

Lontar: found in translation

How do we get to know foreign cultures in general and Indonesian in particular? Through tourism? Tourists tend to scratch the surface and very selectively at that (many think the holiday ‘paradise’ Bali is an independent nation). Through the media? Media reports on the 2005 tsunami or the sporadic terrorist attacks do not offer a balanced perspective on Indonesia either. No, we can best become familiar with another culture by reading its literary works – and for that to work we need translations.

Roy Voragen

The Translator

LITERATURE IS A USEFUL TOOL to gain insight into a foreign culture, and the rich history of Indonesian literature indeed offers, when translated, a valuable gateway to Indonesian culture. Knowledge of this rich history is limited (although, this is unfortunately also the case for most Indonesians).

During the Cold War, the works of Indonesian authors that were translated mostly followed the ideological agenda of the recipient country. And then, with the waning power of the Communist bloc in the mid-eighties, the West appeared to simply lose interest in Indonesian literature. Lontar was established in 1987 to step into this void.

Unlike the Cold War lust for power, Lontar’s aim is a humanist one and, as Edward Said wrote, humanism is a “knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes.”¹ Lontar is an independent, not-for-profit foundation based in Jakarta, which aims to promote Indonesian literature and culture to an English speaking audience by, among other things, translating and publishing Indonesian literature so it becomes accessible to an international audience. Furthermore, Lontar aims to preserve the history of Indonesian literature.

Anthony Reid, eminent historian of Southeast Asia, said: “Lontar has become one of the most important windows on Indonesia for the rest of the world.”² Last June I went to Lontar’s office in the center of Jakarta to meet the chairman of the Board of Trustees and Wisconsin native John McGlynn and we had a meandering conversation on book publishing, the art of translating, money, culture and politics.³

Slightly more than two-and-half decades ago the poet Sapardi Djoko Damono was named recipient of the SEA-Write Award and invited to speak in Thailand. Realizing that he had no collection of translations of his poetry which he could present to his hosts, he asked his former student McGlynn, who had studied Indonesian literature at the University of Indonesia, to undertake some translations. The two invited the chief editor of Tempo Magazine and poet Goenawan Mohamad for a discussion; subsequently two more friends were invited: poet and literary critic Subagio Sastrowardoyo (1924-1995) and sociologist and writer Umar Kayam (1932-2002). And out of their discussions Lontar was born.

Since that time, hundreds of Indonesian authors have been translated and published by Lontar. However, the approximately hundred titles produced so far sell only 2000 copies on average and mostly within Southeast Asia because of poor distribution, which represents a failure and hampers Lontar’s goals. Not only is shipping costly, the burden of distribution lies with the publisher, i.e. it is on consignment and unsold copies are sent back or pulped at the expense of the publisher. However, new distribution methods and technologies of recent years might alter this situation, especially for a niche publisher like Lontar: online bookstores (Lontar’s publications can since recently, for example, be purchased at Amazon.com), e-books (Lontar’s publications are made available as e-books in cooperation with Book Cyclone), print-on-demand and online payment systems.

“Profit,” McGlynn says, “has never been the motive behind Lontar’s work, but how can Lontar survive if relying only on income from the sale of its books? Frankly, it can’t.”⁴ Lontar, therefore, depends for its survival on donors; sixty percent of Lontar’s resources comes from Indonesia and these donations are mostly in small amounts, for example, through fundraisers. Historically, some of Lontar’s largest grants have come from foreign donors, such as the Ford Foundation. Recently, however, Lontar has made more inroads into

obtaining grants from domestic resources. One example is a substantial grant from the Djarum Foundation, which made possible the translation and publication of the first ten titles in Lontar’s new Modern Library of Indonesia series.

Lontar has a policy to not allow donors to push their own agendas, and will refuse grants if necessary. But so far, donors have not influenced Lontar in a negative way; in fact there have even been positive interactions. For example, the Ford Foundation’s already existing focus on manuscripts led it to provide a grant to Lontar within this program, and which resulted in the publication of *Illuminations: Writing Traditions of Indonesia*.⁵

Until today, Lontar has received no substantial support from the government of Indonesia, financial or otherwise. The Indonesian political elite “does not properly recognize the significant role that language and culture play in identity and nation-building.” As elsewhere in the world, “enlightened government policies” are not on the political agenda. Still, Lontar tries to convince the government that it has an important role to play in conserving and promoting culture through offering subsidies and financial incentives. While Lontar claims, for good reasons, that literature should also be valued on its own merits, McGlynn realizes that the Indonesian political elite has to be approached on their own turf because, with very few exceptions,⁶ the merit of literature is simply overlooked. And so, some of the instrumental arguments put forward: it could improve Indonesia’s image abroad (Indonesia is more than an abundant reservoir of cheap labor); and by improving its image, Indonesia’s power could increase (this is Joseph Samuel Nye’s soft power argument); and, in turn, it could bolster Indonesia’s GDP (this is Richard Florida’s creative industry argument). Even if the government could be persuaded to implement policies beneficial to literature, it is unlikely that it will find the work by authors such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Goenawan

Mohamad, Seno Gumira Ajidarma or Ayu Utami acceptable for support, as their multifarious voices are far too critical for the liking of government officials. McGlynn is aware of this issue as he wrote that “history [...] is a synthesis of different voices, not just one; and we should be suspicious if the only story is the one told by the officials.”⁷

In 2007, McGlynn decided it was time to transition out, because Lontar needed to be able to survive beyond him. However, it was around the same time that new laws concerning foundations were put into effect and so McGlynn decided to return to Lontar as a major restructuring and reorganization became necessary. In fact, the new laws concerning foundations are so complex that “it makes it hard to make day-to-day decisions in an efficient, business-like manner.” Foundations are required to have three boards, and it can take six months to a year to make a management related decision. Moreover, Lontar cannot even own its own office building and it now only has land use rights, “which does not guarantee long-term stability of the organization.” The advantage of maintaining a foundation status, however, is that donors are more willing to donate.

McGlynn sees “Indonesia becoming left behind. [...] This nation [...] is not a promoter of new cultural knowledge and values but a receptacle of ideas [...] while Indonesian writers have something to say to the world [...] and the rest of the world could benefit from Indonesian ideas [...]” One important platform on which Indonesia could show its rich literary history is the Frankfurter Buchmesse; Indonesia has been invited to be guest of honor in 2015.⁸ “The Buchmesse represents a unique opportunity which Indonesia cannot afford to ignore [...]”. But will the Indonesian government commit the substantial financial resources necessary to afford the translation and publication of literary works of historical significance? Based on past experience, [McGlynn] would not want to bet on it.”⁹ Even if the government of Indonesia decides to set aside a budget for this purpose – unlikely in normal times, even unlikely in times of upcoming elections – then it should be done sooner rather than later. A translation of a novel requires one to two years, and no matter how good a translation is, it also has to go through a lengthy editing process.

A great many Indonesian authors have written novels, poems, drama and essays on par with what the world of literature has to offer. While Indonesian literature should be read first and foremost as literature, it can at the very same time be read to learn about and to become acquainted with Indonesia and its cultures. A third reason for reading Indonesian literature in translation is to discover ideas which can be valuable in one’s own culture. One idea Indonesia could share with the world is that of tolerance – Indonesians could learn from themselves though – and if tolerance is not merely a cliché, we have to see how it is practiced in, for example, literature. In Indonesian literary works, tolerance is shown thematically, for example by showing the fluidity of sexuality, or as embedded in literary style. Indonesian “writers are versatile and they have a consistent ability to cross genres.” And it is safe to claim that Indonesians practiced hybridity long before it was theorized as postmodernism.¹⁰

Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (1941)

What flows (1973, complete poem)

What flows? Blood.
What blooms? Roses.
What swells? Hope.
What feels? Regret.

With a thousand regrets
I search for You
With all means available
I search for you
With a thousand contrivances
I search for you
With a thousand temptations
I search for You

Sitor Situmorang (1923)

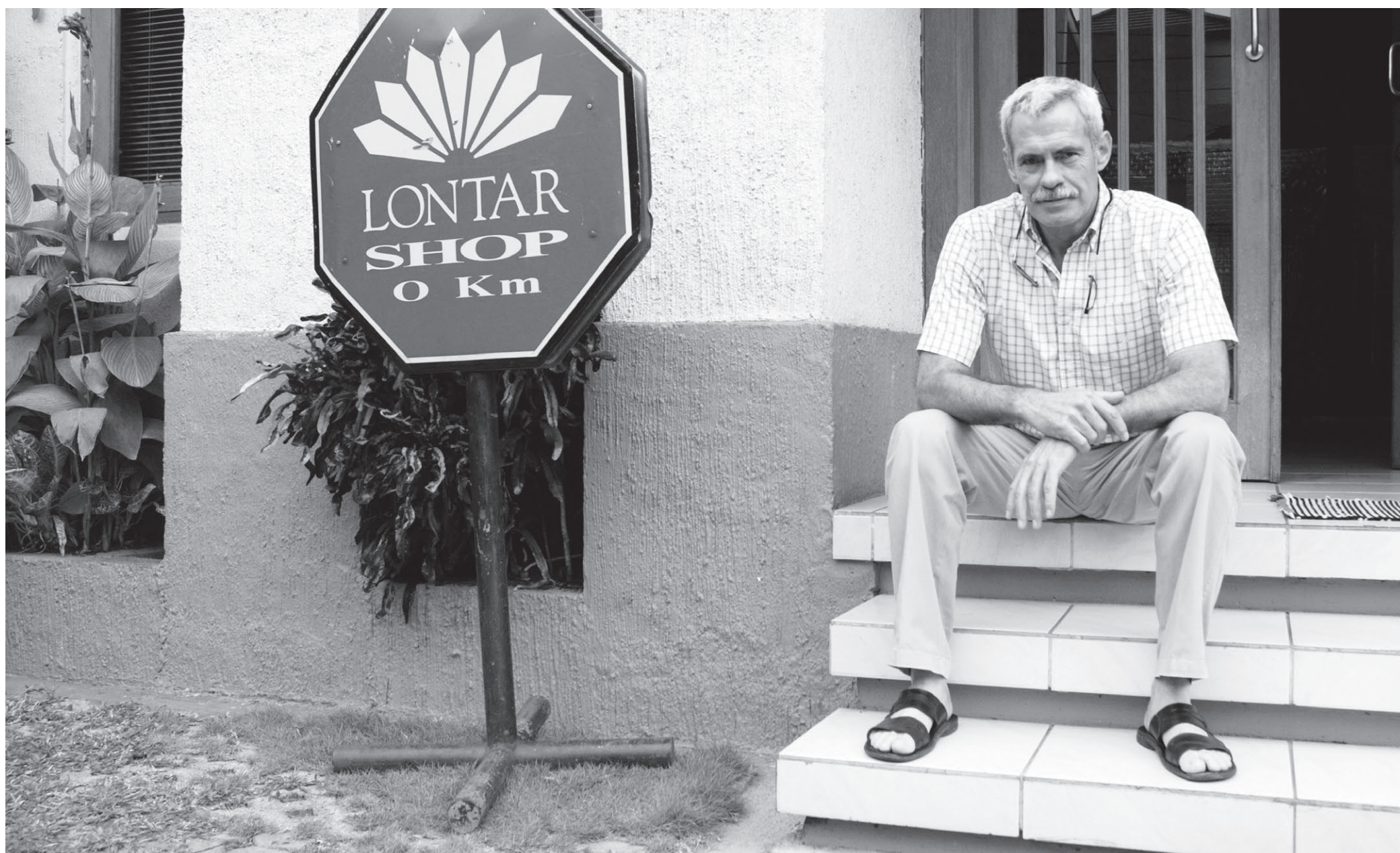
A Poem (1953, complete)

Why not believe in God?
Such sadness is poetry

On us he has no hold
In sorrow only does he stir

In our death
He too is stopped by silence

Publishing Indonesian literature in English



Chairil Anwar (1922-1949)

Pines in the Distance (1949, fragment)

Life is but postponement of defeat,
a growing estrangement from youth's unfettered love.
Knowing there is always something left unsaid
before we finally acquiesce.

Announcement (1946, fragment)

To dictate fate is not my intent,
fate is separate loneliness-es.
I choose you from among the rest, but
in a moment we are snared by loneliness once more.

There is though a tension between, on the one hand, this practice of tolerance and, on the other hand, a very long history of censorship. According to McGlynn, censorship is mainly horizontal in Indonesia. Even during Suharto's New Order (1966-1998), outright (or vertical) censorship was very rare (an exception was the forced closing of Tempo Magazine in 1994).¹¹ However, this situation offers Lontar opportunities, especially in cases concerning sensitive issues or topics, which major publishing houses choose to steer clear of. Lontar's *Menagerie* has been a particularly excellent platform for muted voices; for example, a collection of stories from former political prisoners in *Menagerie 6*,¹² and a collection of gay literature in *Menagerie 7*. Of the latter McGlynn said that the "Indonesian archipelago is as multi-sexual as it is multi-ethnic."¹³

Menagerie aims to give an overview of the rich Indonesian literature by selecting, translating and publishing short stories, poetry and essays. *Menagerie* is a "gradual construction, [a] step-by-step fitting together of the jigsaw puzzle that is Indonesian literature."¹⁴ And as such, *Menagerie* could very well be a never-ending story. *Menagerie* was initially planned to be published once a year, but there have been an average of more than two years between issues. So far it has been book-format, but soon this will be changed to an electronic format due to the high costs. Producing *Menagerie* is much more expensive than the usual publications, because so many authors and translators are involved for each issue.

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Lontar has produced a "cogent body" of translations "to study the scope, range, and depth of Indonesian literary history." Lontar likes to ensure that each piece of work it translates has already proven itself, and that there is already a consensus on its merits. Translating is dancing on a tight-rope: "respecting the integrity of the original while still honoring the intelligence of the reader is often very difficult." McGlynn claims that "very few literary critics are qualified to review translations of Indonesian literature. If they don't like the book, they blame it on the translation, as if something is lost in translation."

Unfortunately, for Indonesian authors it is not financially beneficial to be translated; nonetheless, it is an honor. It helps to give them a voice in the global (literary) community.¹⁵ Lontar will continue helping Indonesian authors by translating, publishing and archiving their work. Next year, Lontar will celebrate its twenty-fifth birthday. While questions concerning (financial) sustainability remain, Lontar certainly has shown the will to continue and so it will (with a little help from its friends and donors).

For more information on Lontar see www.lontar.org
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Notes

- Edward W. Said. 1994. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, p. xix.
- Quoted in the September 2009 Lontar newsletter. All newsletters on the website are written by John McGlynn, see www.lontar.org.
- Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from this interview, conducted on 22 June 2011.
- March 2011 Lontar newsletter.
- Ann Kumar and John H. McGlynn, eds. 1996. *Illuminations: Writing Traditions of Indonesia*. Jakarta: Lontar.
- An exception is the current minister of foreign affairs, Marty Natalegawa, who bought Lontar's books as mementos for foreign dignitaries, instead of the usual plaques; he was also the honorary chairman of the International Publishing Forum of which McGlynn was the chairman in 2010.
- John H. McGlynn. 2000. "Silenced Voices, Muted Expressions: Indonesian Literature Today," *Mānoa* 12, no.1 (Summer 2000), p. 43. *Mānoa* was founded at the University of Hawaii in the same year as Lontar, but there is no institutional connection. McGlynn is the Indonesian country editor for *Mānoa*.
- In an email (9-8-2011), Simone Bühler, Director Guest of Honour Programme at the Frankfurter Buchmesse (<http://www.buchmesse.de/en/>), wrote that she is not yet able to provide confirmation of Indonesia's invitation, because Indonesian literary organizations still have to go through the application process for this programme.
- May 2011 Lontar newsletter.
- For example, by one of its godfathers: Jean-François Lyotard. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, p. 79.
- For an excellent insight on Tempo's case see: Janet Steele. 2005. *Wars Within, The Story of Tempo, an independent magazine in Soeharto's Indonesia*. Jakarta and Singapore: Equinox and ISEAS. Tempo was founded in 1971.
- These political prisoners were alleged members of the former communist party and/or its auxiliary organizations. Ever since the bloody turmoil of 1965/1966 everything that smells like the left is considered taboo.
- May 2010 Lontar newsletter. *Menagerie 7* was also published in Indonesian as *Di Balik Kaca*.
- John McGlynn, ed. 1991. *Menagerie 1*. Jakarta: Lontar, p. xi
- And foreign publishers are herewith given easy access to consider the option for further translations of a book. Ideally, they still would have to translate from the original, which does not always happen – which, in turn, violates the rights of the first translator.