
Y. B. MANGUNWIJAYA

1929-1999

Fr. Yusuf Bilyarta Mangunwijaya (affectionately known as Romo Mangun) priest, social worker, novelist, essayist, architect, and activist, died suddenly in Jakarta on February 10. He was sixty-nine. Romo Mangun's death was a shock to his friends and colleagues. But in Indonesia all agreed he had a "good death," departing this world among friends in the middle of a conference. "A death just like Soedjatmoko," people said. The kind he would have wanted.

Romo Mangun was certainly prepared for death. He had long before written a will donating his body to science, although his wishes were overridden by the Archbishop. And in his bag was a letter to President Habibie, a letter addressed to "Mas Rudy," that was duly delivered and published a few days later in *Kompas*, praising Habibie for his policy on East Timor and pleading for intervention to stop ABRI's arming of pro-integrationists.

That evening, a constant stream of mourners paid respects at the Cathedral in Jakarta. On February 12, the funeral was held in Yogya. The requiem mass was held at the Gereja Kidul Loji, officiated by two bishops, three monsignors, and two priests. The church was overflowing—people crowded the yard. Many had come from Jakarta, and Yogyakarta's intellectual and artistic community was there. Also among the people in the church was a contingent of farmers from Kedung Ombo, representing those whose case for just compensation for their confiscated land Romo Mangun had long defended, and two busloads of people from the Kali Code community where Romo Mangun had lived and worked. As it was a Friday, the end of the mass coincided with *sholat jumat*. Before the procession to the cemetery, Romo Mangun's coffin was brought out to the churchyard, and Islamic prayers were offered by a large group gathered there. It was a remarkable scene.

In these times in Indonesia it is difficult to imagine anyone else who could unify so many people from so many different walks of life, and particularly from different religions. But that was Romo Mangunwijaya—in life and in death—and the genuine deep wide-felt grief expressed at the passing of this man was also a realization that the need for people such as he is greater now than ever.

Romo Mangun was born on May 6, 1929 in Ambarawa. He was the oldest of twelve children, and liked to tell the story that his second name "Bilyarta" was given him because his father was playing billiards at the time of his birth. In one of his essays he tells that as a child he thought that the entwined JB signs displayed at the time of the marriage of Princess Juliana and Bernhard, were put up everywhere especially for

him (Jusuf Biljarta), and was then rudely disillusioned to discover he was not special at all.

When he finished school, Romo Mangun joined the Indonesian Student Army, where his most "heroic" action, as he also loved to point out, was delivering food to the fighters. In 1959 he took orders for the priesthood, and immediately began to study architecture, first for a year at ITB Bandung and then for five years in Germany, graduating from the Westfaelische Technische Hochschule in Aachen in 1966. He then worked as a parish priest in Muntilan and taught architecture at Gadjah Mada University. In 1981 he was granted permission to leave his parish duties and went to live among the poor at Kali Code where he transformed the community, working with the sand-gatherers, prostitutes, and thieves who lived there to clean up the river, build a complex of simple bamboo houses and a reading-room, and instill a sense of confidence and pride. He was awarded the Aga Khan Foundation award for this project in 1992.

Romo Mangun always identified with ordinary people, both in social work and in his writing. As a priest, he was attracted to Liberation Theology, writing many essays on this subject, but remaining ambivalent about ideologies of social action, preferring to pursue his work as a quiet act of personal commitment, rather than as a manifestation of his affiliation to a wider movement. As a social activist, he showed great courage and generosity of spirit. His defense of the people who lost their land for the construction of the Kedung Ombo dam was tireless, and he placed himself in a position of real personal risk. Despite the fact that the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of just compensation was ruthlessly overturned, he continued to fight for their cause.

He loved to debunk myths of heroism, particularly of the revolutionary period, and his novel *Burung-burung Manyar* (translated into English as *The Weaverbirds*) took as its hero an Indonesian soldier fighting on the wrong side. He was passionate about the need to speak up against the falsification of history, and wrote many essays attacking the New Order's rewriting of the revolution and its fabrication of heroes, particularly Soeharto. His own hero was Sutan Sjahrir, Indonesia's first prime minister. Goenawan Mohamad wrote that Romo Mangun was attracted to Sjahrir perhaps because Sjahrir's fight against colonialism was not based on revenge, and because Sjahrir, like Romo Mangun, viewed victory and defeat with equanimity. Romo Mangun wrote of his respect for Sjahrir as a humanist who was brave enough to swim against the tide.

Romo Mangun is best known internationally as a writer and intellectual. He was a prolific essayist, and it is with his essays that Indonesians are most familiar. His writing was also courageous; speaking out in defense of the PRD (Partai Rakyat Demokrasi, People's Democratic Party) when its members were being hunted down, arguing for Bishop Belo when Belo was attacked in Indonesia for daring (in the international limelight of the Nobel Prize ceremony) to criticize Indonesia's treatment of the Timorese, and pushing the boundaries of tolerated criticism of the regime to the limit in his satire. One memorable essay published in 1996, at the time of the PRD roundup, explained that in order to heed the official warning against communist infiltration, it would be helpful to be provided with identifying characteristics, and then proceeded to describe the totalitarian trappings of the New Order regime. He was consistent and forthright in his criticism of the Soeharto regime, and wrote of taboo subjects such as independence for East Timor, the need to reform the Constitution, and the need for a federal Indonesia, long before the current "reformasi" voices began to

discuss such matters in a more conducive political climate. He bombarded newspaper editors with his essays, many of which were considered too dangerous for publication and later appeared in book collections. His tone was always sharp, witty, and self-aware, occasionally repetitive and at times patronizing. He liked to step in and out of his writing and was the master of parentheses, moving easily from impassioned comment to a witty aside spoken directly to the reader, a technique common to Javanese *wayang kulit*, for which he had a deep love.

The same qualities—readiness to debunk myth, sharp wit, commitment, love of history, identification with the ordinary person, playful awareness of his own voice, and above all a deep love of the richness of language—is found in his fictional writing. Romo Mangun wrote several short stories and eight novels; *Burung-burung Manyar* (1981), *Romo Rahadi* (1982), *Ikan-ikan hiu, Ido dan Homa* (1983); the trilogy: *Roromendut, Genduk Duku, Lusi Lindri* (1983-86), *Durga Umayi* (1991) and *Burung-burung Rantau* (1992). He received Southeast Asian Literary Award in 1981, and in 1996 the Professor Teeuw Award. His writing displays a brilliant fluidity with language, moving through different registers of Indonesian and weaving in English, Dutch, Javanese, and German, always keeping a clear observer's stand, intervening to remind the reader of the genre and the game. In his last novel, *Durga Umayi*, he gave full rein to his Javanese language sense and love of *wayang*. At a seminar in Sydney in 1997 he gave a reading from this work, and the text leapt into performance.

Romo Mangun's parents were both teachers, his father at primary school, his mother, kindergarten. He himself believed fervently in the need for a stimulating education, particularly for small children. He was always surrounded by young people, and his greatest faith for Indonesia's future was in the energy of its youth. Disgusted with Indonesia's education system, he believed the only hope for change was to start anew with the very young. In 1994 he founded a primary school in Yogyakarta for poor children, where the main focus was teaching language skills and instilling a love of reading. It was fitting, then, that Romo Mangun died at a seminar about publishing having just spoken passionately about the need to popularize reading in order to develop creativity, inquisitiveness, and tolerance, and again calling for a total overhaul of the education system. It was a cause for which he fought all his life. As people said in Indonesia, a good death.

- Jennifer Lindsay