Utopian Identities, Real Selves

By Tony Day

T he workshop’s very conceptualization promised a shift from a narrow concern with the legacies of colonialism, which, as many commentators have observed, has tended to reinforce the very dominance of European languages and literatures that indigenous authors and post-colonial scholars are contesting. If the presenters effectively ‘provincialized’ and localized the dominant West, they also indicated that much remains to be done, through the re-staging of the polite forms in which we have themselves, before we understand how the worldwide processes of literary creation occur and lead to the emergence of ‘world literature’. Particularly fascinating were the hints of a tension between utopian possibilities for identity conveyed through literary forms, whether ‘Western’ or ‘indigen- nous’, and the ‘real’ selves, whether in the guise of characters or authorial personae, conveyed by the literary text. The tension between idealized past or future identities and real selfhood in the present has less to do with the formation of the nation state than with the creation of literary selves. Readers around the world can recognize the latter in their own actual everyday, modern contexts (for several stimulating def- initions of realism and the self in literature, see Karatani 1993, Makino 2000 and Ziai 1993). Thus, according to Daniela Menolla (Leiden University), a real self emerges in modern Beryle Kahle’s literature that is distinct from those portrayed in either French ethnograph- ical, Berber folkloric, or official (classical) Arabic linguistic terms. According to Thomas de Brujin (Leiden University), Premchand’s Hindi short story, Kajal, effectively presents India’s economic and social realities in the 1930s not through Western techniques of narrative and psychological realism, but by using older, indigenous rhetorical forms. Madhava and Gobinda are a world whose ‘pre-colonial’ Hindus are con- sidered to recognize as similar to their own through forms of characterization that derive from traditional ideas about pos- sibilities for individuality and freedom. One such possibili- ties occurs in the last stage of human existence, the ‘period of renunciation’, which is governed by the dominant emotion- al state (rasa) of ‘the gruesome’. Another is embodied in the archetype of the saintly drunk. The self thus brought to life in the story is picturesque not only for its customs and beliefs that offer an all-encompassing meaning to life and to release from life’s suffering, but to the paradoxical real- ity that, as Ghisler observes, ‘someone who did not get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new abadon when she dies’. The story argues against any realistic hope of either a utopian modern future or a return to an idealized traditional past by means of a rhetoric saturated with Hindu religious idealism.

Menolla and De Bruijn, as well Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr (University of London), Evan Mwangi (University of Nairo- bii), and A.M. Klaasen (University of Bayreuth) in their essays on African literatures, do not present national identities as unitary but, rather, as multiple, layered, and gendered. The complex reality of war in Vietnam as portrayed in Duong Thu Huong’s Novel Without a Name (1995) cannot be reduced to the heroic, ideal male stereotypes of Communist Party sile- lags, as Ursula Lies (University of Poitiers) demonstrates in her analysis. Yet that novel also conjures up a timeless, utopian kind of national identity that transcends the limits imposed by national boundaries, state structures, or gender differences. The role of the Sherlock Holmes-like detectives in the 19950s Sumatran novels discussed by Doris Jedamiski (workshop convenor) is similarly utopian, not only as an ideal- ized representation of masculinity and national identity, but also as she puts it, or as a representation of the quintessential Javanese nobleman brought back to life in the late colonial Dutch East Indies, but also as an endorsement of a desired, future state of absolute law and order. As represented in the Indonesian detective figure, the ‘real’ self is concealed behind the mysterious masks of a paternalistic superman who only ambiguously represents either an independent, modern self or the national citizen. This is reminiscent of Francisco Moret- ti’s and Umberto Eco’s claims that the detective fiction genre in the West negates individualism and freedom in the inter- nalization of order (Taylor 1985, Eco 1979). As Moretti notes, detective fiction invokes science for defensive rather than developmental purposes, for it reifies an ‘ide of status acquity that is externalized, as well as the diffus- ions by Garin Nugroho and Arjo Danusuri, introduced by the latter, an ethnographic filmmaker from Jakarta, the conference featured six speakers who engaged the issue of Indonesian and anthropological ‘futures’ in a range of compelling ways. Thinking about and imagining the future involved a detour through the past (Krae, Streed- ly), an engagement with the shifting temporalities woven through women’s life-cycles of work as well as the subjective narrative of this variable experience (Saptarian), a discussion of the conditions as well as possible out- comes to be pursued in the aftermath of violence (Laksono, Manuhutu), and the problem of ‘making the future’ in the context of the disavowed national historiography of the New Order (Henk Schulte Nordholt).

A focus of discussion was how thinking about the future necessarily implies a vantage point with respect to which not only the future – or a range of possi- nesses of globalization and the nation state’s redefinition within an increasingly internationalized world are matters of concern together with, more specifically, current revisions of the nation state project and related issues of sover- eignty, regional autonomy, and his- torical and political revisions. Amongst these more volatile issues, participants were asked to consider the kinds of imaginings, experiences, and ordinary and extraordinary events that have come to characterize the everyday across Indonesia since 1958.

References

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Anthropological Futures

By Patricia Spyer

A mong other issues raised, the confer- ence convenor addressed the need for new research agendas that can better address the complex social dynamics involved in post-act- erizing Indonesia since Suharto’s step-down. Are the same intellectual paradigms employed in research car- ried out under New Order conditions equally valid today, or did ‘the appear- ance of order’ – in John Pemberton’s felicitous formulation (Pemberton 1994) – put in place by the Suharto regime cause us to look in some direc- tions and not others? Has a new set of complex problems emerged which have only now become visible?

Along with the refuging of unfolding cir- cumstances, the legacy of the Suharto era and, equally important, that of the scholarship of the New Order can be explored from new perspectives. Amongst other issues, conference par- ticipants were invited to consider, in ret- rospect, the ramifications of legal restrictions and policies of the New Order with respect to media and labour, as well as the impact of the regime’s cultural policies on religion, ethics, and gender. The bankruptcy of the former regime’s historiography, the silences covering the massacres of 1965-66 and the New Order’s human rights record, and the relative paucity of scholarship regarding Islam and the country’s ethnic Chinese, seem espe- cially worthy of reconsideration. Issues of globalization and the nation state’s redefinition within an increasingly heterogeneous world are matters of concern together with, more specifically, current revisions of the nation state project and related issues of sover- eignty, regional autonomy, and his- torical and political revisions. Amongst these more volatile issues, participants were asked to consider the kinds of imaginings, experiences, and extraordinary and extraordinary events that have come to characterize the everyday across Indonesia since 1958.

Two films were screened at the conference. *Maiden of the Morning Star*, an episode on Papua from the TV docudrama series Library of the Children of the Archipelago, focuses on expectations for the future, in this frontier of the Indonesia nation state as seen through the eyes of a young Papuan schoolgirl. *Novel Without a Name* (1991) cannot be reduced to the heroic, ideal male stereotypes of Communist Party sile- lags, as Ursula Lies (University of Poitiers) demonstrates in her analysis. Yet that novel also conjures up a timeless, utopian kind of national identity that transcends the limits imposed by national boundaries, state structures, or gender differences. The role of the Sherlock Holmes-like detectives in the 19950s Sumatran novels discussed by Doris Jedamiski (workshop convenor) is similarly utopian, not only as an ideal- ized representation of masculinity and national identity, but also as she puts it, or as a representation of the quintessential Javanese nobleman brought back to life in the late colonial Dutch East Indies, but also as an endorsement of a desired, future state of absolute law and order. As represented in the Indonesian detective figure, the ‘real’ self is concealed behind the mysterious masks of a paternalistic superman who only ambiguously represents either an independent, modern self or the national citizen. This is reminiscent of Francisco Moret- ti’s and Umberto Eco’s claims that the detective fiction genre in the West negates individualism and freedom in the inter- 

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Following 32 years of Suharto’s New Order rule in Indonesia, the startling, occasionally marvellous, and all too often frightening developments of the last four years of Reformasi and its aftermath challenge us as scholars to consider the political-historical conjunctures in which we work and to think anew the ethnographic contexts of which we write. The nagging sense of crisis across the archipelago (with varied manifestations in different places), the recurrent political turmoil and communal violence, the novel experiences with democracy, civil institutions, and forms of publicity, the stubborn persistence of powerful forces opposed to change, the processes and by-products of decentralization, and, last but not least, the diverse negotiations by Indonesians of their positions within a post-9/11 global world order, all demand our urgent attention. The exploratory conference ‘Anthropological futures for twenty-first century Indonesia’ was convened with these interrelated purposes in mind.

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An anthropological focus on expectations for the future, in this frontier of the Indonesia nation state as seen through the eyes of a young Papuan schoolgirl.

Maiden of the Morning Star, an episode on Papua from the TV docudrama series Library of the Children of the Archipelago, focuses on expectations for the future.