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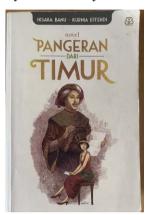
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Ada Apa dengan Raden Saleh [What's up with Raden Saleh]? *Pangeran dari Timur* – A Review, A Novel by Iksaka Banu & Kurnia Effendi, Bentang Pustaka, 2020, 604 pages, 5 illustrations Novel Historical Fiction, ISBN: 978-602-291-675-8

# Synopsis: Based on the description on the back cover of the book edited by Peter Carey



Raden Saleh (circa 1811-1880) was still a teenager when he was separated from his family in Terboyo, Semarang, in early 1829 as the Java War (1825-30) entered its final year. Colonial officials, including the German missionary, JFC Gericke (1798-1857), had early on discerned the young Sarib Saleh's artistic talent. Trained by the Belgian painter-architect, AAJ Payen (1792-1853), in Bogor and West Java in the early to mid 1820s, he was chosen to accompany the Belgian Director of Finances, Jean-Baptiste de Linge, on the lengthy 10,000 nautical mile journey to the Netherlands, a country he had only heard about through the stories

told him by his family in Terboyo and educated Javanese. In Europe, first the Netherlands, then Dresden (Germany) and finally Paris, Saleh mixed with leading European artists and developed his own unique artistic genius. He showed that he could paint not only the lush landscapes of his native Java, but also the faces and events of the Romantic era (1800-1850) in Europe.

Years of living on the other side of the world meant that, when he did eventually return to his homeland in early 1852, he found a land transformed by the indigo and sugar factories of the Cultivation System (1830-1870). Despite his initial feelings of alienation, he still could not deny his calling to depict the beauty of his native Java on canvas. As he explained in the introduction to his now lost 1849 "Memoirs" written in Maxen (Saxony): "Between these two poles [Europe and Java] my life is divided [and] I feel compelled to make both a sacrificial offering of grateful love. I believe there is no better way of doing this than by telling my friends [in Europe] about the simple customs and happiness of the people amongst whom I was born, and by painting my loved ones at home a picture of the wonders of Europe and of the majestic dignity of human intellect. The language I speak is not the pompous language of [...] science but the simple childish speech of the heart" (Kraus and Vogelsang 2012:25). Although Saleh's artistic oeuvre developed beyond the wildest expectations of his artistic mentors it also created a fierce debate among art connoisseurs during the era of the Indonesian national independence movement or pergerakan nasional (1909-1942). Was he an

"Uncle Tom" who had sold out to the Dutch, or an anti-colonialist who used his artistic skills to critique and undermine the colonial project?

Syamsudin, a Bandung-based architect active in the interwar years, had developed an interest in modern art, in particular the Romantic paintings of Raden Saleh. He succeeds in transmitting his passion to Ratna Juwita, the Sundanese girl whom he adores. On the revolutionary side of the nationalist movement, Syafei, with his rebellious spirit, takes the hard high road towards the ideals of being an independent nation ending up dying young in the notorious Dutch prison camp of Boven Digul in West Papua. Together, they complete the history of the founding of a country, with their own desires, ambitions and passions. And, in the midst of the long drawn out social and political turmoil of the birth of a nation fighting for its destiny, a love story will always provide a flame: warm and dangerous.

#### **Review**

### Synopsis

Pangeran dari Timur, a 600-page historical novel divided into 45 chapters, is a remarkable achievement resting as it does on over 20 years of serious research on the part of the lead author, Iksaka Banu, who researched and wrote all the sections on Raden Saleh. Kurnia Effendi, his co-author did the same with the sections of Bandung in the inter-war years and the 1926 rebellion in West Java. But despite its depth of research and ambitious scope, the book fails to take off as a novel because it tries to go in too many different directions all at once. In particular, the mirroring of the novel plot of Saleh's time in Batavia and the interwar romance between Syamsudin and Ratna Juwita in Bandung strains credulity.

Apparently, the idea of developing a multi-strand "War and Peace" style narrative was suggested by the book's publisher, Bentang, who felt that a monographic —single-strand— narrative based on Raden Saleh's life would not attract a younger audience. This is why the frankly insipid characters of Ratna and Syamsudin were forced on the book. They are there to create a love interest thus appealing to millennials and Generation-Z readers. But I am not sure that this really works. This is especially the case when two-thirds of the way through the book, the novel branches out into three separate storylines—Raden Saleh himself, the Bandung situation 1926-1945, and Syafei's Boven Digul imprisonment and death. These take the reader into completely different chronologies and milieux. All three strands might have made for strong narratives in themselves, but moving from Saleh's very compelling fictionalised life history to these other plots is frankly distracting. It might have worked better if the authors had focussed on greater background depth for the context of the main storyline on Raden Saleh and the different milieux

through which he moved. Others, however, may think this multi-layering of the novel a masterstroke. For the present reviewer, it was like someone pressing on your doorbell on your wedding night!

### Why is Pangeran dari Timur Important for contemporary Indonesia?

"A Senegalese poet once said: 'In the end we will conserve only what we love. We love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught'." (Yo-Yo Ma, White House Conference on Culture and Diplomacy, 2000)

Obviously, *Pangeran dari Timur* is a fictionalized version of Raden Saleh and his world. There is no harm in that. *Du Coté de Chez Swann* (Swann's Way) (1913) and Combray (Illiers), the fictionalized Normandy village —now Illiers-Combray in Proust's honour— is a recreation of the world of Proust's childhood. But, whereas Proust's novel works at the level of the imagination, *Pangeran dari Timur* does not. I will dig more deeply into this below, but first what is the significance of this novel for Indonesia?

In contemporary Indonesia, it is particularly important to have such a novel because works of history need to be presented in culturally accessible ways. These can include films, novels, art exhibits, paintings, cartoons, animated films ("Diponegoro 1830," available on YouTube), documentaries, operas, tuturan (dramatic readings in the traditional Malay spoken hikayat style), wayang and dance performances. This is the way a wider readership, particularly millennials and members of Generation Z, the generational cohort born between the late 1990s and early 2010s—28 percent of Indonesia's 280 million population—will access history here in Indonesia. Since a recent survey (Miller and McKenna 2016) has estimated that one in a thousand Indonesians read books on a regular basis, it is unlikely that multi-volume tomes like Kuasa Ramalan: Pangeran Diponegoro dan Akhir Tatanan Lama di Jawa, 1785-1855 (2012), the Indonesian translation of the present reviewer's full-length 2007 KITLV Press (Leiden) Diponegoro biography, Power of Prophecy; Prince Dipanagara and the End of an Old Order in Java, 1785-1855 (Carey 2012), will be their doorway to learning about their past. Such weighty works are immediately off-putting and seen by most as 'berat di tangan dan berat di kepala' (heavy on the hand, heavy on the head)!

Although very few have read my work on Diponegoro (1785-1855), many more have seen Mas Don (Professor Sardono W. Kusumo's) *Opera Diponegoro* (1995), or been to Mas Landung Simatupang's "Aku Diponegoro [I Diponegoro!]!" *tuturan* readings (Simatupang 2015), or visited the "*Aku Diponegoro*; *Sang Pangeran dalam Ingatan Bangsa* [A Prince for All Seasons:

<sup>1.</sup> These dramatic readings took place in four venues associated with the prince's life: Magelang (24 November 2013), Tegalrejo (Yogyakarta, 8 January 2014), Jakarta (5 March 2014) and Fort Rotterdam (Makassar, 5 June 2014). See Simatupang 2015:xiv-xv.

Diponegoro in the Memory of the Nation from Raden Saleh to the Present]" month-long art exhibition at the Indonesian National Gallery (GalNas 2015), which attracted nearly 26,000 visitors in the 24 days the exhibit was open between 6 February and 8 March 2015 (Agnes 2015)!

A measure of the impact of such literary and artistic events related to Raden Saleh is the popular heist film *Mencuri Raden Saleh* [Stealing Raden Saleh] (Angga Dwimas Sasongko, 25 August 2022). Based on a fictional plot involving the stealing of Raden Saleh's masterpiece, "The Arrest of Diponegoro" (1857) from the Istana Merdeka (Merdeka [Freedom] Palace), the official residence of the Indonesian President, this film attracted a movie audience of 1.5 million viewers within the first fortnight after its release (*Jawa Pos* 2022). Sequels are now being planned (WhatsApp, Subianto [documentary film maker], 9 September 2022).

What is striking is that such a film, which trades on the instant "brand recognition" of Raden Saleh's name and his famous "Arrest" painting, could not have been made over a decade ago. Before June 2012, Raden Saleh was only a name with resonance amongst the Indonesian artistic cognoscenti. I know this because when my friend, Bang JJ Rizal, was about to publish the volume of essays, *Raden Saleh: Anak Belanda, Mooi Indië, & Nasionalisme* in February 2009 at his Komunitas Bambu (Kobam) Press in Depok, I had to provide a copy of Raden Saleh's "Arrest" painting for the back cover. Apparently this image was unobtainable on the internet at that time. Luckily, I was able to provide a diapositive colour image (slide) which I had obtained directly from the Museum Bronbeek, Arnhem, the Netherlands, where the painting was displayed until its return to Indonesia in 1978. At the time, I needed the image to prepare my article on "Raden Saleh, Dipanagara, and the Painting of the Capture of Dipanagara at Magelang (28 March 1830)" (Carey 1982).

The solo exhibition "Raden Saleh and the Beginning of Indonesian Modern Painting," curated by the German Raden Saleh expert, Werner Kraus, at the Galeri Nasional 3-17 June 2012, was the turning point here. Supported by the German government and the Goethe Institute Jakarta, this was the first major exhibition of Saleh's works since his death in 1880. It brought together some 40 of the 140+ paintings still believed to be extant in private and public collections. The "jewel in the crown" was of course, the "Arrest of the Javanese leader Diponegoro" (original German title: "Ein Historisches Tableau: De Gefanghenname des Javanischen Häuptlings Diepo Negoro," 1857), borrowed from the Presidential Collection. This had been given a preliminary cleaning by the German art restorer, Suzanne Erhards, before her complete restoration

<sup>2.</sup> This publication is now in its second revised edition (June 2022). See Rizal 2009, 2022.

**<sup>3.</sup>** This occurred under the auspices of the Oranje Nassau Foundation, see Carey 1982:2 quoting Depdikbud 1978.

<sup>4.</sup> Stellvertrender CEO at Fine Art Conservation, Fachhochschule Köln.

of the masterpiece in June-August 2013.<sup>5</sup> The exhibit broke all records for visitor numbers, attracting over 20,000 in its brief 14-day showing. This was a substantially higher *per diem* inflow than those who attended the February-March 2015 'Aku Diponegoro' show three years later (Agnes 2015).

A friend, Michael Nicholson, a senior member of the Indonesian Heritage Society (IHS), who was given a "private" viewing by the curator, Werner Kraus, recalled how he was asked to come after the exhibit closed at six o'clock in the evening. But, when he turned up, the queue of visitors still stretched all the way from the National Gallery (GalNas) to the main road, Jalan Merdeka Timur, a distance of some 150 meters. So the closing time had to be extended to eight o'clock at night by which time the "private viewing" had taken place with a gallery still full of the general public. "It was an outstanding exhibit that is unlikely to be repeated because of technical difficulties [ie the expense and difficulty of bringing paintings from all over the world]" was Nicholson's verdict (WhatsApp, Mike Nicholson, 22 February 2023).

Here we can witness how literary and artistic events can shape popular consciousness. This can make ordinary Indonesians better aware of their cultural inheritance. Few amongst the 20,000 visitors who attended the June 2012 GalNas exhibit, still less the 1,5 million who flocked to post-Covid cinemas to see the heist thriller "Mencuri Raden Saleh" probably had more than a passing acquaintance with the details of Raden Saleh's life let alone the historical context of his "Arrest" painting. But by late 2022, both Saleh and his magnum opus were sufficiently lodged in the national consciousness that they were recognised as national "treasures" capable of attracting a sizeable film audience. This creates a "virtuous cycle" in which cultural events, dramatic performances and works of literature can feed into a wider popular understanding of art and culture in Indonesia. This is where *Pangeran dari Timur* comes into its own.

# Critical Reflections on Pangeran dari Timur

One thing which immediately leaps off the page when reading this book is that it is based on serious archival research. The present reviewer even found a mention of his Sundanese-Hokkien-Japanese wife's grandfather, Tōshirō Aimono (deceased circa 1934), the owner of the Toko Toyama ("mountain of iron' in Japanese —" Toijama & Co Toko Japan' in the original iteration)—general store, originally situated at Pasar Baru 36, Bandung. Such details could only have been gleaned from a very close reading of the local Dutch-language press from the interwar years —for example, *Preangerbode*, 10-11-1922 and

<sup>5.</sup> The US\$70,000 cost was paid for jointly by the Goethe Institute Indonesia, who covered all Erhards' travel and living expenses, and by the Yayasan Arsari Djojohadikusumo (YAD), whose head, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, had his own collection of Raden Saleh paintings, Rulistia 2013.

*De Indische Courant*, 13-12-1934 (available at www.delpher.nl/nl/kranten)—or reference works like Katam and Abadi's *Album Bandoeng Tempo Doeloe* (2006). I found this impressive.

Sometimes, this archival sure-footedness deserts the authors. For example, the famous English photographer Walter Bentley Woodbury (1834-1885), who opened a studio in Batavia with his partner, James Page (1833-1865), and were active in the years 1856-1861, was born in Manchester and was a British national not German as he is referred to in the book. More important. in the long chapter "Kuda Pacu dan Begal [the Race Horse and the Robber]," which deals with Raden Saleh's arrest in a case of mistaken identity in 1869 (Kraus 2018:175-5), it is very unlikely that an Assistant-Resident, Van Musschenbroek (Buitenzorg/Bogor), would speak to his superior, the Resident of Batavia, Hendrik Jeronimus Christiaan Hoogeveen (1823-1881; in office, 1866-73), in the truculent way depicted in this book. This sort of "insubordination" just did not occur in the Dutch colonial administration—the Binnenlands Bestuur (Internal Administration, BB) —where Residents were gods in their respective localities. We know this from the famous example of Eduard Douwes Dekker (1820-1887). Writing under the pen name, Multatuli ("I have Suffered Much"), he vividly described what happened when iunior ranked civil servants got above themselves and contradicted their superiors. In the case of Douwes Dekker and the Lebak Affair (1856), a case involving the exploitation of the native population by local Bantenese officials, this led to the stormy petrel Dekker/Multatuli's immediate dismissal (1857), an event later immortalised in his famous novel Max Havelaar (1860).

In the latter part of the book we are told that on the fifth day the cruiser Java carrying Syafei and his fellow revolutionaries to Boven Digul eventually reaches Makassar ('pada hari kelima kapal merapat di Pelabuhan Makassar' p.425). It is simply not possible that even a large man-of-war with coal-fired engines would take five sailing days to reach Makassar from Surabaya. Tanjung Perak to Makassar is a distance of just 430 nautical miles. If one assumes that one travels at an average speed of 14 knots (nautical miles) an hour, such a journey would take at the most 30 hours to complete. The present reviewer has made this selfsame voyage as a deck passenger when he was a graduate student following in the footsteps of Diponegoro and sailing on a Radeau de la Méduse (Medusa's Raft) type PELNI (Pelayaran Nasional Indonesia) ship from Surabaya to Makassar in September 1972. At that time, the cargo ship took two days and a night. Exactly 30 hours in fact.

Still on the theme of Makassar, *Pangeran dari Timur* gives a detailed description of Fort Rotterdam (p. 563), when Ratna and Syamsudin are passing through in 1953 on their way to Boven Digul. The text states that "on the extreme right-hand side [of the Fort], which we saw from the outside, there is the Bastion Bacan. In this place formerly, Prince Diponegoro apparently

ended the remainder of his days with his family [Yang di ujung paling kanan adalah kubu Bacan yang tadi kita lihat dari luar. Di tempat ini dahulu, konon, Pangeran Dipanegara menghabiskan sisa hidup bersama keluarganya]." But this is entirely a figment of the authors' imagination. The actual location of Diponegoro's detention in Fort Rotterdam (1833-1855) was in an officer's dwelling (post-1844, two officers' dwellings) situated besides the main guardhouse or hoofdwacht overlooking the landpoort (landward gate) leading into the city of Makassar (Carey 2008:737). A political prisoner as important as Diponegoro would certainly have not been located on any bastion which were gun emplacements not places of residence.

Then there are the larger historical contexts and milieux which the authors could perhaps have made more of. One has already been mentioned, namely the fact that when Raden Saleh returned home from his 22-year sojourn Europe in 1852, he found a completely changed Java. This was no longer the tradition village world of "old order" Java in which the young Raden Saleh had grown up, but one transformed by the sugar and indigo factories and *de facto* slavery of the Cultivation System (1830-1870). It was as though the painter had suddenly stepped into an antebellum Southern United States of 'king cotton'. This was a huge shock. Saleh may also have experienced the same feeling in reverse when he returned to Europe in the 1870s and found a Germany transformed by Bismarck's politics of "blood-and-iron." Uniformed officers could now be spotted at railway stations as they travelled between their various barracks and military posts, a fact also noted by the Filipino nationalist writer, José Rizal (1861-1896), when he lived in Berlin for six months between November 1886 and May 1887. By this time, Germany had become a highly militarised society, a fact which struck me forcibly when I visited Berlin and Potsdam immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989). Walking through what had been East Berlin, I saw row upon row of late 19th-century barracks recently vacated by the Soviet Red Army but originally built in Wilhelmine Germany for the army of the Second Reich (1871-1919) after its great victories in the Austro-Prussian (1866) and Franco-Prussian Wars (1870-1871). This was a Europe transformed from what Raden Saleh had known during the much cosier — gemütlich — Germany of the kleinstaaterei (little states/principalities of pre-unification Germany) in the 1840s, when he had been so entranced by the cultural atmosphere of Dresden with its openness and refreshing lack of racism. This was so different from the arrogant and demeaning views expressed by Oueen Victoria's (r.1837-1901) lady-in-waiting, Lady Canning (1817-1861; in office 1842-1855), and the British Foreign Minister, Lord Aberdeen (1784-1860, in office 1841-46), when they visited Coburg, home of the queen's cousin Grand-Duke Ernst II of Saxe Coburg-Gotha, in the entourage of Oueen Victoria and the Prince Consort in 1845:7

<sup>6.</sup> Zaide and Zaide, Chapter 7.

<sup>7.</sup> See Kraus 2018:56 quoting Surtees 1975:158.

"In the Gd. [Grand] Duke of Baden's room, I saw one of the works of the Java Prince Ali [Raden Saleh], who lives at Coburgh [Coburg] like a tame monkey about the house. Ld. [Lord] Aberdeen was so taken aback the first day [at Coburg] to see this black in his Turkish dress instead of handing us coffee, quietly take some to drink himself."

Raden Saleh made two great historical paintings relating to Java in his 60-year artistic career. The first was "The Arrest" painting (1857) (see above), which the authors make much of and feature in a special image in the present volume (p. 296). But the second. Watersnood in Midden Java [A Flood in Central Java] (1862), which draws on Théodore Gericault's politically charged Le Radeau de la Méduse (1819-21), is only mentioned in passing (pp. 312-313). Yet this is a really important 'political' painting, which gives us an insight onto the nature of Raden Saleh's anti-colonial struggle through his art. It depicts the aftermath of the devastating flood which followed the torrential rains of the night of 21-22 February 1861 (Carey 2008:36 fn.99; 2012:42 fn.99; Kraus and Vogelsang 2012:101-106, 229). Saleh focusses on the Central Javanese district of Banyumas, where the flooding was particularly severe. A senior Javanese official —perhaps a wedono (district head)— recognisable from his striped *lurik* jacket and blue batik wraparound cloth (kain) is depicted atop a raft made up of a rapidly disintegrating palm-thatched roof. The message of the painting is clear. In their hour of need, the Javanese can count only on themselves. Despite the scale of the disaster, there is no trace of a representative of the colonial state anywhere to be seen. And this despite the fact that it is that very state which is supposed to ensure the safety and welfare of its Javanese subjects. Instead, the latter have been left to fend for themselves. The rescue, as depicted in Saleh's work, is being effected by a villager in a small dug-out canoe as though underscoring the message, in Werner Kraus's words, 'that the Javanese cannot and must not rely on help from the colonial government in times of disaster. The only thing that can save them is their own mutual self-help and solidarity' (Kraus and Vogelsang 2012:106).

Obviously, there is a limit to what can be introduced into a novel, especially one as ambitious as Iksaka Banu and Kurnia Effendi's magnum opus. But I hope these reflections may provide a starting point for a revision for a second edition. As I wrote to Bung Banu when I finally turned the last page on his novel during the first year of the Covid lockdown which for the present reviewer was the "best and the worst of times" (the best because it gave so much space for reading and writing, the worst because so many close friends died):

"I really appreciated receiving your great novel and reading it and feel sure that many more Indonesian readers will now come to Raden Saleh and his *oeuvre* who would previously have only known him as a name. A great achievement! Well done!"

Peter Carey, Serpong, 24 February 2023

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