ACADEMIC JOURNEY

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PENANG: TURNING POINT IN A LIFE TRANSLATING INDONESIAN AND MALAY LITERATURE

When I went up to the University of Sydney in 1959, my intention was to become a high school teacher of English and History. Towards the end of that first year, our History class received a visit from the lecturer in Malay, Dr. A.H. Hill, who talked about a new programme in Indonesian and Malayan Studies. I remember his visit, complete with batik cloths and wayang puppets, just as I remember the History lecturer’s counter-claim that he had “the head of Oliver Cromwell in a bottle–Oliver Cromwell as a boy”, that was. Indonesian and Malayan Studies seemed a fascinating new area to explore and I enrolled the next year. My seniors were Glenda Adams, later to be an important fiction writer, and Doug Miles, who conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Ngaju Dayak in Central Kalimantan and the Yao of Northern Thailand. Two of my classmates were to become leading scholars of classical Malay, Javanese and Balinese literatures: Peter Worsley, later professor of Indonesian Studies, at the University of Sydney, and Stuart Robson, head of Indonesian, Monash University. George Miller became the senior Asian Studies librarian at the Australian National University. Another fellow student was the poet, Les Murray, who favorably reviewed one of my first books, Contemporary Indonesian Poetry, in the Sydney Morning Herald (15 May 1975). From an Australian perspective, Malaya was somewhat familiar, part of the Empire and part of the memory of World War Two (Changi most of all). Indonesia was exotic but we were deeply aware that it was politically turbulent. The Indonesian communist
party was the third largest such party in the world and existed in an uneasy
tension with the army, a balance maintained for his own purposes by the
still charismatic President Sukarno. After 1963, Australia was also involved
in the “Confrontation” conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia and troops
from the British Commonwealth.

After finishing the Bachelor of Arts degree, I enrolled in the Diploma
of Education in 1962, still thinking about school teaching, but almost
immediately went back and did the Honours year in Indonesian and Malayan
Studies instead (writing a thesis on “The Hero in Malay and Indonesian
Literature”–classical Malay and modern Indonesian both). I enrolled again
in the Diploma of Education in 1963, and dropped out of that too when I
received a Commonwealth Scholarship to write a master’s thesis in Indonesian
literature about the playwright Utuy Tatang Sontani (1920-1979). Utuy Tatang
Sontani was an accidental Marxist, who lived in exile in Russia after the
1965 coup and, I’m glad to say, was grateful for my interest in his work. In
1965 I received the offer of a Commonwealth Scholarship, Malayan Award,
but by the time the offer finally came I had accepted a position at Monash
University in Melbourne and begun teaching courses in Indonesian literature.
I paid off my debt (my “bond”) to the NSW Department of Education, which
had subsidized my early studies, and went on to teach Indonesian and Malay
Studies courses at the tertiary level in Australia, Malaysia, the United States
and Indonesia, over the following half century.

In Indonesia, the term “Nusantara” includes Malaysia. In Malaysia,
“the Malay World” includes Indonesia. Because of the focus on Indonesia
and Malaysia in my early training, both countries have been important to
me throughout my career. I traveled to Malaysia (which included Singapore
at that time) in 1965 prior to taking up my position at Monash, which
helped in retrospect to see how different my life would have been had the
scholarship been offered earlier. I visited Indonesia in January 1967 as part
of a group organized by the University of New England. We toured from Bali
to Yogyakarta, then to Bandung where we had intensive language lessons
for several weeks at what was then the Bandung Teacher’s college (now the
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, UPI). Sukarno was still president but the
communist party and its perceived supporters had been viciously massacred;
Suharto was soon to come to power as the second president of Indonesia.
There was, of course, a lot of turmoil in the air but I don’t think we fully
realized how much. Indonesian literature was about to enter a period of new
growth with the emergence of the so-called “Generation of 1966”. I taught
for a semester at the University of Indonesia during 1970 and was able to
follow these developments closely through further regular visits to Jakarta, in particular, over the following years. Sooner or later, all writers must come to Jakarta, in my experience. Compared to my long periods in Malaysia, I always found that I was well served by short intensive visits to Indonesia for meeting writers and buying books, and have spent a frequent periods in the capital with visits to Yogyakarta and Bandung.

I left Monash in 1972 in order to take up an appointment teaching literature at the newly established Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. My research continued to focus on Indonesian literature, but I was able to develop a parallel interest in Malay literature. This was basically three years of total immersion in Malaysian culture and society, at a time when the lines between ethnic communities were not as absolute as they are today. In Penang I was distant from the capital but managed to attend major writers’ festivals such as Hari Sastera and the award of Hadiah Sastera. (On one such occasion I was talking with Adibah Amin when a senior figure approached us, and she quickly poured her brandy into my soft drink. In her next newspaper column, she described an eccentric foreign scholar who had spent the whole evening drinking brandy and dry–from a teacup!) I also met regularly with English language authors, such as Lloyd Fernando, Edwin Thumboo, Lee Kok Liang, Krishnan Jit, Chandran Nair and Muhammad Haji Salleh. Much later I spent two years in Kuala Lumpur as Writer in Residence at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990-1991, and completed my doctorate in Malay studies at the National University of Singapore, 1991-1999, on the Malay author Shahnon Ahmad, whose MA thesis I had supervised at USM.

In all, I have lived in Malaysia for a decade and spent fifty years reading its literature. To me, “Indonesia” refers to the nation and its institutions. But there are many regional cultures–Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese and so–where life is lived on a more intense, personal level. Malay is my regional culture and has provided a depth to my understanding of the nuances of the national Indonesian culture. It was beneficial that Malay and Indonesian felt to me for a long time to be variants of the same language. (The differences are no doubt more uncomfortable for first language speakers of these mother tongues.) Paradoxically, although Malay culture is fairly direct in its expression, the Indonesian nation and its institutions often appear to be highly rational and emotionally restrained. When we come to modern Indonesian literature, it happens, on the contrary, that a lot is very unreasonable and emotional. A knowledge of a regional culture like Malay helps to understand how writers justify their breaking the emotional expectations about being polite and respectful of other people’s feelings.
While I was teaching in Penang, I published my early translations of Indonesian literature, which I had already begun in Australia—Rendra’s *Ballads and Blues* (with Burton Raffel, 1974), *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry* (1975) and Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *A Heap of Ashes* (1975). In Penang, my commitment to translation became established. In my literature classes, we used my translations of Arifin C. Noer’s, *Moths* (1974), Iwan Simatupang’s *The Pilgrim* (1975), which received the first ASEAN Literary Award for the Novel in 1977, and *From Surabaya to Armageddon: Indonesian Short Stories* (1975). As well, I translated a second work by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Fugitive* (1975) and *Gestapu: Indonesian Short Stories on the Abortive Coup of 30th September 1965*—originally done for ISEAS in Singapore but, after they felt it to be too confronting, published in Hawaii. Beside my Indonesian works, I began to translate Malay literature, beginning with A. Ghafar Ibrahim’s *Tan Sri Bulan* (1973) and A. Samad Said’s *Salina* (1975), which I offered to do for Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka if they would publish *Moths*. It was a wonderful time to be a translator. The University of Queensland Press, Oxford University Press in Kuala Lumpur and Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), all had series for literature in translation from Asia and were eagerly looking for manuscripts to publish. Unfortunately, all of these series came to an end about the same time, in the mid-1980s.)

I have long treasured Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s extravagant remarks in her book *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, which describes her early life and education in Malacca and Kuala Lumpur, and her subsequent American experience in Massachusetts, New York and California, with only occasion visits to Malaysia and Singapore:

A visiting Australian professor, red-haired and red-skinned from the tropical sun, invited me to teach a creative writing course with him. A scholar of Indonesian literature, Harry addressed the students in fluent bahasa, for the national language of Indonesia came from the same Malay linguistic stock as the Malaysian national language. I had not used Bahasa Malaysia since studying it at the age of seventeen for the precollege examinations, so I lectured in English. It was another of those international cultural ironies that befuddle simple identity equations. Harry had just translated a collection of stories set in New York by an Indonesian writer. “If you could read this and check the American idioms,” he said, “I would be ever so grateful.” He had never been to Manhattan, had to guess at the speech of New Yorkers from old Hollywood movies, and thought of me as an American.
People were not always that kind. There was some opposition to my Indonesian translations, especially from critics who knew the Indonesian language well but had little appreciation of the subtleties of English. The translation of *Salina* was often criticized on purely visual grounds (it is a much bigger book in Malay). The rest of my translations from Malay—of Ishak Haji Muhammad, Keris Mas, Shahnon Ahmad, A Ghafer Ibrahim, Kemala, Anwar Ridhwan, Azizi Haji Abdullah, Siti Zainon Ismail, even other works by A Samad Said, for example—have provoked little comment at all.

From these first harvests, I have gone on to translate in all over 60 major works of Indonesian and Malay literature (25 from Malay), a few from Vietnamese authors writing in French, and several co-translations with people who knew Hindi. These translations, besides being immensely enjoyable to do, were above all my way of introducing the richness of their various cultures to the outside world, at a time when they were still largely unknown. I always believed that Indonesia and Malaysia (and Vietnam and India) were “part of the neighbourhood”, which we in Australia should understand better, rather than always looking to England or America or somewhere else overseas. In order to avoid debates that distract from culture and personal relationships, I have tried in my teaching to stay away from politics and again have been more concerned to present a positive image of Indonesia and Malaysia to the outside world. Nevertheless, I was briefly banned from entry to Indonesia in 1994, in part because of my translations of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. It was perhaps a professional hazard at the time; not to have been banned, in fact, potentially meant that one was naive about the complexity of life under the late New Order. Fortunately this ban did not last long and I was soon able to return to Indonesia to collect material for the anthology *Secrets Need Words: Indonesian Poetry 1966-1998* (2001), an anthology reflecting the ambiguity and complexity of literary responses to the New Order government.

Translation is a complex affair. The translator is not only dealing with words, and words never carry exactly the same meaning between different languages, but also with different cultures, different ideas about how people should behave and how the world works, and different expectations about what counts as literature and the ways in which good literature should be written. A work that is considered “beautiful” in Indonesian/Malay may be over-emotional and lacking in serious content for a reader used to emotional reserve and plain language in English. The appearance of my *Salina* had changed because I aimed it at a sophisticated English audience and reduced some of the most obvious Malay literary features: its length and repetitiveness. In my pre-emptive defense I wrote in the Translator’s Note that:
There are many ways of translating a piece of literature, ranging from the very literal (sentence by sentence and word by word) to the very free (Robert Lowell’s *Imitations*, for instance, are “reckless with literal meaning but labour hard to get the tone” of the originals). My aim generally has been to find a plain English style which would adequately reflect Samad Said’s plain colloquial Malay. As English relies perhaps more on understatement than Malay does, my English version is a little shorter than the original. Nothing essential has been omitted. The only words I have not translated are certain Indian words–exclamations, film and song titles, and the familiar word *kampung*, used for a village, a small urban community or a “neighbourhood”. (p. xiii)

Ultimately I had erred on the side of wanting to make a novel that would be acceptable to readers of literature in English. That was a mistake. The empire does not write back to the centre but to itself. This translation, and most of my other translations, have circulated exclusively within the ASEAN region. Readers in Southeast Asia were far more tolerant than my imagined English readers on whom I was hoping to make a good impression. They knew the objects that were unfamiliar in London, New York and Sydney (*cempadak*, *tosai*, *apom*, *nasi lemak*, *putu mayang* and *roti parata*); they did not find the titles of works of Malay literature melodramatic (*The Victim of Mount Kinabalu*, *Inspector Saruan*, *Fatimah the Servant Girl* and *Sacrificed by Her Own Innocence*, p. 195), even if Samad Said explicitly apologized for the “poor quality” of Malay literature; and they did not mind the range of language levels, some of which (the language of Indians and Chinese) I considered to carry racist connotations. Hawa Abdullah has justified the poor English of her 1991 translation by saying:

> But that’s the way we speak with each other. I translated the way it was meant to be. It may sound provincial and unsophisticated but the characters are simple folk, not in touch with “Queen’s English” so to speak. My exposure to the West and the first hand information I gained enabled me to see the various strata of society, the way they behave, the way they speak. For example, the way the Cockney speaks—we also have the “Cockney” group in Malay society if one cares to delve deeper.7

It is well-known that later translations of a work can take more risks than the first translation; today I think I would just translate everything and let the reader decide, especially if the translation was to be published in the region. Subagio Sastrowardoyo has expressed this challenge over moving between different languages, cultures, worldviews and literary systems clearly in his
poem “Nada Awal”, The first sound, from which the title of *Secrets Need Words* was drawn:

_Tugasku hanya menterjemah gerak daun yang bergantung di ranting yang letih. Rahasia membutuhkan kata yang terucap di puncak sepi. Ketika daun jatuh tak ada titik darah. Tapi di ruang kelam ada yang merasa kehilangan dan mengaduh pedih._

My task is to translate the movement of the leaves, hanging on tired branches. Secrets need words, spoken in silence. When a leaf falls, there is no blood. But in a dark room, someone feels grief and cries out in pain.

Many things are required for success as a good translator: “acumen as a critic, craftmanship as a poet, and skill in the analyzing and resolving of a confrontation of norms and conventions across linguistic and cultural barriers in the making of appropriate decisions”. And, of course, one needs good publishers: today the Lontar Foundation in Jakarta and the Institute Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia have replaced The University of Queensland Press, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), Oxford University Press. Except for a few outstanding writers, who have been “consecrated” by western sources–Pramoedya Ananta Toer, as a political prisoner and Noble Prize nominee for literature, for example–the interest in, and support for, Malay and Indonesian literature in translation still begins and ends in Malaysia and Indonesia.

My translations being in English have allowed Malay and Indonesian literature to be known more widely in the Southeast Asian region. (Dorothea Rosa Herliany’s *Kill the Radio* is the only book I have translated which has been republished in Europe). “You are our gateway to Indonesia,” someone once told me in the Philippines. None of my books have been published there, so I could only infer that photocopies circulated at that time. In an article from 2003, “‘Mistakes’ in Translation: A Functionalist Approach”, I distinguished between what I describe as “dumb mistakes” (foolish errors) and “deliberate mistakes” incurred when a translator specifically chooses to recreate the text in a way that seems to deviate from the literal surface meaning of the source text. No doubt I had my share of dumb mistakes (although “my percentage of errors is infinitely smaller than has been suggested”, as Burton Raffel, the first major translator of modern Indonesian literature, has pleaded), but my creative mistakes were always a source of quiet pride. A simple example is the last line of the poem “Asmaradana” by Goenawan Mohamad: “Lewat
remang dan kunang-kunang, kaulupakan wajahku, kulupakan wajahmu”

The hero is leaving his wife to face certain death in battle. Literally the line means: “Passing cloudy weather conditions and fireflies, you forget my face, I forget yours”. In Indonesian there is a relationship between “lupa”, to forget, and not “kunang-kunang”, fireflies, but the verb “kenang”, to remember. I therefore translated the line: “Passing cloud and embers, you forget my face, I forget yours”.

There are questions about how far “transcreation”, as it is sometimes called, can go. My translation of Iwan Simatupang’s Ziarah (1969, The Pilgrim), for example, begins with the sentences: “It was a day like any other day. He awoke feeling that he would meet his wife at a bend in the road…” The Indonesian reads: “Juga pagi itu dia bangun dengan rasa hari itu dia bakal bertemu isterinya di salah satu tikungan …”. Where does the first sentence of the English come from? It comes out of that small word juga. Juga means “also” and its position as the first word in the sentence, the first word in the novel, is quite extraordinary. It seemed to challenge me how to find an equivalent word or phrase of similar gravity. I didn’t pluck the sentence from nowhere. The title of Sebuah Radio Kumatikan: Kill the Radio idiomatically means “I turned off the radio”: the evocation of a sudden silence is powerful in Indonesian but turning off a radio is not very exciting in English. Literally “mati” does indeed mean “kill”, but the idiom is itself a dead one in Indonesian. It has always been clear that the new title instantly grabs the attention of potential readers, who are the people at whom the translation is aimed. As Raffel has insisted: “A translator, and above all a translator from a … little known language, does not translate for those who already know the language, those who can savor the original’s ways just as they have come down to us. Nor are his or her responsibilities conditioned by the existence of such fortunate people. His or her job is to interest and to educate, to please and to inform, the modern reader who knows not a word of the original tongue”.

Despite the criticism, I usually thought (not always, sometimes I felt very depressed) that what I was doing was important for the wider understanding of Indonesia and Malay society and kept translating. As Helen Waddell has observed in her wonderful book, Mediaeval Latin Lyrics: “One cannot say ‘I will translate’, any more than one can say ‘I will compose poetry’. In this minor art also, the wind blows where it lists”. Perhaps I am a better translator these days, perhaps I have lived longer than my enemies, but these judgmental attitudes are less of a problem now. I have regretfully come to accept that readers demand contradictory things from translations. One wit
has listed the twelve principles for a good translation: a translation must give
the words of the original; it must give the ideas of the original; it should read
like an original work; it should read like a translation; it should reflect the
style of the original; it should possess the style of the translator; it should
read as a contemporary of the original; it should read as a contemporary of
the translator; it may add or omit from the original; it may never add or omit
from the original; a translation of verse should be in prose; a translation of
verse should be in verse, etc.\textsuperscript{16} There is no perfect translation and no matter
how much I discuss and generalize about my problems, “my translator’s
side of the endless dialogue of writer and reader”, as Raffel says, “too many
people believe they do know how to read and evaluate translations—and are
in a position as critics and reviewers to proclaim their beliefs publicly”,
but they are “incredibly mistaken” (p. 103). Translation is a no-win game.
Perhaps that is why the Anugerah Pengembangan Sastera ESSO-Gapena
1991, the 1991 ESSO-Gapena Award for Literary Development, recognised
“jasa gigihnya dalam meluaskan pengertian terhadap sastera Melayu di
kalangan masyarakat antarabangsa”, my determined service in spreading
an understanding of Malay and Indonesian literature among international
society. (My fellow awardee was Adibah Amin.) Determined indeed. It
certainly wasn’t the money that kept me going.

I returned to Penang as a Visiting Professor in Translation Studies in
2004 and to the University of Indonesia in 2006 and 2007. I have also given
short courses in Yogyakarta (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2010) and Medan
(Universitas Sumatera Utara, 2006 and 2007). As a consequence of my long
involvement with Indonesia, I have been classified as an “Indonesianist”. The
term is often restricted to scholars of Indonesian politics and society. There
are, after all, a lot more of them. I see myself as an “Indonesianist” with an
interest in literature and translation. In Malaysia and Singapore, however, I
am more likely to be classified as an “expatriate”. The status of expatriate
does not greatly interest me. I have always sought to live in close contact
with Malay and Indonesian society and had little dealing with European
society in any of these countries. Perhaps speaking Indonesian/Malay was
an important factor in this local integration. I have taught and researched
in all three countries and my immediate environment has been that of local
university campuses. My friends were fellow teachers, students, and a broad
range of writers, who were most generous in their companionship. Indonesia
in particular is not an easy country to live in but the personal rewards have
been very great.
Away from the region, I continue to serve by supervising Indonesian and Malay doctoral candidates at Monash University and elsewhere in Melbourne, who are often having problems with their Anglo supervisors and the different cultural expectations of what knowledge is and how one expresses it. I have also regularly taught at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Ohio University, where my classes consisted of a mixture of Indonesian, Malay and American postgraduate students. American students ask the sort of questions that make Indonesian and Malay students themselves think more about their own culture—and reflect on what it is in American culture that has lead to those sorts of questions in the first place. In my classrooms, as it has been said, “cultures come together, languages are learned and works of literature are translated” (Maria Gallucci, Interview, Center for International Studies, Ohio University).

I am fairly self-contained as a scholar, but I move in a number of different worlds and am comfortable in doing so. “Home” is wherever I am, but ultimately it is Melbourne, Australia these days. I started learning Malay/Indonesian at Sydney University because Indonesia and Malaya were close to Australia. It was new and no one else was doing it. I could do new things in the exploration of literature (instead of writing the millionth essay on Shakespeare). I was ahead of the field because I began early and I enjoyed teaching. When I stopped for a brief period in the early eighties, no one else came along to do what I did, so I had to go back to doing it again and was happy to do so. I am still writing, teaching and translating.

My aunt, a staunch Anglican all her life, gave me a map of Borneo when I was eight years old. She may have hoped that I would be a missionary. I became a missionary of “Borneo” (Malay and Indonesian territory) to Australia instead. I am still attached to the region. As a reader and a writer, I am both an “insider” and “outsider”, someone who moves between different cultures and translates them, so that other people can understand them better. I know that I feel much closer to Malaysia and Indonesia than to Europe, which I have almost never visited.

I can sympathise with the idea of being a “global citizen,” but believe that those with experiences of other cultures must be able to share these experiences and insights with members of their own culture. Indonesia and Malaysia gain most value from me not when I think like an Malay or an Indonesian, but when I act like an Australian who knows and respects Indonesian and Malay culture and can present different and distinct perspectives on them—to Australians, Malays and Indonesians alike.
LIST OF MAJOR TRANSLATIONS FROM MALAY


NOTES
1 An earlier version of this paper was published in (ed.) C. Velde: Dragonflyers: Prominent Expatriates' Influential Roles in Indonesia (PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, Jakarta 2015), pp. 2015.
2 Unfortunately Dr. Hill died at the beginning of my second year of studies, in an air crash on his way to see Borobodur. He was replaced by Dr. Russell Jones, who taught also Malay and, in the interim, a number of Dutch teachers of Indonesian.
3 See Anthony Reid, “‘Alterity’ and ‘Reformism’: The Australian Frontier in Indonesian Studies”, Archipel 21, pp. 7-18, 1981.
7 Lalita Sinha, “Masa Silam Hadir dalam Masa Depan: Suatu Perspektif Berkisar terhadap
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Received: 10 September 2016
Accepted: 18 November 2016