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In memoriam Professor Poerbatjaraaka

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IN MEMORIAM PROFESSOR POERBATJARAKA

The Indonesian Journal of Cultural Studies ("Madjalah Ilmu-ilmu Sastra Indonesia"), vol. II, 1964, contains 26 articles written in honour of professor Poerbatjaraka, who in that year reached the age of eighty years. The volume is called: "Nomor Persembahan kepada Prof. Dr. R. M. Ng. Poerbatjaraka berhubungan dengan ulang tahun beliau ke-80, dari para murid beliau". He died in Djakarta in the same year.

It is fitting to commemorate this gifted Javanese scholar in the "Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde", to which he contributed many important articles on Javanese literature.

Poerbatjaraka was the son of an official of the Court of Surakarta, in Central Java. According to Javanese custom, gentlemen belonging to the Court were raised in rank periodically, and on these occasions they were given higher titles and sometimes new names. Poerbatjaraka’s father reached almost the highest rank in the hierarchy of Court officials: he became a tumënggung (in Dutch colonial parlance translated as “regent”). He was lastly known as Radên (a predicate) Tumënggung Purbadipura. The ending -dipura corresponds with the rank of tumënggung. The element Purba (from Sanskrit purva, i.e. first) refers to the group of Court officials to which the regent belonged.

Purbadipura was a favourite and confidential servant of King Paku Buwana X, serving him in a function comparable with a master of the robes, a barber and a private augur or divination doctor. Moreover the regent developed into a panegyrist, composing some poetical descriptions of the tours through all districts of Java which his Royal master liked to make. He was interested in Javanese literature. No doubt Purbadipura could be called a typical old-fashioned Javanese courtier, nourri dans le sérail.

As a matter of course, the regent’s sons entered the Royal service, as pages or in comparable functions, at an early age. They were not given a more extensive school education than was provided by the
“H.I.S.” the “Hollands-Indische School”, a primary school with a curriculum of about seven years, which comprised, beside the usual subjects, a study of the elements of Malay and Dutch. The daily contact with accomplished old-fashioned courtiers and life in the sphere of the Court left more lasting impressions in the mind of the boys than the rather superficial instruction in European culture they were given in school. Nevertheless the Dutch lessons stimulated their curiosity. It is recorded that the regent’s eldest son, Lésya, who afterwards was to be called Poerbatjaraka, sometimes visited the barracks of the Dutch body-guard to hold conversations with the soldiers off duty, who apparently took a pleasure in talking with the bright Javanese boy. Certain Dutch expressions which Poerbatjaraka sometimes used may have been reminiscences of his early contacts with guardsmen.

Lésya always had a love of reading. At an early age he learned to read the classical Javanese romances and epics, some of them in hand-written copies found in his father’s library. Special reading-matter for young people was not provided in old-fashioned households of the time. The beginning of Lésya’s studies in Old Javanese literature seems to have been his perusal of a Dutch book by the celebrated professor Hendrik Kern on a classical text. This book had been presented by a Dutch official to the King, and he, not being able to read it, had given it to his favourite regent Purbadipura, probably with an order to provide an explanation. So the book came into Lésya’s hands.

The lettered courtiers of the time used to have private meetings where literary questions were discussed. Mostly they were concerned with the explanation of difficult passages in Old Javanese poems. Lésya, Purbadipura’s son, was as a rule allowed to be present, but, as a young man of no importance, he was not expected to take part in the discussions of the pundits. At one time, however, his reading of the Dutch professor’s book gave him the clue to solve a difficult question in debate, and apparently he was so glad to have found the solution that he forgot himself so far as to offer his opinion without being asked to do so, contradicting his seniors. This was the cause of serious troubles.

Feeling that he was right in following the way shown by the Dutch book, Lésya began to feel unhappy in the sphere of the Court of Surakarta. He addressed a humble letter to the Dutch Resident, in his eyes the representative of European civilization, and he had the good fortune that this gentleman, being satisfied of the merits of Lésya’s case, established contact with the director of the Archeological Service in Batavia/Djakarta.
This resulted in an appointment in Batavia, which, in 1910, for a Javanese young man born in Surakarta, meant an emigration to a foreign country. In this period Lésya was given his official name Poerbatjaraka, which he always spelled in the Dutch manner. It is composed of the initial part of his father’s name, and tjara (caraka), which is the conclusion of ana-caraka, the name of the Javanese alphabet (called after the initial letters A N C R K). So the name Poerbatjaraka contains an allusion to literature. The predicate Raden and the official title ngabèhi (which is lower than tumënggung) may have been given also in this period. The distinctive predicate Mas (Raden Mas) was added afterwards.

In Batavia/Djakarta Poerbatjaraka was much consulted by members of the staff of the Archeological Service in matters where knowledge of Javanese literature was indispensable. He continued his reading of Old Javanese poems and began studying Sanskrit. After several years he was again given an opportunity to acquire more scholarly knowledge by an appointment as assistant to the professor of Javanese in Leiden, Dr Hazeu. He was commissioned to give lessons in modern Javanese to various classes of Dutch students. Meanwhile, though not in the possession of the required academic certificates (he had never sat for the statutory examinations), he was allowed, by way of exception, to obtain his doctor’s degree at the university of Leiden. His thesis was called “Agastya in den Archipel”. This was in 1926.

After his return to Java, Dr Poerbatjaraka was attached to the staff of the “Museum van het Koninklijk Bataviaas Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen” (now, Museum Nagara), and commissioned to make a catalogue of the Javanese manuscripts in the library. Now he was in his true sphere. It is improbable that any other scholar but Poerbatjaraka would have been able to cope with the huge task of inspecting the great number of Javanese manuscripts which had accumulated since almost a century. He found the time to write monographs on several groups of Javanese texts, providing them with Dutch summaries of the plots of the narratives, and extensive registers of names.

In the last period of his life, after 1942, Poerbatjaraka was a professor of Javanese in various universities: Gadjah Mada (Yogyakarta), Universitas Indonesia (Djakarta) and Udayana (Den Pasar, Bali). During the years of his retirement he lived in Djakarta. All these years he continued to contribute articles on philological and historical subjects to various journals, both in Indonesia and in The Netherlands. The results of his studies of Javanese literature, pursued for many years,
were collected in his book “Kapustakan Djawi” (bahasa Indonesia edition: “Kepustakaan Djawa”), published in 1952.

Poerbatjaraka was a gifted man, and he made the most of his talents. His diligence was unflagging till the end, as witness the list of his publications which is appended to this article. Therefore it was most appropriate that the “Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde” made him a honorary member in 1963. It was a satisfaction for his Dutch friends and colleagues that he appeared to value this mark of appreciation of his merits.

In Poerbatjaraka’s writings his innate feeling for the peculiar character of Javanese art and literature is always in evidence. He prided himself on being a “Solones” (a native of Solo, i.e. Surakarta), and in his behaviour and his works he often showed the peculiar sense of humour which, especially in Surakarta, is associated with the panakawans, the wise mentors, wizards, clowns and jesters, who have an important role in Javanese wayang plays. It is characterized by a broad-minded understanding of the frailties of humanity combined with a good-humoured ridicule, making fun also of the jester’s own aspirations and doings. The opinion that everything is but relative is preponderant in this philosophy. The jesters’ parts in the Javanese plays contain rather puerile pranks alternating with sayings which bear testimony to a profound insight in human nature.

There is some reason to suppose that Poerbatjaraka’s propensity to play a jester’s role was strengthened by his feeling of being a mediator between the old world of the Javanese Court, where he was born, and the modern sphere of European scholarship, which he entered by his own efforts. One of the characteristics of the Javanese jesters is their mediatorship between the groups which together constitute the cosmos and human society, according to ancient Javanese belief. Some utterances of Poerbatjaraka, recorded by Dutch friends, seem to intimate that he sometimes felt lonely, no longer at home in the world where he was born yet not perfectly accustomed to the European way of life.

From his training as a page at the Court of Surakarta Poerbatjaraka retained much of the behaviour of a Javanese gentleman of standing. He did not withdraw from the obligation of supporting his numerous relatives who had not risen in the world as high as he had done. At a mature age he married a lady who belonged to the Royal family of Yogyakarta. On account of this matrimonial connection he had a right to be considered a member of the Javanese nobility, to which he had learned to look up in his youth. His Dutch friends did not have the
impression, however, that this rise in rank in Javanese society gave Poerbatjaraka much satisfaction. Perhaps it came too late in life.

In philology and archeology Poerbatjaraka was an autodidact. His early works were criticized as being amateurish. His lack of scholarly accurateness was, in his mature age, compensated by the wealth of information on things Javanese in general, and on Javanese literature in particular, which was found in his books.

Poerbatjaraka lived in a period of transition. He was not a representative of the old class of literati, nor did he wholly belong to the modern westernized intelligentsia. He had some of the merits and deficiencies of both groups. His zeal for the promoting of Javanese studies made him respected among his compatriots, though the younger generation had no understanding for his particularities. Those of his Dutch contemporaries who understood the trend of the time were grateful for having the opportunity to know a remarkable man. Their sympathy may have been a consolation to him in the last year of his life.

The following bibliography of Poerbatjaraka's writings, though probably not complete, has been borrowed from the "Daftar karangkarangan Prof. Poerbatjaraka" by Sri Timoer (Lembaga Bahasa dan Kesusastraan, Dep. P.D.K., Djakarta), which was published in the "Nomor Persembahan" of Madjalah Ilmu-ilmu Sastra Indonesia, Vol. II, No. 2, of June 1964. The articles which Poerbatjaraka wrote in a Javanese literary journal of the late twenties, called "Kawi", are not mentioned in the list. "Kawi" did not endure for long.

TH. PIGEAUD

LIST OF THE WRITINGS OF PROFESSOR DR POERBATJARAKA,

"De naam van den Nâgarakrtâgama", Mededeling, T.B.G. vol. 56, p. 194.


1920 “Pararaton (Kên Arok), of het boek der Koningen van Toemapel en van Majapahit, 2de druk, bewerkt door N. J. Krom, met medewerking van Prof. Mr. Dr. J. C. G. Jonker, H. Kraemer en R. Ng. Poerbatjaraka”, Verhandelingen B.G., vol. 62.

1921 “De eerste twee strophen van zang 70 van de Nâgarakrtágama”, Oudh. Versl. p. 28-34.

“De inscriptie van het Mahâkṣobhya-beeld te Simpang (Soerabaja)”, B.K.I. vol. 78, p. 426-462.


“Arjuna-Wiwâha, tekst en vertaling”, B.K.I. vol. 82, p. 181-305.


“Het verraad van Salya”, Mededeling, T.B.G. vol. 72, p. 767-770.
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1933 “De Handschriftenverzameling”, Jaarboek K.B.G., vols 1-8, years 1933-1941.
“Enkele oude plaatsnamen besproken”, T.B.G. vol. 73, p. 514-520.


“Kapustakan Djawi”, Djambatan, Djakarta/Amsterdam, 171 p.
“Kepustakaan Djawa”, Djambatan, Djakarta/Amsterdam, 199 p.


"Sambutan", Penelitian Sedjarah, Djuni no 3, tahun 2, p. 4-6, 50.