IN MEMORIAM: PARAMITA RAHAYU ABDURACHMAN, 1920–1988

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One of the great pleasures of a visit to Jakarta was conversation with "Jo" Abdurachman; alas, future scholars will miss that contact with one of the most knowledgeable and generous guides to Indonesia. Paramita was not by training an academic, but she had the great gift of being able to observe and put into perspective the vast changes that took place in her lifetime. Her background and experience made her close witness to the upheaval of national revolution, but she never lost that sense of detachment which enabled her to judge clearly what she saw around her. Moreover, she made a natural connection between political and cultural changes, and saw their origins in historical development—thus making a synthesis which foreign academics (when they tried at all) arrived at only after a great deal of mental struggle. As a result, she was one of the most wide-ranging and stimulating commentators on Indonesian culture and affairs, and for four decades foreign scholars visiting the country found in her a source not only of information and contacts but of wisdom and critical good sense.

In one way, Paramita was a child of the Indonesian establishment, secure in her social position, an authority on elite culture and manners, protected first by birth and then by revolutionary record from the penalties exacted by changing times. Yet she was also conscious of being on the margin, and this awareness was vital to her sense of perspective. To begin with, she was a woman who sought to display intellectual interest and pursue a career in a time and social place where this was not expected of females. Her father was regent of what is now Jatinegara (a high position in the "traditional" system, but also a new one, for the post was a late colonial creation). Had she been a male she would probably have been sent for university education in the Netherlands, but as it was she obtained the excellent HBS schooling to which a lucky few of the Indonesian elite were given access. It gave her a splendid command of Dutch, English, French, and German, to which her later academic interests caused her to add Spanish and Portuguese. It drew her into a Western intellectual world and made her lastingly internationalist; at the same time it repelled her in its ignorance and rejection of Indonesian people and Indonesian cultures, and made her a determined nationalist. In 1940 she enrolled as a history student in the Batavia Faculty of Letters and at the same time taught school at the HIS Pasundan in Jatinegara. By then war was approaching, and this plus her growing concern for a socially useful role moved her to become active in the Netherlands Indies Red Cross.

When the Japanese arrived Paramita was recruited into social welfare work for the occupation regime, first as secretary to the head of the Department of Justice and then as a member of a team investigating the conditions of forced labor detachments recruited for the Japanese war effort. In this capacity she traveled widely in West Java, and there, toward the end of the war, she met the long-exiled revolutionary leader Tan Malaka, who had secretly returned to Indonesia. Soon after independence was declared, he appeared at the Jakarta house of her uncle, the prominent nationalist Achmad Subardjo. Tan Malaka appeared to Subardjo and his associates an ideal figure to head a more radi-

cally anti-foreign struggle than was promised by Sjahrir's leadership; they backed him, and Paramita acted as his secretary until his imprisonment in mid-1946.

Though Jo's service with the elusive Tan Malaka attracted the interest of historians of modern Indonesia, it was not by any means her most significant revolutionary activity. She was one of the founding staff of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, another role arrived at by courtesy of her uncle but also earned by her language skills and wartime experience in dealing with the Dutch and Japanese. She participated in the establishment of the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia) shortly after the declaration of independence, and as head of its foreign section was active in negotiations over the care of war prisoners and refugees. Years later, she would recount how she and other delegates on the PMI's first delegation to an international meeting were astonished to discover that other Islamic countries had chosen to call their organizations Red Crescent and wished Indonesia to do the same. Paramita and her associates pointed out that the red cross was not the same as the Christian cross, a measure both of their greater sophistication and ease with Western symbols and of their comparative naiveté and isolation regarding the larger Islamic world. It was also characteristic that they did not consider changing their organization's title for the sake of political advantage.

Paramita joined the Republican government's exodus to Yogyakarta, where she enrolled as a student at the newly founded Gadjah Mada University. Again, however, studies took second place to greater social concerns: she was active in nationalist youth organizations and increasingly absorbed by work for the Red Cross. Following the Dutch attack of July 1947 she became head of the PMI's information department. Her Red Cross activities were now mixed with political purpose as, outraged at the overrunning of West Java and at attempts to promote a separate Sundanese state, she helped to keep information and advice flowing between Yogya and Republican supporters in the occupied territories. The Dutch were suspicious that her frequent visits to Jakarta were not prompted by social considerations alone; but her family was too highly placed and elite support was too important to their plans for Pasundan for them to take action. In this period Jo developed a close connection with the Siliwangi Division, whose leaders she had known as schoolmates or as her pupils in prewar Bandung and Batavia. In December 1948 Yogya fell to the Dutch, and Paramita was among the nationalist activists arrested; very soon, however, she was released on her family's responsibility and returned to Jakarta, where she witnessed the final disintegration of Dutch rule. She was working then for the Indonesian mission of UNICEF, and became its deputy head.

Following the transfer of sovereignty, Red Cross workers accompanied Indonesian army units as they spread into the Outer Islands, establishing the Republic's rule. Paramita followed the Siliwangi into East Indonesia and was in charge of distributing relief in South Maluku following the defeat of the RMS revolt. The Moluccas fascinated her for their very different society, their rich and tormented past, and the complex problems of adapting their culture and experience to a Republican future. Perhaps, too, they presented an arena less discouraging than that of a national capital that was already suffering a postrevolutionary loss of purpose. She developed a lasting relationship with Maluku, becoming adopted into Ambonese society and delving into local language, history, and custom. Much later, when she was rusticated from active social work, this would become the basis for her career as a scholar.

In 1951 Paramita was given a government scholarship to study sociology at New York University, thus becoming one of the first Indonesians to undertake graduate work in the US. Although this led to a lasting relationship with the American academic

community it had not much effect on her scholarly development. The studies were too abstract, too cut-and-dried, too little related to the problems of the world she knew. Much more vital and useful to her mind was volunteer work with the Red Cross in New York and with the Indonesian diplomatic staffs dealing with the US and the UN. Moreover, she had left behind important work in Indonesia: in April 1951 she had been elected treasurer of the PMI. Returning to Jakarta, she resumed her role in that organization, worked in the foreign relations section of the Ministry of Social Welfare, and headed the social workers' association Ikatan Pekerja Kemasyarakatan.

In 1954 she became the PMI's secretary-general. She held that post for nearly a decade, surviving well into the period of Guided Democracy, as few other officials of her background and integrity did. In 1964, however, she was judged too far from the spirit of the day. By Presidential decision she was retired from the Red Cross post, to be taken up as an employee of the National Research Department and later the LIPI. She was now free to develop her scholarly interests—or not, since the appointment was more a reward for past service than an active assignment. Characteristically, she did not use the position as a sinecure but established herself as a serious historian of Maluku, delving into archives in the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and England as well as Indonesia. Yet she was conscious of being marginal as an academic, an autodidact among, increasingly, Western-trained PhDs. It made her cautious, keeping in her writing to topics which displayed little of the breadth she expressed in conversation.

She was more at ease in what increasingly absorbed her as an avocation, the propagating of popular knowledge concerning Javanese and Sundanese high culture. As Indonesia became more integrated into a Western-dominated, materialist life style, she grew concerned for the loss of the nation's cultural roots and alarmed at the inability of the new generation of urban elite to relate at the most elementary level to its heritage. Her efforts in this line, while more on the level of organization than publication, resulted *inter alia* in the book *Cerbon* (Sinar Harapan, 1982), the fruit of a long interest in Ceribon court history and art. She had also a particular interest in preserving traditional batik art and helped to mobilize interest in Indonesian textiles both in the country and abroad. In later years, as she became the eldest member of her extended family, her time was increasingly spent providing advice on custom to the younger generation. Yet this new role was not the reflection of a conventional life-arc from youthful radical to elderly conservative. Her opinions remained as lively and, in the current Indonesian context, iconoclastic as ever. But she had always valued both tradition and modernity, as she had looked to both foreign and indigenous values: to her mind, one needed to command both and to choose what was best in them. Now age, political marginality, and above all a sense of the needs of the time caused her to emphasize those elements in her own heritage that were being lost to the future. She continued to be active in this and in her historical research right up to her final illness: it would not have done for her, either as an aristocrat or as a revolutionary, to have given up the task.