

TAN MALAKA: "JUST AS ARTISANS, WHEN GATHERED TOGETHER"

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I

There has been, admittedly, apprehension over the past twenty years or so, about what if Helen Jarvis should finally make it. I thought of the beautiful trips of exploration, the searches for a chapter or a loose page from some Tan Malaka text, of the moments of victory, when, in *Pasar Senen* let's say, a market still of somewhat dubious fame for its fishy dealings, one might one day find, amidst pans, sandals, and old recordings, a stenciled thriller-like, samizdat-like version of *Pandangan Hidup* (*Weltanschauung*) or even a copy of *Madilog*. One feared—not a few Indonesians had been searching the same way—that Tan Malaka's message would become stale if it did not reach us through this kind of adventure. For the two decades or so that I had known about Helen Jarvis' project, I thought of the day when these three handy, fat, respectable volumes would appear on my shelf, complete with index, bibliography, and notes, easy to browse through, on recycled paper and for only thirty dollars.¹

Tan Malaka's monumental, moving, crazy, and wise autobiography, the warmest statement by and about Indonesia during the first fifty years of the twentieth century, and maybe the warmest statement by and about the Asian revolution during the same period, is now available in English. After Sukarno, Hatta, or Sjahrir, after Ho Chi Minh or Louis Taruc, or Mao Tse Tung, the English-only reading academia may now study another real figure with a strong accent.

Helen Jarvis almost lost herself in the job. She spent more than twenty years on translating Tan Malaka. In that time, so she says, Tan Malaka became "an ever present fourth member of the household." It must have been an adventure similar to those in the *Pasar Senen*. It is evident that Jarvis traced Tan Malaka with pleasure. She remembers, for instance, how in Indonesia, as she was conducting her interviews,

¹ Tan Malaka, *From Jail to Jail*, translated and introduced by Helen Jarvis, 3 vols. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, Southeast Asia, No. 83, 1991). Numbers in parentheses refer to the volume and page numbers of this translation.

A frail man of seventy, almost blind, had trekked several kilometers along muddy paths and had forded a river to reach the landrover near Tangerang, so anxious was he to tell his story to someone interested in Tan Malaka. (I: xxiii)

On another occasion, another old freedom fighter and a friend of Tan Malaka, in his seventies also, "relived many battles in the space of a single afternoon in Serang, brandishing his samurai sword and singing the Internationale" (Ibid.).

Jarvis went through the archives, too—in the United States and United Kingdom. She discovered some documents on Tan Malaka there, but not many, and none of the material changed fundamentally what had already been known. She thoroughly searched the Dutch colonial archives in The Hague. There, of course, she found files and files, but Harry Poeze had been there before her, and already in 1972 he had published most of what he found in his own *Tan Malaka*. Jarvis' interviews are her single greatest success—namely those with a group of old people in Bayah, who knew Tan Malaka during the war, and with Paramita Abdurrachman in Jakarta, who as a young woman had been close to Tan Malaka after 1945. For the interviews alone, the heuristic work Jarvis has done for *From Jail to Jail* is an important and highly commendable scholarly contribution.

Impressed as I am with Jarvis' splendid job, I now know better than before the three volumes were published, why I was apprehensive during those years. More consciously now, I may nourish my memories, bouts of nostalgia even, for the *Pasar Senen* searches.

One thing in particular disturbs me in Jarvis' Tan Malaka—a notion of "reliability," which seems to be the central principle of Jarvis' approach as an editor and as a translator. Jarvis describes *From Jail to Jail* as "on the whole an honest account" (I: xi). She, no doubt, is correct in this. But she appears to define Tan Malaka's "decency," and thus locate him in time and space, by juxtaposing what he has tried to make us believe—about countries, revolutions, friends, himself—with data on the same objects and subjects given by "authorities."

Tan Malaka is placed on an accepted map of knowledge; the map is presented as respectable, and the man is questioned.

Jarvis inquires, for instance, if Tan Malaka might have "plagiarized" some of the "penny-thriller" novels, which were abundantly published about him in Indonesia from the 1930s onwards; if he made his life more romantic and adventurous than it really was. Jarvis' conclusion essentially absolves Tan Malaka of any wrongdoing of that kind. It is information we may like to know. But does the heart of the matter not beat elsewhere? Would it not be more relevant, say, to point out, how these thrillers (and you still may find some in *Pasar Senen*, on a miraculous day) might be very real and thus very respectable—forming part of the reading of the whole of Tan Malaka's generation, part of that generation's consciousness, a true part of Tan Malaka's story—plagiarized or not?

It is certainly useful to check on Tan Malaka's data. It is all very well to point out errors he made. Largely missing, however, are a genealogy and poetics of the errors.

To give another example, Jarvis comments extensively in the notes on the real Rizal, Mabini, or Varona, on Philippine history as it actually was, and she does much to straighten out Tan Malaka's account in that sense. But she did not work enough, I feel, on the unreal, the bizarre, and, in a way, the "wrong" part of the picture: namely, the ideas of all-Malayan unity, which, it seems, really mattered. Tan Malaka was obsessed by the concept of common Malay roots, and future and potential all-Malayan solidarity, and so were, and not by accident, many of the Filipinos Tan Malaka met or liked. Tan Malaka's view of the Philippines, might be very marred or biased by the fact. Tan Malaka's journey through the Philippines

might be determined by those marred and biased perceptions. The errors might be functional; they might even be the essential particles of the truth of the autobiography.

Tan Malaka's autobiography is all built out of details and trifles. In two of her notes Helen Jarvis points out that Tan Malaka erroneously named Heraclitus and not Leucippus as the first proponent of the atomic hypothesis (I: 171n; III: 218n). This certainly means that Tan Malaka is not reliable as far as Greek philosophy is concerned. But it might be more revealing to point out again that there is a story behind this error. Doing so might perhaps locate Tan Malaka on a more relevant map. Generations of Marxists and "Marxists" were, for some reason, fed in Stalin's crash courses with the assertion that Heraclitus was the man to be honored as the father of our atomic, thus materialistic, awareness. I myself can attest to that. I believed in Heraclitus, too, and am sad and a little angry, when Jarvis tells me that I was wrong for so long. Ways of error are truncated as are rumors, and they easily become intertwined with the course of one's life and they should be studied with utmost seriousness.

At one place in his autobiography, Tan Malaka uses the term "Tammany politician." He does so in an otherwise wholly Indonesian paragraph, and without comment. There is also no comment on the term in Jarvis' notes. Is this because the term was already in English? Was it believed that, therefore, no further translation was needed? How many of Tan Malaka's readers in the Indonesia of 1947 could have had even the vaguest notion of what a "Tammany politician" meant? Why this omission by Tan Malaka—and why this omission by Jarvis? What witness this single detail might have provided to the torturous ways of Tan Malaka's return to his people, and his torturous ways in reaching us in the West!

Jarvis' rendering of Tan Malaka's opus, as far as I, as an East European, may judge that particular matter, is in clear and rich English. It reads fast and fresh, and is in many parts truly entertaining. Yet, should it be that way? According to Helen Jarvis,

Tan Malaka's text contains much that is strange to an English reader, leaning towards the Germanic style with frequent capitalization, particularly for abstract nouns, and the inclusion of a series of exclamation marks, question marks, and full stops. I have not included these in the English translation, where they would look quite out of place. (I: xvii).

Should Tan Malaka not look out of place? The strangeness of Tan Malaka—and, significantly, the strangeness of his language played a crucial role in Tan Malaka's appeal throughout his life and in his failure, and is still a part of his message to the Indonesians. Can we truly be made to hear Tan Malaka without being made aware of this?

Helen Jarvis, correctly I believe, decided to retain virtually all the words and expressions from English, German, French, Latin, Minangkabau, Chinese, and Japanese, that in abundance crowd Tan Malaka's text; in some cases, when she felt it necessary, she gave the English explanation in brackets or in a footnote. As far as Dutch is concerned, however, according to Jarvis,

Tan Malaka would have assumed some knowledge of Dutch on the part of the majority of his readers(...) Written and spoken Indonesian of that period frequently was punctuated with Dutch terminology; a decision to preserve Tan Malaka's Dutch would, I believe, have introduced a barrier to understanding the text that was not encountered by the majority of its contemporary readers. (I: xvii)

On the basis of this argument Jarvis decided, with few exceptions, to translate Dutch words in Tan Malaka's text into English "without annotation" (Ibid.).

My American students will, thus, have another barrier less to climb, and this is bad in itself. Moreover, I strongly believe that something should have been tried—by way of translation or in notes at least—to let a non-Indonesian reader feel precisely how important, in that time and place, the interaction between Indonesian and Dutch languages had been. Throughout the late colonial period, and throughout the war and revolution, on their way to what they believed was modernity, progress, and freedom, Indonesian intellectuals never passed easily over Dutch words, Dutch idioms and grammar. Several generations of Indonesian public figures, and Tan Malaka most probably among them, have struggled to speak and write Indonesian in spite of thinking Dutch. This awkwardness was an essential part of the texts they left; to a very large extent, this was their culture.

Dutch language behind the scenes, reflections of Dutch, echoes of Dutch, had always some hidden and thus, in a way, more powerful meaning. Tan Malaka was not really exceptional in the way he was aware of this. He chided his contemporaries for speaking an “adulterated” Dutch (II: 78). And he pointed out that the Indonesian text of the Linggajati agreement read “as though it were translated word-for-word from Dutch” (III: 157). Tan Malaka was more alert to the problem than the others, but he was a part of his generation

II

Publication of Helen Jarvis’ edition made me re-read Tan Malaka after many years. I am now almost exactly the age Tan Malaka was when he wrote it. Perhaps because of this also, the meeting was different. I have this time enjoyed much more the way Tan Malaka enjoyed himself—the way he relished his story, in particular when it came to narrating his travels, and, even more so perhaps, his departures:

The weather had cooled, rain drizzled down, and the wind blew gently. It was November 1919. With a roar, the big ship weighed anchor and engaged its propeller, churning water more impressively than a whale as it begins to swim. Slowly we left the city of Amsterdam behind until all we could see were indistinct little groups of houses in the mist. (I: 17)

Tan Malaka, so it seems to me this time, was able to write exactly about the things each man should know when departing on a trip—be it a walk in a Shanghai street, an exile, or travels on a revolutionary mission:

We Indonesians recall and long for our country and its climate only when we are in a place where we shake from the cold and face freezing winds whipping up the snow from the bare ground. (. . .)

We appreciate a vocation that has a clear direction and motivation only when we are in a foreign land, in a society with a different language and desires, when we feel like a grain of sand tossed about by the waves, wrenched from the ties of the society we know and from our life’s desires and our daily work. (I: 78–79)

Tan Malaka appears to me, this time, as a man dealing wisely only in the most simple things. What he seems to want most is to give practical advice:

“I was forced to leave my trunk, books and typewriter. I was also unable to take my blanket, really a thin eiderdown . . .” (II: 25). “Frequently I awoke to find him tucking my blanket in tightly around my feet, so that the part of the body which first feels the cold would eventually get warm again.” (II: 29) “My chest of clothes, my books, my

typewriter, and my brazier, charcoal, rice, soy sauce, onions and other things for cooking had vanished completely (. . .)." (II: 30)

It is all very well to talk about nationalism, and communism, and Trotskyism. But we should also know, and it seems that Tan Malaka wanted us to know this very badly, that the truly grave mistake he made, was—at the climax of the revolution, one morning, for some reason difficult to explain—not to pack his blanket, when told that the President was waiting. Of course, only another prison waited for him. The bitter cold, the image of the missing blanket, return through the remaining pages Tan Malaka wrote, blending into the motif of the unfinished revolution.

Food is as finely described, and as seriously handled, as the travels, the blankets, and the revolutions. In a Chinese village, Tan Malaka tells us,

I had learned the secret of how to live: what foods were good for me and what to avoid; how to cook various foods; what medicines cooked with what foods would strengthen my body which had endured so much suffering (. . .). (II: 75)

And a few pages further on:

Early on in the meal, a duck is usually served, cooked to perfection. The duck is still steaming and its aroma whetting the appetite when the host proceeds to 'operate' on it, but not with a knife and fork, for the object is to demonstrate the artistry of the host's chef. A perfectly cooked duck needs only to be touched at several of its joints with the tip of the chopsticks to fall asunder on the plate. (II: 81)

Tan Malaka, probably best of all, would have liked to be seen as a good craftsman of the revolution. Appetite for work, expertness, seem the finest human qualities there are in Tan Malaka's autobiography. With an infectious pride Tan Malaka expands on how he performed all his actions, repeating again and again, his plans and his skill in their performance. As a foreman at the coal mines in West Java during the Japanese occupation he invented a system for storing and finding even the smallest, most rarely used, most bizarre tool or machine part. As an English and science teacher in a Chinese school in Singapore, he invented his "own system of teaching." As a revolutionary:

Just as artisans, when gathered together, will talk about their craft, so it is with us activists in the movement. (III: 181)

I am less sure than Helen Jarvis appears to be that Tan Malaka's story "spans two generations of Indonesian nationalists from the formative pre-1926 era to the military struggle for independence that followed World War II" (I: ix). Jarvis herself saved for us the enchanting and sad recollections by Paramita Abdurrachman (recorded shortly before Dr. Paramita died) of Tan Malaka being almost paranoiac in Java after he returned from exile, paranoiac not so much amidst the people, but amidst the political leaders of the time—and these people counted. Whatever was done to, and whoever elaborated on Tan Malaka's myth after 1945, Tan Malaka, the joyful traveler, the artisan of the revolution, so I read his message now, when he came back simply did not fit.

III

It is still believed in parts of Indonesia that Tan Malaka really did not die. Tan Malaka's specter certainly haunted Western scholars long after his death. Probably more than any other figure, the spirit of Tan Malaka was responsible for George Kahin's reconsidering his

classic on Indonesian nationalism and revolution, twenty years after it had been published. Probably more than anything else, it was a feeling of Tan Malaka trekking around that brought about Benedict Anderson's book on the Indonesian revolution, which with Kahin's book are the classics today. Yet, amidst the forest of biographies of first-rate, second-rate, third-rate Indonesian leaders and "leaders," there still is not a single English biography of Tan Malaka.

There seems to be only one explanation. Tan Malaka, unlike virtually all the figures already "biographed," has made his life into a real story, has himself put it into the right words and paragraphs and chapters. He did it so well, it seems—this occasionally happens with truly good stories—that what is beyond the story, is merely silence. Helen Jarvis may have proved this in more than one way.