H. Aveling

The fathers vision in Bukan Pasar Malam

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 131 (1975), no: 2/3, Leiden, 338-340

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

KORTE MEDEDELINGEN

R. ROOLVINK

A PUZZLING POINT IN THE MALAY ANNALS

In Wilkinson's Malay-English Dictionary we find entered under *paut*: umur kita telah pautlah, "my life is being torn away from me". This translation is unsatisfactory in view of the general meaning of *paut*, "catching on to anything, fastened, clinging", etc. The reference is to a passage in the Malay Annals which reads as follows: (Edition Teeuw-Situmorang, ch. 26.4, p. 203; Shellabear, OUP, Kuala Lumpur 1967, p. 179) Ketahui olehmu tuan2 sekalian, bahwa umur kita telah pautlah, ajal kita pun hampir rasanya. Raffles 18 (JRASMB, Vol. 16, Pt 3, p. 149) has an altogether different reading: Ketahui oleh tuan-tuan, umurku ini putuslah rasanya.

The correct or full *jawi* spelling of *paut* would be: p-alif-hamza-wau-t. However, the *jawi* editions of the *Sejarah Melayu* of both Klinkert and Shellabear spell what has been read as *paut*: f-alif-wau-t, = *fawat*, and this solves the problem: *fawat* is a (Malay) misspelling of Arabic *fawāt*, "passing by, passing away, gone", which to my knowledge is not found in Malay and apparently was misunderstood by a Malay copyist who made it into *paut*, a word familiar to him. The translation now becomes clear: "Know, gentlemen, that my span of life is (rapidly) running out and the moment of my death is near, so I feel".

HARRY AVELING

THE FATHER'S VISION IN *BUKAN PASAR MALAM*

Just before he dies, the father in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Bukan Pasar Malam*¹ becomes delirious. The narrator is summoned to the father's bedside by a younger sibling who says:

"Mas, bapak bicara tentang jagung. Aku tak mengerti. Bapak bicara juga tentang jagung yang ditembak. Aku tak mengerti, mas."²

(Brother, father is talking about corn. I can't understand what he's saying. He says too that the corn is being shot at. I can't understand, brother.)

¹ First published by Balai Pustaka, Jakarta 1951. All subsequent references are to the third printing, Jajasan Kebudayaan Sadar, Jakarta 1964.

² *Bukan Pasar Malam*, p. 86.

The father tries to describe what he sees in his delirium to the narrator. After turning to the east, the narrator is meant to see "*Sembilanpuluh sembilan butir jagung*", ninety-nine cobs of corn. The cobs are "*disayembarakan*", the object of a competition. Then:

*"Jagung itu ditembak dari sana . . . dari jurusan timur. Tapi tak sebutir pun di antara jagung yang sembilan puluh sembilan itu kena. Mengerti? . . . Tak ada yang kena, anakku. Itu adalah berkat kekuasaanNya. Mengerti?"*³

(The corn is being shot at from over there . . . from the east. Not one of the ninety-nine cobs is hit. Do you understand? Not one, my son. Because of the blessing of His power. Do you understand?)

The son does not really understand but he pretends to. The father then talks about his own youthful desire to be a nationalist, and his own willing self-sacrifice for the nation as a teacher.

I have never seen any explanation of what this 'vision' means. Possibly the critics agree with the narrator: they do not understand. The old man is raving. His speech is meaningless: there is nothing to understand. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that it is possible to find some meaning in what the old man sees. Hopefully, others interested in the Indonesian Revolution or Javanese mythology will be able to add to, or alter, my interpretation.

From the father's following remarks, I assume that the context of the vision is the Indonesian nationalist struggle against the Dutch, which preceded the Japanese Occupation and culminated in the Revolution of 1945 to 1949.

The vision has five elements:

- (a) the cobs of corn
- (b) the number ninety-nine
- (c) the competition
- (d) the east
- (e) the bullets fired at the corn.

Two, at least, of the elements can be explained in terms of the symbolism of the nationalist movement. The corn is a basic element in the prophecies of Joyoboyo as they were received at this time. To quote Prof. J. D. Legge: "Joyoboyo had prophesied that Java would be occupied by yellow-skinned conquerors who would stay for the lifetime of the maize plant. When the maize ripened and was ready for harvest the conquerors would leave and Java would be free."⁴ (The whole

³ *ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴ Sukarno, *A Political Biography* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1972), pp. 101-102. See also Bernhard Dahm: *Soekarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence* (Trans. Mary F. Somers Heidhues: Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1969), pp. 3-10, 217-221.

of the second section of Pramoedya's novel *Perburuan*⁵ is set in a field of ripe maize, on the evening before the 17th August 1945.)

The east can be found in the opening words of the prewar patriotic song which Pramoedya quotes in "Kemudian Lahirlah Dia", in *Tjerita Dari Blora*:

*Di timur matahari mulai bercaya
Bangun dan berdiri kita semua ...*⁶

(The sun in the east is beginning to shine. Let us rise and stand together ...)

The father sees the nationalist struggle come to fruition. But he also sees it being attacked. The number ninety-nine could well be an un-specific reference to the number of islands in the archipelago. The corn grows in the east, it is shot at from the east. In terms of Pramoedya's book there are a number of possible betrayers of the nationalist struggle. The most obvious, and associated with the symbol of the rising sun, were the Japanese. The defeat of the Japanese by the Allied forces also began in the east of the archipelago. The shooting, might, then, refer to all foreign armies — American, Australian, Dutch and Japanese — who seemed to threaten Indonesian independence as they apparently fought for supremacy in the archipelago.⁷

Within *Bukan Pasar Malam* it is also clear that the Revolution has been betrayed by "clowns" (*badut*) who have profited from the struggle and falsified its ideals. The son is told that the father's illness has been aggravated because, as a teacher, he has no access to proper medical treatment.⁸ (Prof. A. Teeuw has noted that at the end of 1950 Pramoedya wrote of a fairly general feeling in Indonesia that the Revolution had been a failure.⁹) The son feels the failure of the Revolution and introduces an awkward chorus figure in the last chapter to "explain" that it was the father's disappointment with the new Republic which has led to the illness and subsequent death of the father. But in the father's vision not one cob of corn is hit by the bullets. He dies believing that the Revolution is stronger than those who try to betray it, and that this is due to God.¹⁰

Pramoedya has avoided making this optimistic attitude the climax of the story by the drastic step of making the father's vision almost incomprehensible.

Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang

⁵ First published by Balai Pustaka, Jakarta 1950.

⁶ *Tjerita Dari Blora* (Balai Pustaka, Jakarta 1952), p. 93.

⁷ I am grateful to the editorial board of *Bijdragen* for this suggestion.

⁸ *Bukan Pasar Malam*, p. 66.

⁹ *Modern Indonesian Literature* (M. Nijhoff, The Hague 1967), p. 137.

¹⁰ Compare A. H. Johns: "Pramudya Ananta Tur: The Writer as Outsider, An Indonesian Example", *Meanjin Quarterly*, Part 4 1963, p. 356: "The new Republic has failed both the author and his father who devoted his life to its realization". The Revolution may have failed the father, but he does not admit this in his vision.