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Review Article

HUNTING DOWN THE WILD BOAR – CULTURE IN THE
STRUGGLE FOR A HUMANE SOCIETY

Menyusu Celeng, Sindhunata, 2019. Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 179pp.

Reviewed by SIMON RAE.

The launch last year of an extended version of a novel by the Indonesian writer Sindhunata, first published in 2000, is significant in several ways. The context itself was remarkable, occurring on 30 March 2019 in Yogyakarta at the close of an exhibition, ‘Memedi Sawah’, by the artist Hari Budiono, and accompanied by a group of musicians who had produced a musical album, ‘Celeng Dhegleng’ and later a concert with the same theme of the celeng or wild boar, a metaphor for humans unable to resist their greed for wealth and the power over others it brings.

A feature of all participants is that they represent expressions of culture from the margins, from beyond the elite traditions that have their roots in the Javanese princely courts.¹ Their emergence as cultural activists represents something of a new phenomenon, a new and more assertive voice for humane values (*kemanusiaan*) and a healthy civil society.

Dr Gabriel Possenti Sindhunata SJ, who writes as Sindhunata, is a Catholic priest who over more than four decades has established a reputation as a writer with a range that includes journalism, sports commentary, works of fiction and poetry, and substantial philosophical and social studies. Born in 1952 into a Chinese Indonesian family in Central Java, Sindhunata is unusually at home in both literary and colloquial Javanese and Indonesian, as well as German, the language of his doctorate. His creative writing is in a Javanese syncretistic tradition that addresses universally shared issues of humanity, with little if any reference to the religious or ideological differences that fracture societies. Sindhunata continues to assert his profession as journalism, a journalism that has been described as literary and humane. His novels are works of literature, not religious allegories or proselytism, and his academic writing has proved to be of continuing significance.²

Apart from a great volume of incisive journalism, much of it collected and republished, Sindhunata demonstrates, among modern Indonesian creative writers, two qualities, one literary, the other political. A major 1997 study noted him among those who took up stories and themes from traditional Javanese wayang plays and adapted

1 In a recent collection of essays Sindhunata describes a 30-year project to ‘Defend Marginal Arts’, Sindhunata, *Belajar Jurnalistik Dari Humanisme Harian Kompas: Harga Sebuah Visi*, Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2019, chap. 12, ‘Membela Seni Pinggiran’.

2 For a wider perspective, and a preliminary bibliography, Simon Rae, ‘Sindhunata: An Indonesian Writer in his context’, *Archipel* 95 (Paris) 2018, pp 133-149.< <https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.643> > Also, an extended study and updated bibliography, *Sindhunata: Finding truth through story and myth*, forthcoming, Jakarta: Gramedia.

them in their own writing, a trend dating from the mid-1970s. In Sindhunata's case it was noted that he held more closely to the actual stories, unlike others including the Catholic priest-writer Mangunwijaya who made quite radical changes in characterisation and plot.³ Based on a 1997 dissertation this study predates much of Sindhunata's creative fiction, but the trend observed continues to the present, in *Menyusu Celeng* and in an extended version of *Semar Mencari Raga*.⁴

On the political front, Sindhunata was one of those identified in Marshall Clark's 2001 study of writers who had drawn on themes from the Ramayana to critique the state of society during the New Order regime of President Suharto.⁵ Clark presents a cogent reading of Sindhunata's 1983 *Anak Bajang Menggiring Angin*, now available in a fine English translation, *Herding the Wind*, by Joan Suyenaga.⁶ While the Ramayana is too rich to be reduced to a single theme, the relevance of Sindhunata's study in the last decade of the collapsing regime was part of a wider and very Javanese movement that produced literary works of lasting value and through them presented sharp social criticism that managed to evade the increasingly rigid censorship of the time. Once considered so embedded in the Javanese cultural world that it could be translated across cultural borders only with great difficulty, his work is now attracting a readership, beyond Java and beyond Indonesia.

Menyusu Celeng was published in 2019 as a revised version of *Tak Enteni Keplokmu, Tanpa Bunga dan Telegram Duka* (2000), with a new epilogue and a sharper title.⁷ While earlier commentators linked the original version of the novel to conditions during the New Order regime under President Suharto and the tragic events surrounding its collapse in 1998 it is clear now that a new generation of readers, for whom the present rather than even the quite recent past is the focus of concern, is finding in Sindhunata's writing a way of approaching the issues society faces now. While reference to corrupt elites greedy for wealth and power, the theme of the 2000 novel, remains, those who collaborated in the events leading to the 2019 launch focused also on contemporary concerns such as false news, hate speech, slander and the attitudes and behaviours that fracture friendship and solidarity and undermine culture, manners and social norms. The musicians and their collaborators highlighted the confusion and anger of their contemporaries in the face of persistent social and political uncertainties, now two decades into the era of *Reformasi* that was to restore participatory democracy to post-Suharto Indonesia.

3 Burhan Nurgiyantoro, *Transformasi Unsur Pewayangan Dalam Fiksi Indonesia*. Yogyakarta: Gadjad Mada University Press, 1998, 1-3, 21-25.

4 I have access to the unpublished text for translation purposes.

5 Marshall Clark, 'Shadow Boxing: Indonesian Writers and the Ramayana in the New Order', *Indonesia*, 17 (October 2001), pp159-187, at pp159-162.

6 Sindhunata, *Anak Bajang Menggiring Angin*, Jakarta, Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1983, 10th printing 2010. Sindhunata, *Herding the Wind*, (trans. Joan Suyenaga) Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2015.

7 *Menyusu*, from the root *susu*, denoting both breast and milk, could translate as 'suckle on the breast of' or 'draw sustenance from the breast of'. *Celeng*, 'wild boar' (in Javanese folk-lore) and more generally a 'pig'.

The theme of *Menyusu Celeng* had a long gestation, beginning from a 1998 exhibition, 'Indonesia 1998 Berburu Celeng', mounted by the artist Djoko Pekik, which left an enduring impression, and Sindhunata returned several times to the theme of the *celeng* or wild boar, which has a special place in rural Javanese folklore.⁸ Rural Javanese fear the wild boar, which can root up and destroy a farmer's crops, but it is also believed to have a supernatural form, *celeng jadi-jadian*, which can enable its possessor to accumulate wealth and power, by stealth. So the *celeng* is an apt symbol for the greed for wealth and power accumulated by stealth, deception or corruption that has become a feature of many modern societies.

Djoko Pekik, was born in 1938 into an impoverished Javanese rural family, and developed his artistic gifts in a studio-workshop affiliated to LEKRA, a cultural organization of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) which was still legal at that time. In 1966, however, he was confined without trial as a political prisoner. Released with restriction in 1972 he found himself shunned and, unable to work openly as an artist, he supported his family by street-side sewing. Once able to exhibit his work again Djoko Pekik demonstrated an ability to reflect a critical social realism in vividly graphic scenes of people and activities that appear quite normal and quite bizarre at the same time. Online accounts of Djoko Pekik's life and art enable readers to view his paintings, identified by their Indonesian titles.⁹

The Celeng Trilogy (*Celeng Telu*) paintings embody variants of a common theme. The first, '*Susu Raja Celeng*' (1996) depicts the insatiable greed and corruption that marked the final years of the New Order regime. The second, '*Indonesia 1998 Berburu Celeng*' (1998) depicts the capture of the *celeng* and the end of the increasingly despotic regime in 1998. In the third painting, '*Tanpa Bunga dan Telegram Duka Tahun 2000*'¹⁰ the *celeng* lies dead, unlamented. In all three paintings the artist is reflecting on the insidious and powerful presence of the *celeng* or wild boar in society, and potentially in everyone. The paintings suggest that people can seek nurture (*menyusu*) from the king of the wild boars, or that the wild boar though hunted down can still leave people suffering an evil that persists as the *celeng* is reborn and multiplies. In the third painting the futility of the powerful is symbolised by a dead boar, lying exposed in a burnt forest – 'without flowers and a telegram of condolence'. No one mourns the defeated autocrat, but the crowd cowers in the background, seemingly aware that even in death the *celeng* embodies a potent menace.

In Sindhunata's novel both language and art are enigmatic. The gender of the *celeng* is indefinite. After describing its six breasts the writer goes on to affirm, 'one does not know whether this *celeng* is male or female'.¹¹ This is entirely consistent with Javanese story-telling where creative imagining can make strange things normal.

8 Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960, 108.

9 <archive.ivaa-online.org/pelakuseni/djoko-pekik> [Indonesian Visual Arts Archive; accessed 26.4.2019]. Also, Andreas D. Arditya, 'Djoko Pekik: The hunt continues', *Jakarta Post*. 13 October 2013.

10 'Without Flowers and a Telegram of Condolence, 2000'.

11 *Menyusu Celeng*, 2019, 79.

Sindhunata's initial response to Djoko Pekik's paintings was in the literary-cultural magazine *Basis*, September-October 1998, where he does not refer directly to the fall of President Suharto and the New Order regime but tells a story, 'Berburu celeng dhegleng' (Hunting the Wild Boar), inspired by Djoko Pekik's painting of hunters carrying home a massive boar strung upside-down on a pole, surrounded by crowds of people, euphoric and rejoicing but agitated and alarmed, it seems, at the same time. Sindhunata saw this as a kind of prophecy that understood the anxiety of society in a time of chaotic transition. The so-called New Order was overthrown, some were joyful, euphoric, the wild boar had been captured, and *Reformasi* was under way – but still there was a question of why everything ahead looked dark? *Reformasi*, it seemed, was not the door to a new age but rather a revelation of what the nation was really like. Greed and evil could transform anyone into a wild boar. Corruption, division and the manipulation of religion remained.

In 2000 Sindhunata expanded this theme in the novel, *Tak Enteni Keplokmu, Tanpa Bunga dan Telegram Duka*; a characteristically enigmatic title that translates something like, 'Waiting for your Applause, Without Flowers or a Telegram of Condolence', picking up the theme of the third painting. While reader response, increasingly now in social media reflecting a new readership, indicates that while the central theme of the novel was clear some readers remained puzzled. Comments ranged from 'satire hidden in artistic beauty' to, 'I just don't get it – basically it is just the interpretation of a painting'. Published soon after the violence around the downfall of the New Order regime, it seemed obvious to readers of the 2000 version that the novel, like the paintings, referred to the situation around 1998. But the peril Sindhunata saw is universal, the *celengs* represent a seed of evil that can infect anyone; it can be nurtured or resisted. Its power would not be broken by *Reformasi*.

In 2011 Sindhunata returned to the same theme in an article in the Jakarta daily *Kompas*, 'Negeri Para Celeng' [Land of the Celengs], arguing that the political crises that occur are not caused by political or social problems as such but arise 'from the mystery of the power of evil which works together with the spirit of human greed'. People have the power to choose to oppose this evil nature, and not become '*celeng*'.¹²

A little distant now from the events of 1998, Sindhunata reflected on the outcome of the process of democratic reform. Corruption remained rife, there were still divisions and conflicts, and violence against minorities, and the nation and its leaders remained quiet while people suffered. People manipulate religion to gain power, civil society fades, and evil returns.

While acknowledging that Djoko Pekik's painting 'Berburu Celeng' (Hunting the Wild Boar) depicted conditions in the closing years of the New Order regime, the author seems in 2019, in *Menyusu Celeng*, to have a wider, if no less frightening, vision. There is no Indonesian named in either version of the novel, nor the name of any country or region. While imagery and vocabulary suggest an initial Javanese context the signs of

12 Sindhunata, *Kompas*, 31 May 2011.

the times point more widely now, to a universal threat to civil society and civic values. As he has observed elsewhere, the tools of evasion and obfuscation, *tidak tau, lupa, tidak ingat* are deployed everywhere and lying is a malignant cancer in civil life.¹³

Menyusu Celeng is presented by the publisher as ‘Novel/Sastra’ – a novel or literary work. While the author’s debt to the painter Djoko Pekik is evident and clearly acknowledged – without the paintings this book would not exist – Sindhunata is careful to make clear that it is a work of imagination: ‘My special thanks to Djokopekik who allowed himself to become the inspiration and imagination for this story of the celeng’ (p 5). Sections of the poem, ‘Releasing the Celeng’, with which the novel opens, also make this clear:

Only here is the name Djokopekik mentioned
going forward his name will be shrouded
by imagination that is not afraid to
look directly into a foggy mist

In effect this absolves Djoko Pekik, who does not appear in the novel, from any responsibility for the imaginative reconstruction of what might have been the thoughts and experience of the fictional artist who is identified simply as Si pelukis (The painter). How much discussion took place between the artist and the novelist is not disclosed, although it is clear they collaborated, together with musicians and others, in public presentations of this theme in 2018-19. In short, this is a work of creative imagination, from the margins rather than the mainstream of Javanese cultural expression, inspired by the actual paintings of a now well-known artist but in essence a work of fiction.

The novel itself has a form favoured by Sindhunata who distrusts linear storytelling.¹⁴ Its unnumbered chapters each embody a reflection on one of Djoko Pekik’s paintings or some imaginative reconstruction of Si pelukis’s anguish about the *celeng* he painted which can no longer be confined to his canvas or controlled in its ever widening depredations. The *celeng* multiply, and increase their power and although hunted down are reborn in the cruel, the deceitful, the violent and those who exploit the weak or terrorise society.

But the novel is not only about the *celeng*. Si pelukis, after suffering unjustly, and knowing that his suffering was not blind fate but the work of ‘some person’ whose identity he knows but will not reveal, struggled with his hate (*rasa benci*) for those who oppressed him, and his thirst for revenge (*rasa dendam*). But, he reflects, who can live with hate? Hate simplifies the issues, it is not logical to blame one person, or to seek the ring leader (*biang keladi*). Many things, and many people, contributed to the suffering he and his fellow artists experienced. But still, it was this anger and hatred that drove him to paint the *celeng*....

13 Sindhunata, ‘Bohong Adalah Laknat’ [Lying is a curse], *Kompas*, 24 February 2012: ‘don’t know’, ‘forget’, ‘don’t remember’.

14 Sindhunata, *Kambing Hitam: Teori René Girard*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2006, 40.

On another level Si pelukis is troubled about compromising his own values. Before he was imprisoned he was content to be poor, and to associate with the people's artists (*seniman-seniman kerakyatan*) who opposed capitalism, feudalism and the neo-colonialism the regime served. The people's artists opposed, and were opposed by, the conventional art-for-art's-sake school who declared that 'art must be above politics'.

After he was released Si pelukis was shunned socially and had to support his family with menial work but when he was able to exhibit and sell his art again he became wealthy, and secure. Was this a moral compromise? What of his old values? Or was it just the outcome of his painting in a changed environment, where his work now had value?

For Si pelukis, the essential dilemma remains: He chose the *celeng* to be 'a symbol of the power that must be resisted', but he came in time to see that the *celeng* was 'also a symbol of the evil power of darkness that was not easily countered, even with goodness and the power of light.' (p 30).

In *Menyusu Celeng* Sindhunata presents readers with a literary work, fluid in style and captivating in language and imagery. While the setting in rural Javanese folk beliefs and the frequent resort to Javanese words and expressions may puzzle readers from further afield, clarification is usually provided by unobtrusive translation or amplification within the flow of the story, and after a first reading the novel is both accessible and engaging, and in 2019 it has a much wider reference and relevance than its 2000 predecessor.

Sindhunata, in the pattern of Javanese traditional story-telling (*wayang*), presents a concrete social dilemma in an open dramatic form that encourages but does not determine response. The opening section of the introductory poem identifies the paradox at the heart of the novel, and of contemporary civilisation: how is it that corruption, greed and lust for power continue to threaten the integrity of modern, developed societies? Is it really plausible that wild *celeng* could be abroad in a civilised society? 'But often civilization is only another face of cruelty.' (p 19) This poem sets a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1885) in a contemporary context:

Almost everything we call 'higher culture' is based on the spiritualisation and intensification of cruelty – this is my proposition, the "wild beast" has not been laid to rest at all, it lives, it flourishes, it has merely become – deified.¹⁵

Menyusu Celeng provides for Indonesian and Malay readers a significantly different contemporary reading experience and at the same time an insight into the way a writer, schooled in social philosophy and with decades of experience in investigative journalism, can present issues of humanity and society, seeking values that may be shared rather than what so often divides.

15 Sindhunata, *Menyusu Celeng*, 17, German text from *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1885, with English translation.