



Lontar Newsletter

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Greetings

On August 17 Indonesia celebrated 81 years of independence. When thinking about how that independence was one, most people think of battles and political negotiations. But another struggle was taking place alongside the military and diplomatic one: the struggle to define what it meant to be Indonesian.

Long before the Republic existed, Indonesian writers were helping to imagine the nation that would eventually emerge.

Writers such as Muhammad Yamin, Chairil Anwar, and later Pramoedya Ananta Toer wrote when the idea of Indonesia itself was still being formed. Their work confronted colonialism, promoted a sense of shared identity, and encouraged people to imagine belonging to something larger than their own island, language, or ethnic community. They were not simply describing Indonesia. They were helping to create it.

Language was central to this process. The development of the Indonesian language gave a diverse population a common means of expressing political and cultural ideas. Literature helped turn that shared language into a shared national imagination.

What is striking is that Indonesian writers today remain engaged in the same fundamental conversation—although the question has changed.

For the nationalist and revolutionary generations, the challenge was largely how to create Indonesia. For many contemporary authors, it is what kind of Indonesia has been created, and who gets to belong to it.

Today's literature explores regional and

Ruminations

The Inheritance of Meaning

As I look around my house, the objects I have collected summon vivid memories. Take, for instance, the oversized ceramic bowl with Arabic calligraphy on the coffee table in my living room. Ann Kumar, the Australian historian, bought it from a roadside vendor in Cirebon and gave it to me after the filming of a *wayang golek* performance in Indramayu in 1999. I remember that evening well as Matthew Cohen, scholar of Indonesian performing arts, translated the Javanese dialogue while journalist Jamie James scribbled notes for an article that later appeared in *The New York Times*.

On a shelf in my kitchen is another bowl, made of cut glass. It is not the bowl from which my mother served cranberry relish every Thanksgiving and Christmas, but a facsimile my sister Kathleen gave to each of her siblings after our mother's passing in 2002. Even so, whenever I see it on my dining table—whatever it contains—I can almost taste that sweet-sour relish and smell turkey roasting in the oven.

To anyone else, these objects might appear unremarkable. To me, they are repositories of memory. Their value lies not in what they are, but in the stories they carry.

What, though, will they become after I am gone—treasures or detritus? Objects outlive us. Sooner or later, every possession becomes someone else's responsibility.

Indonesians have a reputation for following *jam karet*, or “rubber time,” but they waste no time when someone dies. Though Indonesia is constitutionally secular, nearly ninety percent of its citizens are Muslim, and Islamic practice calls for burial as soon as possible, ideally before sunset on the day a person dies.

My cellphone was on silent the night of February 18, 2022, and I missed the calls that began shortly after one o'clock. But when I awoke, at six, I learned that Greg Churchill, my oldest Western friend in Jakarta, had died.

After dressing in mourning attire, I drove to Greg's home. When I arrived at nine, flower boards with messages of condolence filled the front grounds. On the spacious veranda, Greg lay in a white casket surrounded by white roses, lilies, and chrysanthemums.

ethnic identity, gender, inequality, migration, environmental change, political power, and the experience of living in a rapidly changing society. Rather than treating national identity as settled, contemporary writers often present it as contested and continually renegotiated.

There is also an international dimension to this conversation. If earlier writers helped Indonesians imagine their country as a nation, the Lontar Foundation has helped the rest of the world imagine Indonesia as a source of literary and intellectual creativity.

Translation does more than make books available. It changes how a country is perceived. Indonesia can too easily be viewed abroad through the familiar lenses of tourism, politics, economic development, or natural beauty. Literature offers something different: access to the ideas, memories, arguments, humor, and imagination of Indonesians themselves.

In that sense, Lontar represents a continuation of the project begun by the writers of the independence generation. They helped give Indonesia a voice; Lontar has helped carry that voice beyond its shores.

The struggle for independence may have ended decades ago. The larger project of defining Indonesia—and making its many voices heard—continues. Perhaps one of the most powerful ways Indonesia can assert its place in the world is not through power or diplomacy, but by allowing its writers to speak, and ensuring that the rest of the world can hear them.



Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

Although COVID was still rampant, more than a hundred masked mourners had gathered. A videographer arrived, followed by a catering truck with boxed meals for guests. Though Greg himself was agnostic, his Muslim partner insisted that he be buried that very day. He was buried at approximately two o'clock. Even after decades in Indonesia and attending many funerals, I was struck by how swiftly such an elaborate event could be organized.



A rod puppet carved to resemble Greg Churchill, standing before his coffin.

Greg collected almost everything: stamps, masks, puppets, bronze statuary, and books. Thousands upon thousands of books. His personal and legal libraries together numbered well over ten thousand volumes. Yet when his will was opened, it proved remarkably simple: eight clauses spread over three pages, with no attachments, only two directives.

I found myself wondering about the future of the collections to which he had devoted so much of his life. I also wondered how many stories would disappear with him. His death brought back memories of another funeral, more than two decades earlier—that of my father (also named John).

My parents' ten children never expected our father to precede our mother in death. Mother had been suffering from progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP), a degenerative neurological disease whose relentless progression we knew would eventually take her life. It was never a question of *if*, only *when*. So when Daddy died after a brief illness in January 1999, we were completely surprised.

Fortunately, I managed to return to Wisconsin on the night of his passing. The week that followed was consumed by funeral arrangements and countless decisions.

Several years earlier my parents had transferred ownership of Glynnspring, the family farm, to their children. As I wandered through the house that week, another question troubled me. What would become of the hundreds of personal possessions that filled my parents' home?

There was no guidance. My parents had prepared no directives regarding their personal effects. Mother could no longer explain what she wanted done with them. Little in the house had great monetary value, but sentiment has never been measured in dollars. I resolved to help Mother preserve those decisions while she still could.

During subsequent trips to Wisconsin, we did just that. I prepared

AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



John Waromi

John Waromi, born Freddie Johnnie Waromi, on August 6, 1960, in Jayapura, is a prominent Indonesian author whose work has brought the cultural and social realities of Papua to international attention. John has established himself as a vital voice in Indonesian literature, blending lived experience with a strong commitment to storytelling.

A member of the Ambai ethnic group, John studied law at Cenderawasih University before pursuing a creative path shaped by both national and international experiences. His early involvement in the Indonesian scouting movement included sailing aboard the naval training ship *KRI Dewa Ruci* in 1983, while his move to Jakarta in 1986 connected him with the influential Bengkel Teater collective led by poet WS Rendra. These formative encounters deepened his artistic vision and commitment to literature.

Waromi's acclaimed novel *Anggadi Tupa, Harvesting the Storm* has been translated into English, expanding his readership beyond Indonesia. His career includes appearances at the Ubud Writers Festival and the Northern Territory Writers Festival in Darwin, Australia. In 2015, he served as one of Indonesia's literary representatives at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2015, a role he repeated in 2019 at the London Book Fair.

Waromi's enduring contributions mark him as a leading figure in contemporary Indonesian writing and a representative of Papua's literary heritage.

an inventory of the house, noting each item's provenance and to whom it might someday be entrusted.

The process was painstaking. Sitting beside Mother, we considered one object after another. Often, she could not remember an item's provenance, and I tried to piece together its origins from fragments of memory. When deciding who should receive a keepsake, I would make a suggestion and wait. Approval usually came as a silent nod.

From those conversations emerged a document I titled *Mementos for My Loved Ones*. Mother explains to more than one hundred recipients not only what she is giving them but why. To Maureen, the lawyer in our family, she writes, "For all the writing she does, I bequeath my desk." To our peripatetic sister Colleen, she gives "the carved wooden hall tree, so that she knows she will always have a place to hang her hat."

Each bequest became more than a transfer of an object: it became a final expression of affection, encouragement, humor, or gratitude.

I then suggested that Mother leave something else behind. Together we prepared a second document, *Words for My Loved Ones*. Unlike the first, it spoke not of possessions. It expressed the values by which she had tried to live and offered a final word to her children, close relatives, and dearest friends.

The preamble begins: "The most important things in a person's life are faith, family, friends, and community. This is what I believe, and they, along with the Ten Commandments, have been my guiding principles in life, the rule of thumb I've tried to teach my children."

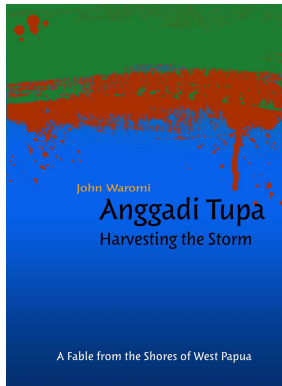
Later she concludes: "At times I feel sad and I cry when thinking of my loved ones, but I've always believed what Christ taught—that 'dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.' Now, after so many years on earth, I'm beginning to feel, as Big John used to say, as old as the sod itself. But being a farmer's daughter and the wife of a man who loved the soil, I know that the sod must occasionally be turned if better things are to grow."

Neither of my parents was a writer, yet both loved the written word. I believe they would have written such documents themselves had time and circumstance allowed.

As I wrote this "Rumination," I realized that directives are about far more than deciding who receives what after we die. They spare those we love unnecessary burden, but also preserve something more fragile: the stories behind the objects and the values we hope will outlive us.

Someday, the bowls I mentioned will belong to someone else. Whether they are kept or discarded matters less than whether the stories they carry survive. Material possessions are inherited. Meaning must be passed from one generation to the next.

John H. McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)



Anggadi Tupa: Harvesting the Storm by John Waromi is the first novel published by a Papuan author. Translated by Sarita Newson, this fable-like tale unfolds along the shores of West Papua, where creatures on land and sea live in remarkable harmony—until greed disrupts the balance.

The story is told through three creatures: Andevavait, an amphibious tide-pool blenny who can live both above and below water; Bohurai, a greedy toadfish; and Anggereai, an observant striped crab.

In this ecological parable, Waromi explores the consequences of “harvesting the storm”—the idea that we are destined to reap the results of our actions once events have moved beyond our control. Along the way, he illuminates the ecology of the southern Papuan coast and the lives and culture of its people, whose traditions have sustained natural diversity and preserved a delicate balance with nature for centuries.

In the Ambai language, “anggadi tupa” refers to coconuts that wash ashore, often after a storm. Some are eaten; others are planted to produce new trees. But in Waromi’s novel, what washes ashore or emerges from the earth includes remnants of another storm: the Pacific War. Humans use abandoned Japanese and American munitions, including dynamite, to blast reefs and harvest fish.

At its heart, *Anggadi Tupa* is an allegory of Waromi’s own Ambai people and their struggle to survive in West Papua today.

Surat dari Pejompongan

LEGIUN

Kawan Moer,

Agustus yang akan segera kita tinggalkan ini menyimpan satu momen penting bagi sejarah Indonesia, yakni 17 Agustus. Kita semua tahu tanggal itu bahwa pada setiap tanggal itu kita memperingati seraya merayakan proklamasi kemerdekaan Republik Indonesia yang jatuh pada 17 Agustus 1945. Sepanjang sebulan penuh kita memasang bendera merah putih untuk mengenang hari bersejarah ini. Juga, untuk mengenang perjuangan para pahlawan revolusi dalam mempertahankan kemerdekaan kita. Doa terbaik untuk mereka.

Apa yang kita kenal sebagai “revolusi” di situ adalah masa yang tidak terlalu panjang, sebenarnya, tetapi cukup banyak mengubah bangsa Indonesia. Kurang-lebih, empat tahun empat bulan sepuluh hari, 17 Agustus 1945-27 Desember 1949. Kemerdekaan Indonesia diakui secara resmi oleh Belanda, Indonesia lahir kembali sebagai negara baru yang merdeka-berdaulat. Ada banyak yang berubah sepanjang masa itu, salah satunya adalah sastra Indonesia.

Mungkin kau masih ingat, sebelum Perang Dunia Kedua meletus dan Jepang menduduki Indonesia, sastra Indonesia berada dalam panduan generasi Pujangga Baru. Itulah generasi sastra yang memproklamasikan dirinya pada Juli 1933 dan menjadikan romantisisme Belanda sebagai acuan estetika. Orang seperti Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana adalah tokoh yang paling lantang menyuarakan sastra yang mesti terlibat dalam penyadaran atau penumbuhan kesadaran nasional. Sastra tidak boleh asyik sendiri.

Namun, sebelum kedatangan Jepang, generasi ini sudah mulai kehilangan kepercayaan pada dunia sosial di Hindia Belanda. Pendudukan Belanda oleh Nazi pada 5 Mei 1940 ikut menentukan hilangnya kepercayaan para pengelola majalah *Poedjangga Baroe* untuk menentukan keberlangsungan majalah acuan generasi itu. Hanya berselang beberapa bulan sebelum Jepang masuk pada Maret 1942, majalah ini sudah berhenti terbit.

Salah satu kritik penyair Chairil Anwar pada majalah ini adalah mereka tidak ambil peduli pada fasisme yang merebak di Eropa saat itu.

Masa pendudukan Jepang memberikan warna baru bagi ekspresi kesusastran Indonesia, tetapi wataknya masih tetap sama. Jika sebelumnya mengacu kepada propaganda kebangkitan nasional, kini propaganda kepada kebaktian sastra akan perjuangan menegakkan harga diri bangsa Asia, melalui pemimpin Jepang, dalam menghadapi Barat. Ekspresi kesusastran mesti menanamkan kesadaran akan pentingnya menggelorakan semangat kebaktian kepada bimbingan Jepang tadi: demi kemakmuran Asia Timur Raya!

FEATURED TRANSLATOR



Sarita Newson integrated into the Balinese community and Indonesian society more than fifty years ago and, as a writer, translator, editor and publisher, has endeavoured to their richness beyond borders all the while since.

From 1979, Sarita was editor (and translator) for *Bali Post*'s seminal English edition, *The Sunday Bali Post*, and worked on numerous translations for development projects. In 1980 she introduced and edited *Paon Bali: A Guide to the Balinese Kitchen*, the first ever Balinese cookbook, featuring traditional Balinese recipes for the Bali Hyatt.

She researched and wrote *Bali Plus*, an in-depth information manual on Bali plus other travel destinations for the Bali Tourism Promotion Board. For decades her design and communication studio always had a book 'on the back burner'.

Sarita enjoys helping authors to self-publish, or to find a suitable home in the literary world. John Waromi is one such author, with a timely message for Indonesia and beyond. She has created several series of illustrated multilingual children's books on education, environment and folklore through Saritaksu Editions. Her imprint's name pairs *sari* (essence) with *taksu* (creative inspiration).

A longtime supporter of the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival since its founding, Sarita continues to celebrate literature by introducing new books and authors.

Namun, sekelompok penulis muda yang menolak propaganda ini kemudian lahir sebagai kekuatan perlawanan sekaligus kekuatan baru setelah Indonesia merdeka. Itulah lingkaran kecil Chairil Anwar, Asrul Sani, Rivai Apin, dan sejumlah nama lain. Jika orang bertanya sastra macam apa yang dibutuhkan untuk Republik Indonesia yang baru lahir, itulah sastra yang dibawa oleh Chairil dan kawan-kawan. Bukan sastra generasi Pujangga Baru, bukan pula sastra yang tunduk pada arahan Kantor Pusat Kebudayaan (Keimin Bunka Shidōsho). Karya-karya Chairil dan kawan-kawannya segera mendominasi rubrik sastra di majalah-majalah saat itu, terutama *Pantja Raja* dan *Pembangoenan*.

Sastra Indonesia masa Revolusi adalah sastra yang identik dengan suasana perang. Masa ini segera menjadi unik, sebab perang yang terjadi adalah untuk mempertahankan kemerdekaan, bukan merebutnya. Kita sudah menjadi bangsa merdeka sejak 17 Agustus 1945, tetapi kedatangan tantara Sekutu dan NICA kemudian mengubah kemerdekaan itu menjadi penuh ancaman. Itulah kenapa pada pemuda mengangkat senjata. Para pejuang bukan semata-mata tantara aktif, tetapi juga pemuda yang bergolak jiwa patriotismenya, bahkan para penulis kita.

Itulah kenapa dalam masa Revolusi muncul jenis kesusastraan yang disebut "sastra legiun", sastra yang berisi kisah perjuangan rakyat Indonesia dalam mempertahankan negeri ini dari ancaman Sekutu dan NICA. Tentu saja, tidak semua memasang tokoh tantara atau pejuang revolusioner, meski kelompok ini yang paling dominan. Salah satu yang berbeda sudut pandang dalam hal ini adalah Asrul Sani.

Cerita pendeknya yang berjudul "Museum" adalah sebuah kritik terhadap jiwa amtenar yang masih bertahan dalam bangsa Indonesia yang telah merdeka. Sinismenya terhadap mentalitas yang melapuk ini, membuat Asrul termasuk pengarang yang lain dalam korpus "sastra legiun". Ada samar-samar suasana absurd, tetapi ejekan terhadap mentalitas yang melapuk itu tidak kalah kuatnya.

Kau mungkin pernah merasakan suasana itu di kantor kedutaan yang pernah memusuhiimu dulu. Tapi sekarang sudah lain. Sudah lebih baik dan bersahabat ya? Aku ikut girang. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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