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## In memoriam Sitor Situmorang

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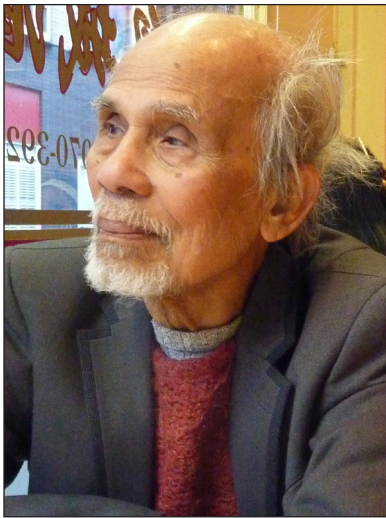
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## Obituary

*In memoriam Sitor Situmorang*

*Harianboho, Samosir, 2 October 1924 – Apeldoorn, 20 December 2014*



Photograph by Barbara Brouwer (2013).

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On 27 December 2014, in the course of a cold and windy Saturday afternoon, the mortuary of Amsterdam Schiphol Airport filled with friends of Sitor Situmorang to farewell the poet who would be flown back to the land of his forbears, the Sumatran region of Toba Batak. Seven days before, at 9.30 p.m., he had peacefully died in the city of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, his wife Barbara Brouwer and his son Leonard on his side. Just a few months earlier, on 2 October, Sitor had attained the age of ninety, but his last few years were marked by a crepuscular state of mind preceding death. Up until the beginning

of the new millennium, Sitor had still been writing poems. In 1998 he wrote “Tatahan pesan bunda” (Chiselled message for mother):

When my end is there  
bury me in the land of the Toba  
in the coastal region of the mighty lake  
stretched out alongside Mother

When my end has come  
don't lay a tombstone on my grave  
but a slab unearthed from the soil  
without carvings without decorations

except for the most sacred message  
Mother's blessing chiselled in stone:  
the Lost Son has come back!  
I meet him in my lap!

The theme of the Lost Son (“Si Anak Hilang”) has appeared time and again in Sitor’s poetry, first of all in *Dalam sajak* (1955). This Lost Son was not the biblical Prodigal Son who returned home repentant after having lived a wasteful life for a number of years. Sitor’s only “sin”, if you could call it that, was his eagerness to explore the world beyond Lake Toba, North Sumatra. Born on the island of Samosir, at the edge of the lake, Sitor was the son of Ompu Babiati (1850-1963), the imposing chief of a Batak clan which, while having converted to Christianity, still maintained its ancestral traditions. In 1908, Ompu Babiati had signed a peace treaty with the Dutch, a year after his brother-in-law King Si Singamangaraja XII had fallen in battle. In his partial autobiography *Sitor Situmorang seorang sastrawan 45* (1981), Sitor relates how he had to leave Samosir at the age of six to be educated at an elementary school in Balige where Dutch was the language of instruction. From Balige he went to Sibolga and from there to several other cities to complete his education. In 1945 he became a journalist, at first in Sibolga, then in Medan for the daily *Waspada*, which sent him to Java as its correspondent on the Indonesian Revolution. It was in Java that his literary interest germinated. Living in Yogyakarta, he occasionally went on assignments to Jakarta, where Chairil Anwar stimulated him to write. In 1948, Sitor published his first poem in the journal *Siasat*, taking his place among the Generation of ‘45, according to John McGlynn a “loose group of anxious artists who came of age during the Japanese occupation and the Revolution [...] iconoclastic, vibrant thinkers, uprooted from their place of birth, open to the world, obsessed with the idea that everything should be different.” In 1948 he was arrested by NEFIS (Netherlands East Indies Forces Intelligence Service) and kept in Wirogunan prison until 1949.

In 1950, Sitor, who had since married and already had three children at that time, was invited by Sticusa – the Dutch foundation for cultural cooperation between the Netherlands and its former colonies – to work at its Amsterdam desk. In the period 1951-1955 he came into his own as a writer, publishing his first volume of poetry, *Surat kertas hijau* (Green paper letters) in 1953, followed in 1955 by two voluminous collections: *Dalam sajak* (In rhyme) and *Wajah tak bernama* (Anonymous faces). In those first three volumes, various themes come to the fore: the desire of the wanderer who wants to explore the world, feelings of guilt about the alienation from his own culture, and finally the solitude of an anonymous existence in the big city. In 1952, Sitor went to Paris, where he stayed for two years working as a locally employed official of the Indonesian Embassy. As a writer, he underwent the influence of the existentialists, and just like them he focused on the individual being in his concrete situation on earth. In his poems he often identifies with lost souls, for instance with a man who jumped from the Eiffel Tower. In the form of his poems he was influenced by the surrealism of Paul Eluard and by the way in which Federico Garcia Lorca experimented with traditional forms of poetry such as the ballad. In some of Sitor’s poems, the underlying structure of the *pantun* is evident, and to Muhammad Haji Salleh his language often has the soft glow of classical Malay, like in the verse of Amir Hamzah and Sanusi Pane.

Sitor did not only write poems, he was also active as a translator (of among others John Wyndham, Dorothy Sayers, Rimbaud, Tagore, Hoornik, and Du Perron), as a short story writer (*Pertempuran dan salju di Paris*, 'Combat and snow in Paris', 1956) and as a writer of essays. In his essays he expounds the solitary position of modern man, being the creator of his own world, facing the cosmos, but the price he has to pay for his freedom and self-consciousness is a feeling of alienation, doubt and loss. This can be likened to the theme of André Malraux' concept of the "human condition": the awareness of the existential limits the human being encounters. Another theme in Sitor's essays is the concept of *iseng* or *ennui*, which, as defined by him, is the inability to connect with the world around you.

In a more positive interpretation of his isolated position, Sitor has called three worlds or checkpoints his own: his ethnic Batak background, Indonesian national life (which he called his base), and the international world at large.

In the fifties, Sitor was also involved with film and drama. In 1950, Usmar Ismail directed the film *Darah dan doa* (Blood and prayer) about the long march of the Siliwangi Division during the Revolution. This film was based on a script written by Sitor Situmorang in collaboration with the director. In 1954, Sitor published a collection of plays, *Jalan Mutiara* (Road of Pearls), written in the same realistic register as his short stories. In 1955, he was member of the jury at a film festival in Singapore, and in 1956 he received a Rockefeller grant to study cinematography and drama in Los Angeles (University of Southern California) and New York (The Actors Studio). While in New York, he made the acquaintance of Langston Hughes (1902-1967), a prominent black American poet born in Harlem, New York. Attempting to look at the USA without prejudice, Sitor was nevertheless appalled by its rampant racism.

There are two sides to Sitor as a writer: the inward looking side of the solitary poet and the outward looking side of political involvement and solidarity with the poor. In this period of Indonesian history, politics were considered to be in charge (*Politik sebagai panglima*). In accordance with this ideology, Sitor was of the opinion that writers should not live in an ivory tower but become actively involved in social development. In 1956, at a PNI congress, he gave a speech about *Marhaenisme dan kebudayaan Indonesia* (Marhaenism and Indonesian civilisation), which subsequently was published. In the same year Sitor published *Menentukan sikap* (Establishing an attitude), his translation of essays of E. du Perron, who was convinced that writers should take a moral stance. Sitor became politically active, as president of the PNI-linked Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional (LKN), as a spokesman for Soekarno's Manifesto Politik and in April 1961 as a delegate to the Afro-Asian writers' conference in Tokyo, attended by authors from eighteen countries. After this conference he was invited by the Chinese writers association to visit the People's Republic of China. This visit inspired his first poetry publication after a long period of silence, *Zaman baru* (A new era, 1962), a volume of poetry full of slogans and praise of the progressive nations in a time of nuclear threat. Yet it also contained musings about love and wanderlust.

In 1965, Sitor published a collection of essays about the development of art and literature, *Sastra revolusioner* (Revolutionary literature). Because of this book he was arrested in January 1966 and without any trial incarcerated in Salemba prison, where he was to remain until 1975. This period of nine years is the theme of his poem "In-communicado", in which the focal point is the prisoner's relation to the warder, a civilian keeping watch over another civilian while civil war is raging:

Outside is civil war  
History counts victims  
and dreams.

Between the informant and myself  
is but the candle light  
and a yawning gap  
between God  
and the first man. [Translation by John McGlynn.]

Sitor's release from prison was followed by house and city arrest until 1977. In 1978, he went on a trip to Bali, which, in his own words, had the significance of a "journey of spiritual refreshment". He associated with foreign travellers, this "brotherhood of wanderers", and met Barbara Brouwer, whom he was to marry later. In September 1978, in one gush, he wrote *The rites of the Bali Aga*, a volume of poetry directly written in English, a feast of body, mind and senses, described by himself as an "unending tantric ritual". This volume had been preceded by *Dinding waktu* (Wall of time, 1976), containing poems from the early fifties and written during Sitor's imprisonment, and *Peta perjalanan* (Travel guide, 1977), written after his release from prison. From the year 1975, the mysticism which had always been present in Sitor's work is strengthened. His poems become more than ever the expression of a personal quest for the deeper undercurrents of life.

After his Balinese trip, Sitor visited his ancestral Batak region, where he underwent a purification ritual in order to restore the cosmic harmony as represented by the clan. This ritual – Sitor carrying his grandfather's skull on a plate – fascinated V.S. Naipaul when he interviewed him for his book *Among the believers* (1981). It struck Naipaul that Sitor, whose life had been "distorted by politics and imprisonment" had "achieved calm, a restful, reassuring man". The Lost Son had restored his relationship with his clan, and being a Lost Father himself, he re-established his relationship with his six children from his marriage to his first wife Tio Minar Gultom.

In 1981, Sitor and Barbara Brouwer, whom he had married in November 1977, moved to the Netherlands, settling in The Hague. Sitor became a lecturer at the Indonesian Department of the University of Leiden until his retirement in 1989. In 1982, I myself became a lecturer at the Dutch Department of the University of Indonesia. In Jakarta bookstores I noticed Sitor's latest volume of poetry, *Angin danau* (Wind over the lake), with its attractive cover showing

a huge lake at the foot of bluish mountains. Intrigued by this image, I began to read the poems, becoming impressed by the way in which Batak nature was evoked. Just like Walt Whitman, in his rhapsodic and passionate verse, sang a song of himself as a universal mythical personality, celebrating his bond with the primordial force of nature, likewise Sitor devotes a hymn, not to himself, but to his native region. In "Dunia Leluhur" (World of the Ancestors), the magical force of nature is called forth in an obsessive manner:

The forest turns into shadows  
of ancestral spirits  
who enter the body.

I translated some poems and after a few years I visited Sitor in The Hague to discuss my translations. I asked him how he enjoyed living in the Netherlands. I will never forget his answer: "Well, you know, it's a consumer's society over here". Living in a relatively wealthy western country, Sitor maintained his focus as an Indonesian nationalist in his solidarity with the common people and as a poet in his quest for meaning.

Sitor's later poems are mostly written in a seemingly easy *parlando* style. They often start out with a philosophical reflection, called forth by a natural image. This reflection may result in a consciousness of the life cycle, such as in the poem "Tatahan pesan bunda", which I cited at the beginning of this obituary. Some of his later poems are homage to the Sumatran Sufi poet Hamzah Fansuri, who lived in the second half of the sixteenth century. The poet is still essentially solitary, but he revives time and again due to the magical animation of his language:

I am the mystical bird  
feathered with wind.

the primordial fish  
whose fins are the sea.

Sitor remained a wanderer, following his wife Barbara to Islamabad (1991-1995) and Paris (1995-2001), where she worked at Dutch Embassies. But wherever he lives, a poet's residence consists of his poems; he can find his inspiration anywhere. After a few years of living in Jakarta, Sitor and Barbara returned to the Netherlands, where they settled in the quiet town of Apeldoorn.

Three anthologies of Sitor's poetry were published with Dutch, English, and French translations. In 1989, a major Indonesian anthology of Sitor's poems came out edited by Pamusuk Eneste. January 2006 saw the first edition of his collected poetry, in two big volumes edited by J.J. Rizal (Komunitas Bambu), which underlined the importance of Sitor Situmorang as one of the best poets of the Generation of '45. Small collections of short stories had come out in 1981 and 2003, but notable are two books of anthropological research, which both were published in 1993: *Toba Na Sae* (Sinar Harapan) and *Guru Sumalaing dan*

*Modigliani "Utusan Raja Rom"* (Grafindo Mukti). In these books, Sitor sheds an entirely new light on pre-colonial Batak Toba society, which had been much more structured and organised than was believed by foreign researchers. Both books were republished in one volume by Komunitas Bambu. In the same year, 2009, Sitor's 85th Birthday was celebrated with a collection of essays on his work, *Menimbang Sitor Situmorang* (Weighing Sitor Situmorang). A year before, in the Paris museum of Quai Branly ("where the cultures enter into dialogue"), I enjoyed the privilege of visiting in off hours an exhibition on the Batak, in the company of Sitor, Barbara, and Constance de Monbrison, who had put the exhibit together. It was a memorable tour, during which Sitor impressed us with his knowledge of the objects displayed, including their meaningful details and hidden symbols.

After a lifetime of wandering, of exploring the world, Sitor Situmorang has returned to the "immortal valley" of his native soil, "rocked by Time". No longer rocked by time himself, he has found peace among his ancestors.