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Obituary

In memoriam Benedict Anderson

Kunming, Yunnan, 26 August 1936 – Batu, East Java, 13 December 2015



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The play of language, literature, and culture

Thursday, 10 December 2015. Students, lecturers, journalists, and guests from Jakarta and other cities braced heavy rain to squeeze into the crowded auditorium of Building IX, the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia (FIBUI). That afternoon the long due Indonesian translation of Benedict Anderson's *Under three*

Photograph by: The Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, 2015

flags; Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination (2005) was launched.¹ It was a special event, not only because it was held as part of a series of event celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Faculty of Humanities, but because the author, Benedict ROG Anderson, was there in person to give a public lecture entitled "Anarchism and Nationalism". Every time he came to visit, after the Indonesian government finally allowed him to enter the country in 2001, Ben Anderson – or Pak Ben – as he was called by his Indonesian friends – was sure to draw crowds. That day the organizer had to move the event from the Faculty's newly refurbished, soundproof auditorium in Building I to a more spacious theatre in the student centre area to accommodate the unexpected number of guests. Some stray guests came late, looking for the new venue.

For about half an hour, the voice of the gamelan orchestra playing in the back of the auditorium seeped into the stage where Pak Ben was speaking. Wearing a black T-shirt with the word *NGEEE!!!* in gold across the chest, Pak

¹ References to this book is based on the Indonesian translation, Benedict Anderson, *Di bawah tiga bendera; Anarkisme global dan imajinasi antikolonial* (Translated by Ronny Agustinus, 2015), Jakarta, Marjin Kiri.

Ben stood on the podium, unperturbed. Before starting his speech, the 79 year old professor stepped down beside the podium, put his hands on his hips, and growled, "Ngeeee!". After completing this small act, he started his lecture on global anarchism, which was symbolized by that curious sound of what he identified as a baby's anger and frustrated scream. The unceremonious atmosphere in the student theatre, with more than 400 audiences, was more fitting for Ben Anderson's "anarchic" style. He was relaxed and speaking at his own pace. Looking a bit tired that afternoon, he spoke rather slow and heavy, a number of times taking time to read closely some quotes from a thick notebook that almost covered his face from the audience. Yet he never lost enthusiasm and his dry humour, and a number of times his growl "Ngeeee!!!" competed with the thunderous rain that now and then interrupted his speech.

In that way he outlined the history of global anarchism in Europe in the mid nineteenth century and discussed its relevance today. He pointed out that when state violence, oppressive bureaucracy and injustice in global capitalism were still rampant, anarchism was bound to be alive. At the same time nationalism, that was initially a movement against injustice, could turn into an oppressive machine against the people.

Later, during the question and answer session, Hendro Sangkoyo, one of his Cornellian students who was present at the lecture, observed that Pak Ben was unusually patient in answering students' questions, dropping much of his usual cynicism aside. Explaining what "good nationalism" should be, Pak Ben gave an example of his feeling as a school age child towards his mother, who made him embarrassed with her pestering about food and other things: ashamed, yet realizing that one cannot be separated from her. To keep this sense of shame towards one's own country, according Pak Ben, was crucial for a healthy nationalism.

The event was closed with a book signing session, with hundreds of students lining up, bringing with them not only one book, but two or three for friends. For each of them Pak Ben wrote their names, making sure he got the spelling correct before signing. It took more than one hour for the queue. Physically exhausted, Pak Ben stayed on until the last book he had to sign, beaming.

That was Pak Ben's last public lecture. Two and half days afterwards, on Thursday, 13 December, 11.00 pm, Benedict ROG Anderson, the author of the classical book on nationalism, *Imagined communities; Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (1983) passed away in his sleep in Batu, a mountain resort, south of Surabaya, after visiting his favourite Hindu temple in the neighbouring area. Many of his colleagues believed that Ben Anderson's final journey was not a coincidence. He died in the country where he spent most of his studies about, amongst the people that he cared most, his adopted children, the young generation he liked to share his knowledge with.

The final lecture in the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, was also like a roundup of Benedict Anderson's intellectual journey. As a scholar, Benedict Anderson, who was born in Kunming, China, on 26 August 1936,

began by studying the classics in Cambridge in 1957. Language and literature were always at the heart and foundation of his critical works. Pak Ben had shown that the best way to study a culture was to master its language. This is a feat of a Southeast Asianist that none of his students could hardly catch up: a polyglot, he spoke and read Javanese, Indonesian, Thai, and Tagalog – besides some European languages French, Dutch, English, and Spanish. He started studying Javanese and Indonesian during his studies in Cornell and during his field work in Yogyakarta; and later when he was banned from entering Indonesia in 1972 (upon the publication of Cornell Papers on 1965 events), he spent his time studying Thai, Tagalog, and Spanish.

The fruit of this hard work was the publication of his English translation of modern Thai short stories, *In the mirror, literature and politics in Siam in the American Era* (with Ruchira Mendiones, Bangkok, Duang Kamol, 1985). In the 78 paged long introduction – he was known for the habit of writing long, comprehensive introduction – he showed his knack of discovering an important subject matter through his selection of 13 Thai short stories written in the years 1967–1979. These were stories published in the so called “American era”, when Thailand served as a Southeast Asian bastion for the US anti-communist cold war policy. Contextualizing this era within the history of Thailand, he showed how the writers, raised in this period of developmentalism and exposed to Americanism through the urban centres, were highly critical and used a social realist mode to depict bitter and tragic human conditions. These 13 stories are not just a translation, but a historical and political commentary. Ben Anderson as a translator was also true to himself in his meticulous footnoting of his translations, explaining local metaphors, cultural context and connotations that his readers might miss. He would take pains to explain why he would translate some words in certain ways to “give some feeling for the humorous, nonsensical, and alliterative character of the original Thai” (Anderson and Mendiones 1985: 144).

Ben Anderson’s entry into culture through a sensitivity towards language and its layers of textual meaning and nuances, coupled with his encyclopaedic knowledge of world literature is displayed in *Under three flags* that was launched at the FIBUI. In this book Ben performed a task that he had put in good use in his book on a mysterious Chinese Malay writer with the pen name of Tjamboek Berdoeri, a literary detective. Employing intertextual and historical method akin to what literary scholars called new historicism, *Under three flags* maps the network of influences, historical context, conditions, and intertextual references of the Filipino author/national hero Jose Rizal (1861–1896). It is an unending, comprehensive catalogues of Rizal’s library, books and authors he might have read (from Goethe, Dickens, Douwes Dekker, and especially French novels) or met, his letters and correspondences, events he might have heard or known between 1882 and 1891. By tracing Rizal’s writing and reading history, Ben inadvertently reconstructed not only Rizal’s world but also world history at the turn of the century. This is a strategic method, as Rizal’s life and connections stretched across the globe, from the Philippines

to Europe, the Americas and Asia.

In reading Rizal, Ben Anderson employs a technique of reading against the grain, by choosing, instead of Rizal's most well-known book *Noli Me Tangere*, a lesser known one called *El Filibusterismo* (1891). If the first one is a "Filipino novel", the second one, according to Ben, is a "global novel," one that connects the Philippines to "Egypt, Poland, Peru, Germany, Russia, Cuba, Persia, Sri Lanka, Moluccas, Libya, France, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Portuguese, Canton, and Constantinople" (Anderson 2015: 82). The way *Under three flags* starts not directly with Rizal but with Isabelo, an anthropologist and folklorist, is also telling of Ben's against the grain reading. This is an interpretative method he claimed to have learned from filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, the montage maestro. There is no documentation that Rizal and Isabelo have met or that Rizal has read Isabelo's work. The juxtaposition of incidental connections like this creates new possibilities of meaning. Isabelo's work of Filipino's folklore might have nothing to do with Rizal's global novel, but their different anti-colonial strategy is the focus of Ben's comparison. Isabelo's folklore critiques European empire indirectly by speaking to them in their language and professional jargons, and showing them the affinity of "absurd" Ilocano's superstitions to Spanish's and Portuguese's local beliefs. Rizal's novel, on the other hand, is an artist's individual struggle with the colonial spectres. Towards the end of the book, Ben juxtaposes Rizal with another younger compatriot, Mariano Ponce, a nationalist activist, whose letters and travels connect Manila to the global Filipino diaspora and revolutionary friends, among others in Japan, Spain, Cuba, America, Hong Kong, Mexico, Macao, and Singapore.

Through this "montage" of juxtapositions, the book connects anti-colonial struggle in the Philippines with anarchist movement all over the globe, which he crystallizes in the final chapter. Another speculative hermeneutics that the book demonstrates is the way certain "mysterious" choice of words, is traced through possible references in global and local context, indicating possible reading influences – with a range of possibilities that might appear quite bizarre and unconnected. One has to note that this linguistic detective work of scrutinizing diction, and change of tenses – is done on texts written in various languages used by the writers – Tagalog, Spanish, French, and German. In this aspect, Ben Anderson's work can be seen as a literary feat, and an interpretive art in itself.

Ben did a literary detective scholarship, researching who the real author behind this mysterious journalist by the name of Tjamboek Berdoeri. This journalist wrote a reportage of the Chinese massacre in the outskirts of Malang, East Java, during the political vacuum during the revolution, when the Dutch with the help of the allies tried to recapture Indonesia in 1947. The calm and objective way this Chinese journalist described the horror, attributing the atrocity to opportunists and criminals instead of lamenting general racism against the Chinese during the revolution, impressed Ben Anderson. Returning to Indonesia in 1999, Ben conducted a research in East Java, mostly

in Surabaya and Malang, where the journalist resided, and finally discovered the identity of this journalist as Kwee Thiam Tjing. He then published the report on the massacre (*Indonesia dalam Api dan Bara*, 2004) and later his memoir (*Menjadi Tjamboek Berdoeri*, 2010). Most of all, however, Ben Anderson fell in love with the hybrid, fluid and playful Chinese Malay language used by the journalist. This mixture of low Malay with scattered diction borrowed from Hokkien, Dutch, English, and local languages (Javanese, Sundanese, depending on the locality) was in fact the colloquial language of ordinary people and popular literature in the ex-Dutch colony until the New Order government purged and standardized Indonesian language. When in 1972 the government issued the new improved spelling (EYD), Ben Anderson, in opposition to the government's effort in controlling language, opted to use the older spelling. Not only that, he preferred Opa Kwee's colloquial, hybrid, wild and unregulated East Javanese Malay than the standardized, formal Bahasa Indonesia.

From learning proper Javanese in Yogyakarta in 1970s, Ben Anderson found his linguistic home in the egalitarian Surabaya, a place for his funeral home in December 2015, before his ashes was scattered in the Java sea. Yet, actually, with his public lecture on global anarchism and nationalism at the Faculty of Humanities, UI, he had come full circle. Under all the play with language and literature was this urgency to keep a critical (read: rebellious) spirit alive against dominant forces, be it an authoritarian state, oppressive ideology or global neoliberalism. From his sympathy for Rizal, for the Thai anti-American writers, for Tjamboek Berdoeri to his stand against the 1965 communist cleansing and 1999 Dili massacre this alignment with the marginalized remained unwavering.

He had a heart for the underdogs. This was what came across strongly in his lecture that day. Amongst hundreds of students lining up for his signature was a first year undergrad who had never known him nor read his works. It was hard for her to follow what he had been saying about global anarchism, but she understood one thing. When she came up to him, she introduced herself and told him that she was impressed by what he had said and asked, whether she could quote some of what he had said for her science-fiction story and make him one of her characters. Amused, he asked her what kind of character, as he was grey, and using a walking stick. "Yes, precisely that." Said the girl innocently. Of course, he did not mind.

The night after I heard of Ben Anderson's death, the student sent me her short story called "Ombenji." It was about a planet called Sparkle where all kinds of creatures of multiple genders lived. Everything in the planet was clone-able, except for a one and only strange animal called Ombenji. It was a slothlike old creature that swung from tree to tree and made the sound "Ngeeee!!". The creature could speak many languages and although sluggish, could travel places in no time. The story focused on a scared little boy who got lost in the forest, and fell into the hands of bullies. This boy was eventually saved by this Ombenji creature, who cuddled him to sleep in a cave in the

depth of the forest. The Ombenji creature encouraged the boy to be strong and not to be afraid to face the bullies. Upon waking up, the boy discovered that the Ombenji creature was gone, but left him a gift to get on with his life.

In her own naive way, this undergraduate student grasped the essence of what Ben Anderson stood for, politically and intellectually. As scholar, thinker, activist, Ben Anderson indeed cannot be cloned. He was a product of an age that was now passing. But his works and thoughts would stay and be relevant for many generations to come, to be appropriated and used in different ways.

Thank you for honouring the FIBUI with your memorable, final lecture. *Selamat jalan, Pak Ben.*

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