



The Kali Lusi in the Dry Season

BLORA REVISITED

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In December 1949, as the Dutch occupying forces left Indonesia and Indonesians finally took control of their own state, the writer Pramudya Ananta Tur was released from prison after two and a half years' detention by the Dutch authorities as an underground agent for the Indonesian Republic. Six months later he made a trip to his birthplace, the small town of Blora, near the border of Central and East Java, to visit his dying father. The visit affected Pramudya deeply, inspiring both his factual account of the circumstances of his father's death given in *Bukan Pasar Malam* (It's No Night Market) and the collection of childhood reminiscences and other tales of Blora life of *Cerita dari Blora* (Stories of Blora). What he found there was a natural and human landscape both familiar and greatly changed from the one he had known; in these stories the physical features of the town take on symbolic force as images of permanence and change in the lives of its people. The isolation of Blora, its harsh dry climate, and barren clay soil are constant, like the poverty and parochialism of those who live there--at one point Pramudya suggests facetiously that it may be the scant muddy well water in which they must bathe, so different from the clean piped water of big cities, which makes Blora people the way they are.¹ But that same natural scene also contains many suggestions of passing time, of a sense of human powerlessness in the face of relentless change.

Even as his train pulls out of Gambir station in Jakarta on the way to Blora on the journey recounted in *Bukan Pasar Malam*, Pramudya notices that the heaps of red earth beside the track remembered from earlier trips have been much reduced in size, swept away by rain and dug up by men, just as human life, his father's life is consumed, worn down, swept away.² When he and his wife reach Blora, the horse-and-cart which takes them from the station to the family home moves with the calm slowness of ages. But many of the buildings they pass along the way have been reduced to rubble, destroyed in the Revolutionary fighting, and as Pramudya enters the house his head touches the top of the door, once high above him, a reminder of his own growth and change.³ The old house itself in its dilapidated state seems to reflect the sad circumstances of the family; the old butcher and long-time neighbor who helped build it urges Pramudya to make repairs, for *Apabila rumah itu rusak yang menempatinnya pun rusak* [When a house is in ruins those who live in it are also ruined].⁴

But the most powerful metaphor of change in the landscape of Blora is the Kali Lusi, the river on which the town is built. In the dry season it is just a

1. *Bukan Pasar Malam* (Jakarta: Yayasan Kebudayaan Sadar, 1964), p. 41.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

shallow trickle, dasarnya yang dialasi batu-kerikil-lumpur-pasir itu mencongak-congak menjenguk langit [its bed of stones, pebbles, mud, and sand seems to thrust up its face to stare at the sky]. With the coming of the rains the river completely changes character, a transformation beautifully echoed in the sound and rhythm of Pramudya's prose.

Tapi bila hujan mulai turun, dan gunung-gunung di hutan diliputi mendung, dan matahari tak juga muncul dalam empatpuluh atau limapuluh jam, air yang kehijau-hijauan itu berubah rupa--kuning, tebal, mengandung lumpur. Tinggi air melompat-lompat tak terkendalikan. Kadang-kadang hingga dua-puluh meter. Kadangkala lebih. Dan air yang mengalir damai itu tiba-tiba berpusing-pusing mengamuk gila diseretnya rumpun-rumpun bambu disepanjang tepi seperti anak kecil mencabuti rumput. Digugurnya tebing-tebing dan diseretnya beberapa bagian bidang ladang penduduk.

Lusi: dia merombak tebing-tebingnya sendiri.

Dan didalam hidup ini kadang-kadang aliran deras menyeret tubuh dan nasib manusia. Dan dengan tak setahunya ia kehilangan beberapa bagian dari hidup sendiri.

[But when the rains begin to fall and the mountains are covered with cloud and the sun doesn't appear at all for forty or fifty hours, the greenish water changes its appearance--yellow, thick, full of mud. The height of the river leaps up uncontrollably. Sometimes to twenty meters. Sometimes more. And the quietly flowing river suddenly swirls about and rages furiously. It tears away the clumps of bamboo along its verges like a child pulling up grass. It destroys its own banks and sweeps off sections of the farmers' fields.

Lusi: it devours its own banks.

And in this life sometimes a powerful current sweeps away the body and the fortunes of man. And without knowing it he has lost parts of his own life].⁵

In *Yang Sudah Hilang* (That Which is Lost), the opening story of *Cerita dari Blora*, the recurring image of the river draws together recollections from Pramudya's childhood, swept away with the passing years like the clumps of bamboo devoured by the raging flooded Lusi. The metaphor of the river, the flood, appears in other stories also, as people are said to have been *terseret* (swept away) by the *badai* (hurricane) of new developments.⁶

For the changes that had overcome Pramudya himself, his family, and society as a whole since his childhood in Blora, involved much more than the usual flux of human joys and sorrows. The Revolution had come with all its upheaval, violence, and power to sweep people up in its course. In many of these stories it is the destruction and suffering of those years which is highlighted--the fear and depriva-

5. *Cerita dari Blora* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1963), p. 13.

6. See for example the description of the coming of the Communists to Blora in the story *Dia Yang Menyerah--tak ada seorangpun dari penduduk kota kecil kami yang meraba-raba bahwa badai itu begitu cepat datang dan menyapu apa saja yang dapat disapunya* [there was not a single inhabitant of our little town who had ever imagined that the hurricane would come so swiftly and sweep away everything that it could sweep] and *Mereka yang terseret oleh arus merah memencak-mencak seperti serigala dapat mangsa* [those who had been carried off by the red tide danced menacingly like jackals with their prey]. *Cerita dari Blora*, pp. 312 and 334.

tion suffered by Pramudya's family, the general demoralization of society. Pramudya documents also the disillusionment of his father and other committed nationalists at the outcome of all this struggle, at the way their dreams of freedom had foundered in a mass of empty slogans and a greedy scramble for spoils. But the attitude to change itself, as embodied in these natural metaphors, is not completely negative. The Kali Lusi is more than a symbol of destruction and loss. In its constantly alternating moods of rage and calm it also suggests permanence--it is what it is because of what it destroys. It is the river which connects and gives form to the scattered pieces of Pramudya's past, incidents which *hilang dari rabaan pancaindera untuk dapat abadi bersinggasana dalam kenang-kenangan* [disappear from the grasp of the senses to become enthroned forever in memory].⁷

In December 1979, exactly thirty years after his first release, Pramudya again left prison. His crime had been the same one, that of unacceptable political beliefs, but this time he had spent fourteen years in detention, held by no foreign occupying power but by the government of his own country. No doubt he has again found the human and physical landscape of Indonesia extraordinarily changed after fourteen years of New Order rule. A friend who visited him recently in Jakarta reports him as saying that he feels like an alien in his own land.⁸ Whether he would now wish or be permitted to express his reactions to these changes in writing is another question. What if he should go to Blora, what would he find there? How have developments of the intervening years affected the symbolic landscape Pramudya created out of the town in the stories of thirty years ago? What of his family, the brothers and sisters introduced in those stories, do they still live in Blora, in the old house--what has become of them?

It was in search of answers to these questions, in an attempt to make contact with Pramudya's relatives and to see for myself the landscape of Blora pictured so powerfully in his stories, that I made a nostalgic trip there in July 1978. The following account of that trip is not intended as a comprehensive report on the life histories of Pramudya's family or on the geographical and sociological features of Blora--it is simply a collection of impressions, of interesting snippets of gossip about old friends. The opportunity to go to Blora came when I made the acquaintance of a student at Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta, where I was living, who was about to return there for a few days to visit his parents. He thought he had heard that some of Pramudya's relatives were still living in the town and offered to help me find them. The advantage of "inside" help in tracking down in a discreet fashion people who might have no wish to be recognized as Pramudya's relatives seemed invaluable, and I delightedly accepted his offer.

We set out from Yogya by bus at 8 a.m. and traveled first to Solo, then on to Ngawi, over great flat rice plains interspersed with forests of teak, where an occasional group of leaf-gatherers would wave a caged monkey at the limousines flashing by, in forlorn hopes of a sale. At Ngawi we changed to a "colt," a kind of panel-van taxi, impossibly crowded and crazily driven as always, for the trip north to the city of Cepu and then on to Blora. Immediately after leaving Ngawi the scenery changed--flat green ricefields gave way to rocky limestone hills planted here and there with gardens of cassava and banana trees, and intersected by gullies with shallow aqua-colored streams. The teak forest became denser and more luxuriant--sometimes the road would weave in and out through huge trees for ten kilometers--but now there was no one to be seen. In any other year the streams would have long since dried up, the cassava plants withered, and the teak leaves

7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8. From Heather Sutherland who talked with Pramudya in Jakarta in February 1980.

fallen crackling and brown to the ground. But in 1978 the rains were unusually prolonged and heavy. In Yogyakarta, where the skies hardly cleared all year long, it was generally agreed that the strange weather, as something beyond normal expectation or explanation, must be connected with extraordinary occurrences in the *kraton* (palace) of the Sultan--had not both the uncle and son of the Sultan died that year, within a few months of one another? The people of Blora, however, showed little interest in this explanation when I recounted it to them--they seemed less concerned with speculating on causes than taking advantage of the boon of the extra rain to squeeze a little more productivity out of their barren land. Indeed it was probably unrealistic to expect the mystique of *kraton* and sultan to have any hold on this part of the world. From the time of Aryo Penangsang, the sixteenth-century lord of Jipang near Cepu, who refused to submit to the authority of Demak, up until the present day--the Communist-sympathizing mystic Mbah Suro set up a kind of "kingdom" in the village of Nginggil between Ngawi and Cepu in 1966, and the Blora area is the site of the largest concentration of nonconforming Saminist⁹ villages in Java--the isolated hills and forests between Ngawi and the Java sea have been renowned as a center for rebels and dissidents. Certainly as we left Cepu behind that day, after changing from the death-defying colt into an ancient rattling bus, seeing the teak forests grow still thicker, the hills more rugged and the settlements of simple wooden houses further and further apart, it was not difficult to imagine that the inhabitants of such country might care more for their own customs than the laws of far-away kings or governments, and that fugitives might find safe haven in that rugged terrain.

It was about 2:30 in the afternoon when our bus crossed a rickety bridge over a briefly glimpsed river (which turned out to be indeed the Kali Lusi) and entered the town of Blora. We passed the railway station, looking as if it had undergone little change since Pramudya arrived there on the train from Jakarta in 1950, then the *bunderan* (roundabout) at the junction of the roads linking Blora to the north coast and to the interior. Perhaps this was the site of an earlier statue (that of Queen Wilhelmina mentioned by Pramudya in *Bukan Pasar Malam?*), but since 1975 it has been marked by a huge stone tree-trunk topped by an eagle and flanked by bayonet-carrying soldiers, symbolizing, so the inscription reads, "the victory of the Panca Sila." Next came some real soldiers, standing guard outside the headquarters of the regional army command, housed in an old Dutch mansion, and next door the *losmen* (small hotel) where I was to stay for the next two days. Later that afternoon my student friend H. and I continued the inspection of the main street of the town. By then the street was full of traffic, mostly youths on motor-bikes, while groups of young people strolled along the pavement. H. explained that Blora, with its three state-run high schools and numerous private ones, acted as an educational center for the surrounding area--these were probably students from these schools on their way to the movies, or to visit friends, or simply *jalan-jalan* (hanging out). Along the street were the usual Chinese-owned shops and two fancy cafes; across the street a large, newly built Catholic church and a little further on a Buddhist prayer-house alongside a tennis court provided additional evidence of the activities of the Chinese community. Interspersed among the shops

9. The Saminist movement is named after Soerosamin, a villager from the area of Randublatung, south of Blora, very close to Mbah Suro's village of Nginggil, who is said to have founded the movement there at the end of the nineteenth century. Saminists maintain radically egalitarian customs and beliefs which contrast strongly with the regard for social hierarchy which pervades all areas of Javanese life. They speak low-level Javanese, *ngoko*, to everyone, whatever their social position, and recognize no external authority, only their own customs.

were some graceful old Chinese homes, like the ones found in the towns of the north coast, with their pillars, tiled verandahs, huge pots of ferns, and cool, high-ceilinged interiors. The most opulent of these houses, its verandah crammed with ornately carved furniture, wooden screens, and a huge slit-drum, its gateways hung with graceful antique lamps, turned out to be no Chinese millionaire's establishment but the residence of the *bupati* (regent) of Blora. Later, while photographing the house, I met Pak Bupati, a chubby, cheery figure in Boy Scouts' uniform--it was Boy Scouts' day--who proudly invited me in to take a closer look at these treasures, then sent me off to my next destination in one of his jeeps.

After Pak Bupati's home came the post office and various government buildings; then, at the top of a rise, the street led onto the broad, grassy *alun-alun* or town square. On the north side of the square was the mosque, to the west the courthouse, and on the east side the old bupati's residence. Here it was that the inhabitants of the town had fled to safety at the time of the great flood described to Pramudya by the servant Nyi Kin in *Yang Sudah Hilang*. As the waters rose to lap at the edges of the alun-alun the bupati had come out of his house, struck several times with his whip while reciting incantations, and driven the river back to its bed. Full of wonder and reverence his subjects lined up to ask for his blessing.¹⁰ The old building is dilapidated and deserted now, half hidden behind trees. It is the movie theater next door, it seems, plastered with gaudy posters of coming attractions, its loudspeakers blaring out the soundtrack of the Chinese kungfu movie now playing, its entrance packed with young people waiting for the next session, which has inherited its charisma and position of dominance.

But for all its motorbikes and moviehouses the Blora of today is still a world away from the futuristic vision of the town Pramudya gives in the story *Anak Haram* (The Bastard), with its oil wells, huge storage tanks, piles of building materials, and aeroplanes zooming overhead.¹¹ Away from the main street, the alun-alun, and the nearby market, life is slow and sedate. The streets are serenely quiet, lined with pleasant old timber houses with shuttered windows, verandahs, and modest gardens, inhabited, one surmises, by the civil servants, current and retired, of Blora's administrative and educational institutions. Blora has apparently long been regarded as a comfortable spot for retirement. At the beginning of the story *Hidup Yang Tak Diharapkan* (An Unwished-for Life), as he describes the decline of the Blora region into poverty, Pramudya comments savagely: *Dan orang-orang pensiunan--terdorong oleh keinginan menghemat belanja--yang tidak menghasilkan sesuatu apa didunia ini selain duduk bermalas-malas dikursi goyangnya telah menduduki daerah kami* [And, motivated by the wish to live cheaply, retired people who don't produce anything in this world--just sit around in their rocking chairs doing nothing--invaded our area].¹² It was to visit one of these pensioned civil servant families, living in one such dignified bungalow, that I was taken that afternoon. It was not until the next day that I located the homes of the poorer and less prestigious members of the community, people like Inem and Leman of *Cerita dari Blora*, small *gedek* (woven rattan) dwellings on the outskirts of town near the banks of the Kali Lusi.

Soon my friend and I were esconced on a verandah crowded with leafy pot-plants, drinking tea and exchanging chit-chat with a group of giggling teenage girls, four sisters. We had come there to talk with the eldest sister, at one time

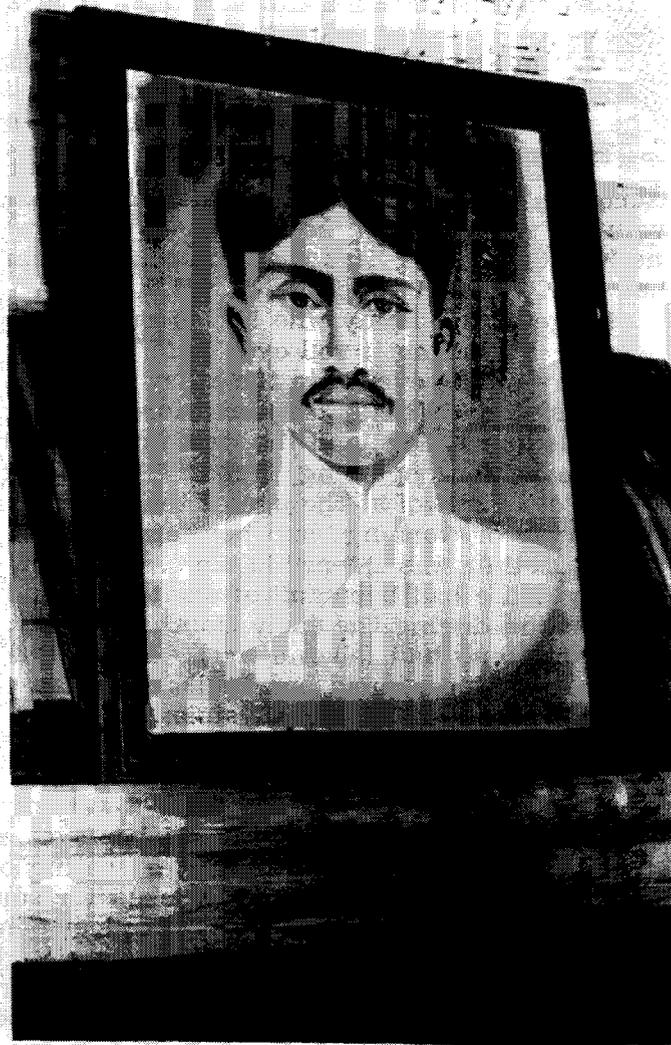
10. *Cerita dari Blora*, p. 19.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

a student of Indonesian literature at the Arts Faculty of Gajah Mada University, who my companion thought might have some special knowledge of Pramudya and his relatives. But since Pramudya had been placed in prison and his works banned while the girl was in primary school, she had never read his books and had no idea whether he might still have relatives living in Blora. I was beginning to tire of the desultory chatter and to wish that I could just slip under the table and escape to get on with the search alone, when the girls' mother came out to join us. She was the widow of the son of the last bupati of Blora during the colonial period, a sharp, energetic woman of about forty-five, who gave the impression of knowing all there was to know and everyone worth knowing in Blora. When told of my mission she sorted mentally through her network of contacts and came up with the name of an ex-servant of hers who had once worked also for a member of Pramudya's family. A cousin was dispatched on a motorbike to investigate the matter. After another hour of tea and chat he returned, I was given the name and address of a certain Pak M, said to be related in some way to Pramudya, and we all went off to the market to celebrate the find with a meal of the famous *sate* Blora.

Next morning the address was easily found, a prosperous-looking, modern-style house on the west side of town. Peeping through the open door of the large front room, which held several sets of sofas and chairs, a motor scooter, cabinets full of china, and photographs of President Suharto and General Nasution, I began to wonder if I had really come to the right place, and, even if I had, whether the people of this house would want to acknowledge any connection with Pramudya. But it was into a smaller back sitting room that I was shown, its walls adorned with photographs of President Sukarno, and, to my delight, Pramudya. I asked the young girl who had received me if her father was at home. No, he was still at the office, but her mother was available and she went off to fetch her. Then a woman of forty-five to fifty entered the room, attired in Western dress, showing a little prosperous plumpness around the middle, but with a long, lean face and grave expression that bore an unmistakable likeness to Pramudya. Yes it was she, rather than her husband, who was related to Pramudya--she was his sister. She summoned a tall spare man whom she introduced as Pak W, her older brother, the second in the family after Pramudya; he was staying with her temporarily. Shortly afterwards her husband, who turned out to be a well-placed official of the Department of Agriculture, arrived home and joined us, along with five of the six children of the family. Contrary to my earlier fears, they were delighted at my interest in Pramudya and proud of their connection with him. A photograph album was quickly produced and two photographs of Pramudya pointed out, one as a boy in scouts' uniform and another as a young man holding his first child, alongside a very pretty woman, his first wife. All other photographs of Pramudya had disappeared, appropriated by Pramudya's second wife and family in Jakarta, they decided. But there were numerous pictures of his two youngest brothers, standing in snow, clad in fur hats and coats, in front of various square, functional-looking buildings. They had been educated in Russia, a privilege for which they were now paying with imprisonment as political detainees. I learned that these were not the only members of Pramudya's family caught up in the roundup of suspected Communist sympathizers in 1965-66. An uncle was in the Salemba prison in Jakarta, and Pak W himself revealed that he had been released from Buru only a few months earlier. He had seen Pramudya there on several occasions and recounted that his brother was in good health, even plump (*lemu*). The family had no further news of Pramudya, no idea of possible dates of release. But Pak M, the brother-in-law, recounted proudly that Pram was just the same as ever, just as firm and outspoken in his opinions. He quoted a recent article in the magazine *Tempo*, which had reported Pram as saying that he had done no wrong, that the government owed *him* a living when he was released, and if he did not receive support in his own country he would



The Painting of Pramudya's Father

simply go elsewhere. Such statements would hardly speed up his release, Pak M conceded, but it was wonderful to see Pram's spirit so strong.

We started to talk about Pramudya's writings and of the picture of his family and of Blora presented there. Nyonya M pointed to another photograph on the wall, a photo of a painting of a very correct-looking gentleman with waxed moustache, hair parted in the middle, and high collar, her father. The Budi Utomo school he founded had been situated just around the corner from this house, which was itself originally built as a dormitory for teachers from the school. An uncle, her father's youngest brother, still lives in a house opposite the site of the old school, now occupied by a junior high school. He taught in the old school up until its closure at the time of the Japanese occupation, but Pramudya's father, under suspicion from the Dutch authorities because of his nationalist activities, was barred from teaching in his own school from the early thirties onwards, and forced to return to the state-controlled HIS. In his depression over this he turned to gambling, to the outrage of his strictly religious wife, just as described in *Cerita dari Blora*. I asked about other characters and incidents from the stories--the

maimed servant Nyi Kin, the little girl Inem, Pramudya's playmate, forced to marry at the age of eight, the family of Leman who made their living in mysterious, unmentionable ways, the grandmother who sold vegetables door-to-door at the houses of rich people. Yes, all true, Nyonya M affirmed.

What of the description of the sufferings of the family during the Japanese occupation and Revolution presented in the longest of the *Cerita dari Blora, Dia Yang Menyerah* (She Who Gave Up)? Was that an accurate representation of what had happened at that time? What had become of Sri, the title figure of the story, the little girl left in charge of the family who had learned to cope with adversity by shrinking into herself and letting it roll over her? Nyonya M smiled. *She* is the Sri of the story. Many of the events in the story are fictionalized, such as the involvement of her older sister with the Communist forces who took over the town of Blora at the time of the Madiun Affair, and the death of the father in the burning prison building set ablaze by the departing "Reds." But it is true that, after her mother died, she had to leave school at the age of ten to look after the family while her older siblings were away or working, and her father caught up in political activity. The death of the mother was a terrible blow, the start of all her troubles. While her mother was alive, life had been full of excitement and happiness, but when she died of malnutrition during the early months of the Japanese occupation, *semua sudah hancur* [everything had fallen apart]. By then there was nothing left to eat, the mother's collection of gold and batik cloth had gone, even the family crockery and kitchen utensils disappeared, stolen by the neighbors at the various *slametan* (ritual celebrations) commemorating the mother's death. The produce of their garden, too, was constantly stolen--she would watch neighborhood youths climb the family's coconut trees and steal the fruit. Why didn't she try to stop them? *Mboten mentala* [I didn't have the heart], she replies. Because of food shortages they often went for two months without rice, eating only cassava from the garden. Any kind of leaves or plants could be used for soup, even moss (*lumut watu*) was sold and eaten. She herself would collect banana leaves and sell them, exactly as described in the story. Her two teenage daughters smile and Nyonya M laughs, saying that they have trouble imagining their mother behaving in such a way. Her practice of using strips torn off her own petticoat as patches for the younger children's clothes is similarly inconceivable. I ask if she recognized her own attitudes in Pramudya's description of her "surrender" to hardship and misfortune--did she ever say anything like this to her brother? But she only repeats the description of the sufferings and says she can't remember what she may have said to Pramudya between her tears on the night they talked together at the time of their father's death, as described in *Bukan Pasar Malam*. She does remember that in the evenings the children would sing a little refrain, "*Sok peng, sesok gepeng*" ["tomorrow they'll be flat, our stomachs will be flat as deflated tires"], dancing about and laughing at their hunger. At that time she never thought of the future, or of where all this would lead, only of each day's needs. For they never knew whether there would be food for tomorrow, just had to live one day at a time. Had her family suffered particularly harshly--what was happening to other people at that time? She replies that she doesn't know, she spent all her time looking after the family, never visiting anyone, and no one came to see them. They were quite alone. What of the neighbors? There is a tiny pause, then the matter-of-fact answer--all the people around them were ordinary *kampung* people; the family never mixed with them, since they were, after all, *priyayi*.¹³

13. The term *priyayi*, which originally referred to members of the Javanese aristocracy and holders of high bureaucratic positions, is now used more generally to refer to people of professional, white-collar occupation. Pramudya's father's

I suddenly thought of Pramudya's description of his mother, hoeing the fields behind their house where she grew vegetables for the family like one of her *kampung* neighbors, yet always maintaining a correct social distance from those around. For their way of life was very different from hers, and while she understood something of their situation and problems, by her strict values few allowances could be made for them on that account. The short story *Inem* is a poignant evocation of these attitudes. When the mother of little Inem calls on Pramudya's mother, the whole conversation about the girl's marriage is an expression of the social gulf between the two women, formalized in the *kampung* woman's use of the noble term of address *ndara*. After Inem's marriage fails and she seeks refuge from her family's beatings with Pramudya's mother, it is the need to preserve her social position which outweighs the mother's natural sympathies, and causes her to refuse the child. For Pramudya's mother and father are important figures in the local community with a large household of schoolboy boarders--it would not be "fitting" for a young divorcee of nine to stay there. In the final paragraphs of the story, Pramudya's hostility to his mother's stance, earlier implicit in the narration, comes through with full force:

Dan kemudian, janda yang berumur sembilan tahun itu--karena hanya membani rumahtangga orangtuanya--boleh dipukuli oleh siapa saja yang suka: emaknya, adiknya yang lelaki, pamannya, tetangganya, bibinya. Namun Inem tak pernah datang lagi ke rumah kami.

Sering terdengar teriak-kesakitannya. Bila ia meraung, kututup kuingku dengan kedua belah tangan. Dan ibupun tetap memegang kesopanan rumahtangganya.

[And afterwards, because she was only a burden in her parents' household, the nine-year-old divorcee could be beaten by anyone who wished--her mother, her younger brother, her uncle, her neighbors, her aunt. But Inem never came again to our house.

Her cries of pain could often be heard. When she moaned, I would cover my ears with both hands. And mother meanwhile continued to maintain the respectability of her household.]¹⁴

Nyonya M had just described the now-inconceivable hardship of a time during which there was no rice for two months, only cassava, people ate soup made of leaves, and she herself sold banana leaves to get money for food. Would she recognize that the state of affairs she had pictured as incredible to the point of laughter for her well-fed, well-dressed daughters represents *normality* for many of these *kampung* people, then and now? Had she any idea of the way those neighbors might have regarded their blatant stealing, why they might have been unsympathetic to, even pleased by, the family's misfortunes? Reading Pramudya's descriptions of the constant suffering of the inhabitants of Blora through successive occupations of their town by mutually antagonistic political groups, one tends to attribute the greed, treachery and indifference people show toward one another to the brutalizing effects of war. There is a sense of pessimism about the frailty of human values when put to the test. In the long conversation Pramudya has with his sister (Sri, Nyonya M) in *Bukan Pasar Malam*, in which she expresses hurt bewilder-

position as a teacher entitled his family to *priyayi* status. The neighbors, however, working as butchers, laborers, etc., and living in a *kampung*, a cluster of small woven-rattan houses, rather than a solid stone or brick residence facing the street, were of markedly lower social status.

14. *Cerita dari Blora*, p. 80.

ment at their neighbors' actions, her brother tells her that such behavior stems from envy and parochialism. *Karena, adikku, penduduk kota kecil ini tak mempunyai perhatian apa-apa selain dirinya sendiri, keluarga dan lingkungannya. . . . Karena itu, adikku, lebih baik engkau jangan turut campur dalam kepentingan-kepentingan mereka.* [Because, my sister, the inhabitants of our little town have nothing to attend to except themselves, their families and their surroundings. . . . And so it would be better if you didn't get involved in their affairs].¹⁵

Talking with Nyonya M, one is impressed by her intelligence and humor, by the evident courage and resourcefulness she showed during those black years, and sympathizes with the resentment she expresses at the predatory actions of her neighbors towards defenseless children. It is gladdening that the suffering of those years has been long left behind, good to see the sad dispirited girl of *Dia Yang Menyerah* transformed into a thriving, contented middle-aged matron. But recalling her reference to her neighbors as "ordinary kampung people" and her own family as "priyayi," adding to this Pramudya's description of their mother's lifestyle and attitudes, and thinking of the present prosperity of Nyonya M and others like her, compared to the circumstances of the poor people of Blora, perhaps it is possible to see in the neighbors' behavior something other than simple greed and vindictiveness. For a few brief years they had the experience of equality with, even superiority to, those who had lorded it over them for generations, and were to do so for many more. When they stole fruit in full view of Pramudya's sisters and gossiped gleefully about the family's misfortunes, were they just being opportunistic and self-seeking, or was there also a sweet feeling of *revenge*?

How had Nyonya M made the transition from poverty and despair to her present comfortable circumstances? When their father died, her older brother, Pak W, had paid for her to attend a secretarial course. After finishing the course she got a job in the Forestry Department where her present husband was then working. Since then he has moved to the Department of Agriculture and has evidently prospered; they have six children, the eldest of whom is in his first year of study at Brawijaya University in Malang. I ask about the other sisters, one older, one younger, the Is and Diah of *Dia Yang Menyerah*. The younger one has married and moved away, the older one is still in Blora, living in the old family home. She is alone, her child having died, as already mentioned in *Bukan Pasar Malam*, and her husband soon after.

I asked what the family thought of Pramudya's writings about them. Do they often read his stories, what do they feel when they do? Nyonya M used to have a number of his books, but now they have all been taken to Jakarta by Pramudya's wife to replace his own copies, burnt with all the rest of his books at the time of his imprisonment. She herself has read quite a few of his works, Pak W not so many. The book that all family members identify with is *Bukan Pasar Malam*, a very accurate account, it seems, of the circumstances of their father's death. Both Nyonya M and later her older sister report that they cry whenever they read it, it is so true. Is she similarly moved by *Dia Yang Menyerah*? *Tidak seberapa* [Not so much], she replies. How do other people react to Pramudya's description of them? Sometimes they are surprised and rather offended at what Pramudya chooses to say about them--*Kok itu yang dipilih* [Why did he choose that]? they ask. Their grandmother was particularly outraged at her depiction, claiming that she had been shown as a "*kere*," a beggar. Pak W may also feel he has been unfairly treated--several times he remarks on the *fictional* quality of much of Pramudya's writing, citing the example of the second brother in *Keluarga Gerilya* (A

15. *Bukan Pasar Malam*, p. 62.

Guerrilla Family) who shot his younger brother dead because his talking threatened to betray their hiding place. Do the family ever talk about the books together? No, never, Nyonya M says, she has never talked to any of her siblings about Pram's works.

After a while I asked if I might visit the old family home, and Pak W offered to accompany me there. On the way I tried to encourage him to talk about his own interests, inquire indirectly about the sort of activities that had brought him to Buru, but he was politely evasive, saying only that he had been involved in some sort of "writing." He was clearly pleased to have company and very willing to help, but seemed depressed and dispirited, so I gave up the questioning. It is only a few hundred yards from Nyonya M's house to the family home, but the old house already stands on the outskirts of town, at the end of a street. On one side there is a cemetery and some fields; to the rear, only a cluster of kampung houses and some gardens separate it from the Kali Lusi. The house is high-roofed, built of timber and brick; there has been some remodeling since Pramudya's description of it in *Bukan Pasar Malam*, but with its peeling paint and chipped bricks it is once more in need of repair. The garden and orchard from which the family eked a living during the harsh years of the Japanese occupation and Revolution is overgrown and neglected now, and the fence separating it from the house is sagging and broken. The well, too, at the front of the house, which Pramudya repaired in accordance with his promise to his dying father, is again falling into decay, but it is nevertheless in constant use, as neighbors come to draw water.¹⁶

Passing through the front door one enters a long, high-ceilinged sitting room, sparsely furnished in contrast to the profusion of china cabinets, plastic furniture, and multiple bric-à-brac of Nyonya M's home. Here there are two sets of simple cane tables and chairs and one bureau, on the walls two small pictures and a few carvings; over the whole austere scene presides Pramudya's father in the original painting from which Nyonya M's photograph was taken. The woman who greets us likewise presents a total contrast to her sister--she has the same long, lean face but her wide, staring eyes keep looking about nervously and she is pitifully, amazingly thin. She is most hospitable--Pak W and I are served huge glasses of chocolate milk and cookies--and wishes to be friendly, but the conversation does not go easily. Talking with Nyonya M about her experiences of thirty years ago felt like a welcome enough expression of interest in sufferings long since left behind; discussing the same subject with her sister, I fear I may be probing something all too painfully present. She tells how she left school in 1944 at the age of fourteen and got a job as a typist in the subdistrict office. It is true that she became involved in political activity but only in a minor way. In 1946 she married a soldier in the Republican army and left Blora to accompany him on his various postings,

16. Pramudya's brother confirmed that the well was indeed repaired shortly after his father's death, in accordance with the promise made to the old man which Pramudya recounts in *Bukan Pasar Malam* (p. 45). Pramudya explains the importance of a well in a town like Blora--*Dan di daerah kami yang kering, sumur adalah pusat perhatian manusia dalam hidupnya disamping beras dan garam. Karena itu--sekalipun pembuatan sumur itu atas ongkos sendiri--akhirnya ia menjadi hak umum. . . . Dan kalau engkau punya sumur disini dan sumur itu kaututup untuk kepentingan sendiri engkau akan dijauhi orang dan dicap kedekut* [And in our dry area a well is as important a focus of attention in human life as rice and salt. For this reason, even though a well is built at private expense, it becomes a public right. . . . And if you own a well here and you close off that well for your own use people will shun you and call you miserly]. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

to Kudus, Rembang, and Kediri. In 1948, when Kediri was taken by the Communists,¹⁷ she and her husband were forced to flee. They returned to Blora, walking the entire distance, through swamps and mountains, because there was no transport. She says that at that time she became *kaget* (traumatized) by the physical suffering and fear, and fell ill. She contracted tuberculosis and couldn't shake it off. Her husband was posted to various places but she stayed behind in Blora; she had a child but it was born prematurely and died a few days after birth. For a long time she simply could not eat and now she cannot regain the weight lost. Her husband returned to Blora and they lived together in the family house, but he died in 1953, "perhaps" also because of TB. After that she was sent to a sanatorium in Salatiga where she recovered from TB, but her soul will never be cured, she says. Now she lives alone in the old house (apart from servants) and does dressmaking for people. She asks me not to tell her tale, her experience is of no use to anyone.

It seemed best to go on then, to continue our walk beyond the old house, down to the Kali Lusi. As we came out scores of grinning, yelling children thronged around. They seemed to derive merriment not only from the unexpected novelty of an odd-looking *Landa* (Caucasian) in their midst but even more from the discomfort their presence caused Pak W and his frail sister. Pak W led me along a narrow path past a group of small, woven-bamboo houses whose inhabitants nodded in respectful recognition as we passed--he had known these people since he was a child, Pak W said. Beyond the houses were gardens of cassava and clumps of banana trees, planted on the sloping banks of the river, interspersed with huge thickets of bamboo. Suddenly the ground fell sharply away, dropping down to the waters of the swirling, muddy Lusi. The river should have been still and shallow by that time of year, but instead, swollen by the unseasonable rains, it was in a raging, devouring mood. A huge chunk of earth and bamboo bitten off from the opposite bank lay marooned in the middle of the stream while smaller clumps swept rapidly by. Some foolhardy little boys were in the river swimming, being dragged along by the current. Pak W pointed to a spot where he and Pramudya were almost drowned while attempting a similar feat. They would often come down to the river to swim, play or simply watch.

I had half-expected the Kali Lusi to be a disappointment, as the reality of a scene read about and long imagined often is. But this river was every bit the image of turbulent relentless change of Pramudya's writings. Other features of the symbolic landscape of Pramudya's Blora also retained their suggestive force. The old house, in particular, in its isolation, its rundown condition, and its austere old-world atmosphere, seemed to mirror all too accurately the isolation and sadness of the woman living on alone there with her memories. Perhaps the troubled fortunes of other family members, of Pramudya and the two younger brothers, as well as the chastened Pak W, were also reflected. Nyonya M, on the other hand, was no longer part of that scene, she had her own bustling establishment. By traditional Javanese wisdom Nyonya M's prosperity may be a just reward for her ability, as described by Pramudya, to remain detached, inwardly calm, resistant to the flux of events. For she has survived and gone on to fulfill the role of a woman of her station, caring for a large brood of children, passing on to them the values and attitudes inherited from her own mother. Those who became swept away

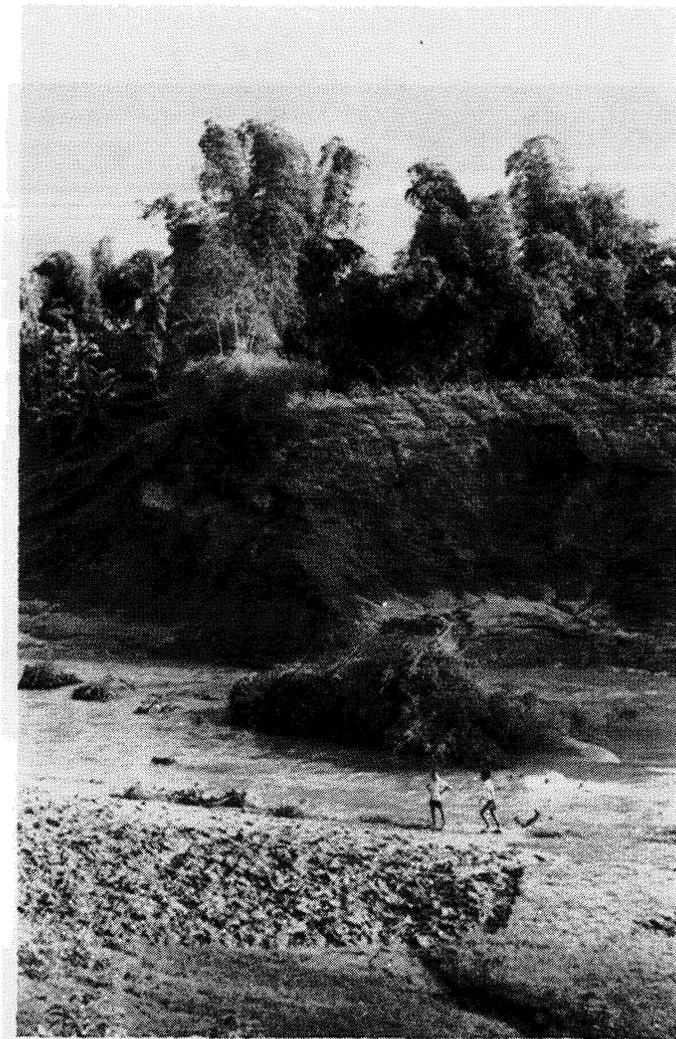
17. My notes taken during this conversation suggest that it was the Dutch rather than the Communists who moved into Kediri at this time and forced Pramudya's sister and her husband to flee. But since I am not sure of this point I have accepted the account given by Pramudya himself in *Bukan Pasar Malam*, which states that his sister fell ill while fleeing from the Communists. See *Bukan Pasar Malam*, p. 25.



The Old House



The Orchard



The Kali Lusi in the Rainy Season



Pramudya's Brother and Two Sisters
(Nyonya M on the right)

with the new currents, who let go of the old ways and got involved in something new, Pramudya, his brothers, Nyonya M's older sister, seem to be still struggling with the tide.

The face of the town as a whole has undergone some big changes in recent years, but through them all runs a familiar pattern. The noisy motorbikes which have replaced plodding horse-drawn carts on the main street are driven by the sons and daughters of the civil servants, teachers, rich farmers, and traders who were carried in the carts; other people walk, as always. The Chinese community has extended its building activity from fine private residences to a big, new church. The movie theater now attracts the attention once directed at grand social gatherings at the bupati's residence, but the move down the hill to a smaller location has not deprived the office of bupati of its political importance, nor, it seems, its holder of an expansive lifestyle. In the pleasant European-style bungalows, away from the main street, life passes quietly and comfortably enough, and the residents of the rattan huts by the river still cringe respectfully if someone from the big houses should pass by.

But that was only my first visit to Blora, the first view of the Kali Lusi. When I stopped there again a few months later on my way back to Yogya from East Java, just to say hullo to the family and to give them copies of the photographs I had taken, the rains had quite gone, and the Lusi was tranquil, shallow, beneficent. The gardens of cassava and other vegetables had been extended on to the newly exposed mud-flats where the water had retreated and the river itself was full of people--digging out sand from the bottom to sell for building, washing clothes and bathing, or simply wading across to a destination on the other side. There had been changes in human affairs as well. Pak W had moved back into the old family home, where he had set himself up in business practicing Javanese medicine. He was bubbling over with enthusiasm about his new venture, which was apparently doing very well--over a hundred people had come to see him in a month, he said, and certainly his record book was full of names. Immediately I arrived at the house he took me into a back room to photograph him and the little niece who acted as his assistant standing next to their saucepans and pots of herbal medicines. His method of curing was to touch the patients' bodies in several key spots to diagnose their illness--heart disease produced signs at wrist and elbow, diabetes could be detected on the tongue, tumors affected the legs, and "*hypertensi*" some part of the anatomy I cannot quite recall. Once diagnosed, the illness was treated with an appropriate preparation, and/or by spiritual exercises. He said he had acquired his skill while on Buru--it had simply come to him after meditation and thought. His services had been very much in demand among other prisoners. The other family members seemed to be pleased about his new enterprise and amused by his eager enthusiasm; the older sister had brightened somewhat with the stimulation of new company.

Another development of note concerned the Bupati of Blora, my Boy Scout friend. As I passed his residence this time, the gates and doors were firmly shut, with no one in sight. Later on I discovered that the great crowd of people outside the courthouse on the alun-alun were listening through loudspeaker relay to the proceedings of his arraignment on charges of unlawful takeover of village land. Later, I believe, he was in fact found guilty and dismissed from his post. It would seem that this bupati had no magic whip nor mystical mantra to keep his subjects in awed submission: the aura of his office was no longer sufficient to place him above the rules governing the actions of ordinary men.¹⁸ During that visit I found

18. See Heather Sutherland's *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial*

out, too, that the uncle who had been earlier reported to be in prison in Jakarta had just been released. No doubt Pramudya's two younger brothers were among the thousands of B class prisoners released in 1979, and then Pramudya, defiant to the end, was finally set free. . . .

Waktu tidak pernah mati. Dunia tidak pernah mati. Dan haripun tak pernah mati. Waktu dan tempat hanya ruang belaka untuk diisi oleh berjuta macam perubahan. Perubahan-perubahan baru datang dengan megahnya. Yang lama memberi tempat pada yang baru dilahirkan. . . . Perubahan! Sekalipun apa yang ada dibalik perubahan itu baru merupakan kabut tak berangka dan tak bertepi yang mengawang antara bumi dan langit.

[Time never dies. The world never dies. And the day, too, never dies away. Time and place are only a space to be filled with millions of types of changes. New changes come in their splendor. The old gives way to what has just been born. . . . Change! Even if what is behind that change is but a formless and boundless mist floating between earth and sky.]¹⁹

Transformation of the Javanese Priyayi, ASAA Southeast Asia Publications Series (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979), especially pp. 20-23, for details of the kinds of financial "excess" considered normal for a bupati during colonial times.

19. *Cerita dari Blora*, pp. 342, 304.