) before deciding whether the combined materials could be turned into an accessible English-language text and then discussing that possibility with Will.



First edition cover of *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*.

Several weeks later, Joesoef delivered to me 800+ pages of single-spaced text, all the original notes from *Nyanyi Sunyi* and the second batch of smuggled writings as well.

"OMG" had been my initial thought upon receipt of this massive amount of text, but the material was so fascinating, I read the entire 3.5 inch stack of paper in a matter of days. While the first batch of writings, those published in *Nyanyi Sunyi*, dealt primarily with life on Buru Island, the second batch was much more personal in nature, including numerous letters to his children, in each of which, Pram recounted memorable episodes in his life. The man's love for his eight children (three from his first wife, Arvah Iljas, and five from Maemunah), which infused these letters they had never received, made my eyes glisten.

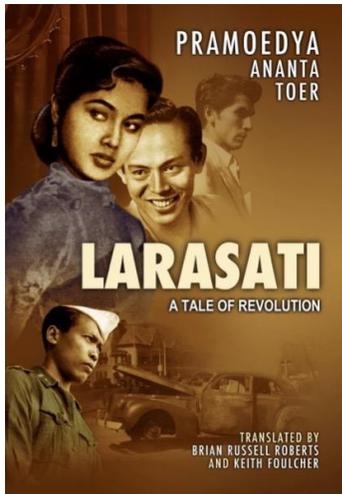
Pramoedya's accounts of the hardships prisoners endured, the many deaths he had witnessed, and the animalistic behavior and cruelty of military officers and penal island authorities made my skin crawl. This cat in the box was a strong-boned creature after all, with a perfect tail and long and sharp claws, but whose thick and matted hair would have to be severely trimmed, cleaned, and combed before the cat could nestle on the laps of readers.

I told Will we had a diamond in the rough and he tentatively agreed to publish a form of the text in its translation. I promised to have a draft translation ready for him before he came to Jakarta with an AAP (Association of American Publishers) delegation in September that year.

When I conveyed this news to Pram, he told me to edit and shape the material in such a way as to make it more easily understandable for and accessible to the English-language reader. It was a job he couldn't do himself. At first I hesitated; I didn't know for sure if I wanted to accept the burden of editorial freedom he was giving to me.

The task I took on that day proved far more difficult and time-

## FORTHCOMING



Set during the Indonesian Revolution, *Larasati*, by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, tells the story of the dazzling Larasati, star of the silver screen. When war breaks out, she pledges loyalty to the struggle for freedom, seeking to negotiate a place for herself and her art in the male-dominated world of the Revolution. Her determination to contribute takes her from anti-colonial Central Java to a fight for survival in Dutch-occupied Jakarta, where her life takes a dramatic turn.

She never wavers in her allegiance to the ragtag freedom fighters who attack the well-armed colonial army with bamboo spears. But can her talents make a difference in this contest between bamboo and howitzers? And during long months of soul-crushing hunger and years of abuse, will she be able to resist the false promises of security that have lured so many fellow Indonesians to the side of their former colonial masters? Through it all, *Larasati* maintains a keen life of the mind that helps her balance the promptings of her heart, her allegiance to the cause of Indonesian freedom, and her instinct for self-preservation.

Finally, the Revolution's triumph is *Larasati*'s own triumph, but years of physical, emotional, and intellectual warfare have taught her that neither defeat nor victory is permanent.

Translated by Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher.

consuming than I had ever imagined, one reason being that even before the editing process could begin I felt it necessary to produce a draft translation of the entire text. I might have chosen to first edit the Indonesian and omit from the translation stage those sections which I felt might not work in English experience had taught me that sometimes there is no way of telling if a text is going to work in English until it has been translated.

The above comment serves to throw light not just on the difficulty I had to face as a translator but also on my far more precarious position as editor. To produce an English-language volume that was comprehensible to the English-language reader and of manageable length, it was necessary to excise from the original text a great deal of information—several hundred pages worth—which scholars of Indonesia might have preferred I retain. In the end, however, because the target audience was the educated general reader, a person who does not read Indonesian and has no detailed knowledge of Indonesian history, this is what determined my editorial policies, particularly as in regard to what material to delete and what to retain.

Pramoedya never intended his Buru island notes and letters to stand alone, within a single volume, much less as his memoir. He had no grand plan for the note and letters when writing them, because of which the original text(s) contained numerous instances of repetition which I chose to delete.

Many an hour the author and I spent talking of his childhood, his marriages and his children, his role as a writer, and his life as a political prisoner. Pram's readiness to supervise my work gave me the necessary willpower to transform his Indonesian words of hope and despair into English-language siblings. He read and signed off on all my myriad choices, not just in my editing of the original material but in the translation as well. Because of his active participation in the publication process, the book was very much a collaborative work, one that might very well have been born on the arid island of Buru more than two decades past but one that was shaped and molded and came of age in the torpid heat of Jakarta.



Pramoedya and JHM at one of their innumerable meetings

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Brian Russell Roberts, co-translator (with Keith Foulcher) of the novel, *Larasati*, obtained his PhD in English from the University of Virginia in 2008. He is Professor of English at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, where for six years he directed the American Studies Program and where he is currently directing the English Graduate Programs.

Roberts's books have included *Artistic Ambassadors: Literary and International Representation of the New Negro Era* (University of Virginia Press, 2013), *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* (Duke University Press, 2016, co-edited with Keith Foulcher), *Archipelagic American Studies* (Duke University Press, 2017, co-edited with Michelle Ann Stephens), and *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America* (Duke University Press, 2021).

Roberts has also published work in original fiction and literary translation. His stories have recently appeared in *Phoebe*, *Joyland*, and the *Notre Dame Review*, and he co-translated (with Keith Foulcher and Harry Aveling) a collection of Sitor Situmorang's short fiction titled *Oceans of Longing: Nine Stories* (Silkworm, 2018).

Roberts has been selected as a Fulbright Senior Scholar to Indonesia twice—his first appointment was in 2015 at Universitas Sebelas Maret, while his second appointment is scheduled for 2026 at Universitas Diponegoro.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### AGUSTUS

Kawan Moer,

Di bulan keramat ini aku ingin membicarakan tentang kemerdekaan Indonesia. Yakni, terlebih dahulu, dengan mengutip dan memodifikasi judul buku sejarawan Jepang Aiko Kurasawa bahwa “Kemerdekaan Indonesia bukan hadiah Jepang.” Aku setuju seratus persen dengan pendapat Aiko ini. Sebagai sejarawan generasi baru dia berusaha menjernihkan semacam kalibut tentang sak-wasangka yang selama ini berkembang bahwa kemerdekaan Indonesia itu hadiah dari Jepang.

Dalam soal ini biarlah aku menempatkan diriku sebagai peminat sejarah, yang mencoba melukiskan ulang momentum keramat bagi bangsa Indonesia itu. Jika kita membaca media-media di Indonesia yang terbit masa pendudukan Jepang (dengan materi yang telah melalui sensor Jepang) jelas sekali bagaimana pada awalnya Jepang telah “menjanjikan” kemerdekaan kepada Indonesia. Semacam badan yang mempersiapkan kemerdekaan sudah dibentuk: BPUPKI dan kemudian PPKI, yang tugasnya adalah menyusun landasan, ini dan itu, untuk Indonesia yang akan merdeka.

Namun, faktanya, Jepang keburu kalah oleh Sekutu pada 15 Agustus 1945—yang didahului dengan penjatuhan bom atom di Hiroshima dan Nagasaki pada 6 dan 9 Agustus oleh pasukan Amerika Serikat. Bayangkan, tentara pendudukan yang berjaya di seberang lautan, tetapi kalah habis-habisan di negerinya sendiri. Bayangkan pula bagaimana tampang tentara Jepang di Indonesia pada hari-hari itu: bengis tetapi juga lesu. Mereka masih memegang senjata, tetapi sudah tidak punya lagi semangat tempur.

Ada kekosongan kekuasaan saat itu. Tentara Jepang sudah kalah, sementara tantara Sekutu sebagai pemenang perang belum lagi datang. Inilah berkah Tuhan untuk Indonesia.

Segelintir anak muda di Jakarta yang berhasil mendapatkan akses radio ke luar negeri tahu situasi ini. Itulah kenapa mereka mendesak Sukarno untuk segera menyatakan kemerdekaan Indonesia. Sukarno dan generasi tua yang sudah telanjur bekerja sama dengan Jepang masih menahan diri sambil menunggu kepastian keadaan.

Konon, anak-anak muda ini dekat dengan Sutan Sjahrir—satu dari tritunggal proklamator yang lebih banyak bermain di bawah tanah selama masa pendudukan Jepang. Sjahrir sangat anti-Jepang, dan dia pula yang mendesak Hatta untuk memproklamasikan kemerdekaan Indonesia pada 15 Agustus. Bahkan, dia telah menyusun sendiri teks proklamasi itu. Kelihatan bagaimana pengaruh Sjahrir di kalangan anak muda saat itu. Cukup kuat. Mereka berdemo di Gambir, menuntut kemerdekaan diproklamasikan hari itu juga, meski Sukarno kemudian menolaknya.

Di Jakarta, keesokan harinyanya anak-anak muda revolusioner

## IN MEMORIAM



Tim Behrend c. 1989

TIMOTHY EARL BEHREND, philologist and scholar of Javanese literature and history, passed away on August 13. He was born on March 17, 1954, in Cleveland, Ohio. Tim studied classics at Brigham Young University from 1972–1978, taking a leave of absence to complete a two-year Mormon mission in Java. He converted virtually no one (and soon left the faith) but developed a deep love of Indonesia, particularly Javanese culture.

Tim began his doctorate at University of Wisconsin-Madison and wrote a master's thesis on *kraton* cosmology. He transferred to Australia National University to concentrate on Javanese studies, completing his PhD in 1986 with an influential, though unpublished, dissertation: *The Serat Jatiswara: Structure and Change in a Javanese poem, 1600–1930*.

From 1989–1993, Tim headed several manuscript preservation projects in Indonesia. His published catalogues of collections at Sonobudoyo Museum, the University of Indonesia, and the National Library of Indonesia remain foundational resources for the field.

In 1994, Tim became senior lecturer at University of Auckland, New Zealand. After his 2011 retirement, he continued working on numerous research projects with characteristic intensity.

Tim was a big man with a commensurate personality—one far too large to be captured in this short obituary. He will be sorely missed.

binaan Sjahrir itu menculik Sukarno-Hatta ke Rengasdengklok dengan tuntutan yang sama. Sekali lagi, Sukarno-Hatta menolaknya.

Jadi, Bung, dalam situasi genting dan penting ini, orang-orang revolusioner itu tidak sepenuhnya kompak. Anak-anak muda cenderung ingin cepat, revolusioner, berdampak langsung. Sementara orang-orang tua lebih suka bermain sesuai jalur dan kesepakatan yang sudah dibangun sebelumnya. Sementara orang kebanyakan di Jakarta saat itu seperti tidak tahu apa-apa.

Akhirnya, semua itu ada titik temunya. Yang tua-tua dan merasa hati-hati akhirnya berpikir pula bahwa waktu tidak bisa diulur-ulur lagi. Apalagi mereka juga sudah didesak-desak oleh anak-anak muda (yang di belakangnya berdiri orang tua juga). Karena itu 17 Agustus bukan sekadar hari sesudah 16 Agustus. Itu adalah angka keramat, ganjil, dan jatuh pada hari Jumat, hari yang paling dimuliakan oleh orang Islam—saat itu bulan Ramadan pula. Maka lengkap sudah kekeramatan 17 Agustus itu, dan sebagaimana terjadi: Sukarno-Hatta membacakan teks proklamasi kemerdekaan di rumah Sukarno di Pegangsaan Timur 57, Jakarta Pusat.

Tapi, kita tahu, saat itu tidak ada Sutan Sjahrir, tidak ada pula Tan Malaka—tokoh-tokoh yang meskipun bercita-cita sama tetapi berseberangan dengan Sukarno-Hatta dalam memandang kemerdekaan Indonesia. Konon Tan Malaka berada di sekitar Kalibata pada hari-hari itu. Tapi Sjahrir yang sudah mendesak Sukarno-Hatta sebelumnya, ke mana dia? Dia memang kecewa terhadap Sukarno-Hatta, jadi dia tidak mau datang.

Jadi, sesungguhnya, pembacaan proklamasi 17 Agustus itu adalah momentum penting yang tidak bulat juga. Ada selisih, tetapi pihak yang menentang kan tidak sebesar yang mendukungnya. Tapi, apa pun kontradiksi di dalamnya, saat itu bangsa Indonesia sudah berhasil menyatakan kemerdekaannya.

Itu bukan hadiah Jepang, tentu saja. Itu sebuah berkah yang di dalamnya terkandung perdebatan, selisih, kontradiksi—tetapi suara yang dihasilkan tetap satu: Indonesia merdeka, Bung! **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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