A Fictional Detective’s Exploration of the Swirling Maelstrom of Indonesia in the Early 1940s: Patjar Koening and the Mysterious Death of Moh. Hoesni Thamrin

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Abstract

In 1941, in the midst of a small boom in the publishing of detective novels, a series of short detective novels were published in the south-central Javanese town of Yogyakarta. These novels were not published in a vacuum, but rather in the social, economic and political context of the final year before World War II. This paper examines the fifth of this series of long-forgotten detective novels featuring a Javanese detective, Raden Soebroto, and a mysterious villain, Patjar Koening, presenting the context of publication and an examination of the novel in the context of political scandals of the day. This examination demonstrates that the novel was clearly shaped in part by the legal risks facing the author and publisher, particularly where there is explicit discussion of contemporary people and events. Finally, this article briefly considers the fate of the Indonesian detective novel in periods of high political tension like the Japanese occupation or the revolutionary period which immediately followed this novel’s publication.

Keywords: detective novels, publishing, politicians, social tension, nationalist movement, journalism

Introduction

Born out of decades of translations of European literature into Malay by peranakan Chinese authors and by largely Minangkabau translators working for the government publisher Balai Poestaka, the late 1930s and first years of the 1940s witnessed a blossoming of popular

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1 An earlier version was presented at the Monash Malaysia conference on crime fiction in Malaysia and Indonesia. This essay developed out of an article dedicated to Jim Collins on his 70th birthday (Horton, forthcoming), and accordingly substantial portions have been borrowed. Thanks are due to numerous people who helped obtain important material, including Goto Ken’ichi, Chris Woodrich, Arya T. Anggara and Sudarmoko, as well as Peter Keppy, Mayumi Yamamoto, Guat Eng Chua and the late Jeff Hadler for comments on earlier drafts, and to the special editor, Eric Wilson, and to Chris Woodrich and Dag Yngvesson for their helpful comments and corrections. Thanks are due to Leiden University Library and the KITLV for making the Patjar Koening books available. This research was generously supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) No. 25300035 (PI, William Bradley Horton) and JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) No. 16H05679 (PI: Mayumi Yamamoto).
detective and spy publications for Malay-reading audiences. In addition to these translations—including both the adventure literature like Baroness Orczy’s “Scarlet Pimpernel” stories published by Balai Poestaka in the late 1920s and detective stories like those published by Tio & Co. in 1924—there were also important predecessors in news-based stories like those of Tan Boen Kim from the 1910s, and in news-based syair of earlier decades. These different streams of story-telling brought “true-stories,” sensational events, and semi-heroic mystery-solving together to be combined with other elements in late colonial Indonesian pop fiction.

Figure 1: Tjerita Pilihan, published in Bandung in the mid-1920s

Figure 2: Tan Boen Kim’s story of the 1916 murder of an actress by a police officer in Surabaya

The final years before the war were special years in the history of writing, publishing, and consumption of such print media in the Indies. The gradual recovery from the economic malaise of the early 1930s was paralleled—and perhaps even preceded—by the dramatic growth of a literate public, a blossoming of the native publishing sector, a dramatic proliferation
of lending libraries, and a rebirth of the Balai Poestaka which had been struggling to compete with Chinese translators, writers, and publishers. Among the growing cohort of publishers, the Eurasian publisher Kolff-Buning stood out as one of the more innovative, enthusiastic publishers of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Of course, the 1930s was also a period in which political activity of Indonesians was tolerated, within limits enforced by colonial courts and administrative fiat, and with exile to Boven Digoel a fateful shadow hanging over the heads of the most committed individuals. This was both an element of stories and a part of the context of fiction production in this period.

During the late 1930s, the south-central Javanese city of Yogyakarta blossomed into an Indonesian language publishing center rivalling Medan, which was experiencing unprecedented growth. In contrast to the wild situation in Medan, in Jogja there was one primary publisher, the evolving Eurasian publisher Kolff-Buning, now rendered with the catchier KB, KABE, KaBe or Kabe. Where explicit Islamic identity and competition with largely Java-based Chinese publishing was critical in the birth of the Medan publishing industry, Jogja’s publishing reflected a Eurasian blending occasionally found in Java. Or perhaps it was a local Jogja version of print capital which prioritized profits—a steady flow of texts to publish, hungry but skilled editors, and increasing numbers of readers to purchase them—over racially or religiously based identity.

This striking burst of publishing followed a 15-year boom in the publishing of Sino-Indonesian literature in Malay which had cut into the colonial government publisher Balai Poestaka’s virtual monopoly, most particularly via the Tjerita Roman and Penghidoepan series, as well as magazines like Liberty. It also followed a dramatic expansion of small lending libraries, and the explosive birth of the Java film industry built on the thriving stage shows of this era. With its flexible attitude, Kabe was positioned to take advantage of a range of experienced writers and new business opportunities in the broad, new “Indonesian” society.

As locally produced films for an Indonesian speaking audience became more popular, Kabe began to publish novelized versions of these stories in a series called Bioscoop-Romans, written by authors such as Ferry Kok (a well-known actor), the highly successful author/director

Figure 3: Saëroen’s Pah Wongso Tersangka

2 On the Balai Poestaka, the roman picisan of Sumatra, and Sino-Malay literature, see Horton (2016), especially chapters II and III.
Njoo Cheong Seng, the illustrator Nasroen A.S., a mysterious writer named “L.”, the journalist Saeroen (who had recently been released from jail), and the translator/writer and jack-of-all-trades, Roestam St. Palindih. In one such story, *Pah Wongso Tersangka*, the author combined a well-known figure (a Eurasian man popular within the Chinese community in particular for his dedication to social causes in West Java), comedy, and other fictional elements into a popular work (*Saëroen, 1941*). In 1939, KB launched a general interest magazine, the liberally illustrated *Ratoe Timoer* (later renamed *Poestaka Timoer*), once more targeting a broad, modern Indonesian audience.

![Koedoes dalam Gelap Goelita](image)

*Figure 4: Achsien’s Koedoes dalam Gelap Goelita (1941)*

Kabe also began to publish detective novels, which had become very popular during the previous decade. A.A. Achsien, a native of Kudus with experience writing for Sino-Indonesian publications (*Salmon, 1981, p. 147*), contributed *Koedoes dalam Gelap Goelita* (1941), a story somewhat reminiscent of Semaen’s *Hikajat Kadiroen* and other Javanese authored stories from two decades earlier, but featuring a noble villain R. Godikdirdjo, more akin to the “modern” Scarlet Pimpernel stories. However, Kabe’s most substantial effort in the realm of detective/mystery/crime stories was a series of novels featuring the detective Raden Pandji Soebrata and his arch-nemesis Patjar Koening [The Yellow Pimpernel], a name which carried clear echoes of Baroness Orczy’s *Scarlet Pimpernel* and Matu Mona’s immensely popular *Patjar Merah Indonisia* (*Oshikawa, 1990; Matu Mona 2001*). The author himself was a mystery, as the books were written under the pseudonym Ketjindoean, a Minangkabau name which seems to have been exclusively used for this series.3

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3 For the solution to this mystery, see Horton (forthcoming).
4 The name Ketjindoean derives from Bujung Kecinduan, the name given to Cindur Mata at birth in a famous Minangkabau story. *Cindur Mata*, a story of the search for truth, may not have been well-known outside of the Minangkabau community until Aman Datuk Majoindo published his version with Balai Pustaka in 1951. More recently, *kecinduan* has occasionally carried the meaning “suffering from love and missing someone or something” (*cinta+rindu=cindu*), but this meaning is unlikely to have been used in the 1940s.
There were at least seven episodes published, all of which are still extant; the title of an eighth episode (“In a Trap”) appeared at the end of the seventh, but it was apparently never published due to the start of the war with Japan (Gunseikanbu, 2604, p. 274).

While these stories were published around 1941, more generally the last three to four years before the war could arguably be considered both a high point and a critical turning point in the history of popular fiction in Indonesia, and an examination of even one novel and its context may help us to better understand the long-term failure of detective stories and mysteries in Indonesia. This paper does that by exploring one of the detective stories published by Kabe, the fifth novel in the series. Published in mid-1941, our story focusses on the death of a nationalist leader who had fallen under suspicion of cooperation with a foreign power and had been placed under house arrest by the government.

Certainly 1940 and 1941 were years of rising tension and uncertainty in the Netherlands Indies. When Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940 and the queen and her top government officials absconded to London, the Dutch in the colonies were shaken thoroughly. A state of emergency was declared by the colonial government, all Nazi sympathizers and Germans were interned, and it became clear that war could be coming to the Indies soon. The second Japan-Netherlands Indies commercial talks were held in Batavia from September 12, 1940 until June 17, 1941, and were a complete failure due in part to the hardening of both sides,
as well as drastically increased Japanese need for alternative oil sources to reduce its dependency on the U.S. (Goto, 1997; Goto, n.d.). Facing an uncertain future and local pressures, from around February 1941 ships to Japan were filled with Japanese returning home. In July, permission was granted by the French colonial government for the Japanese to establish airbases in southern Indochina; in response, the US, Britain, and the Netherlands East Indies governments initiated more extensive embargos on the export of critical raw materials to Japan and a total freeze on Japanese assets. Global politics loomed large as these novels were penned.

*Kedjadian jang Aneh* (A Strange Event) was published in around July 1941. Like the others in this series, this mystery was “solved by Raden Pandji Soebrata” (Ketjindoean, 1941b). The story opens with information about the unfortunate victim (the prominent nationalist leader who had been placed under house arrest), his death, and the public reaction:

People were truly shocked at the death of toean Hoesain Damiri, a very famous person in the public life of the city S. He was not merely famous in this city, but throughout all corners of the island of Java his name was on people’s lips, as well as in the lands across the sea. He was a rich person, with many houses and fields in a number of places on the island of Java. He also did many public services because of his hard work and abilities. He was respected and was a member of several government bodies, famous as a defender of the interests of the majority, a tremendous leader.

However, at the end of his life, he was suspected by a certain party; it seems there were suspicions that he had connections to another country, harming his [own] country. And it appears that his opponent was able to give indications which forced the country to search his house and he fell under the control of the police in his own home, meaning he was not allowed to go out. Coincidentally, he was sick. No one was allowed to see him.

Hoesain Damiri was still young, under 50 years old. According to a doctor’s medical examination, he suffered from a kidney ailment, and in addition to that, he also suffered from heart disease. People presumed that he was shocked because of the searching of his home. He was very well-known in society, so if there wasn’t anything important, certainly he would not yet have had this kind of experience. So in the view of the public, his death was caused by the shock which he experienced while suffering from heart disease. (Ketjindoean, 1941b, pp. 3-4)

For a reader today, like other parts of the novel, in its references to “a number of places,” “the country,” “another country,” “a certain party,” and “the city S,” this section seems very generic, even irritatingly so. For most of the politically aware readership in mid-1941, this was almost certainly not the case—most of this section was as crystal-clear as it could be without inviting the undesirable attention of the increasingly strict colonial authorities. During the preceding two decades, active police presence in meetings of any kind was common, while writers and editors were often arrested for various “press offenses,” which often included the relatively easy to establish crime of defaming an individual. Rather than being concerned about vague descriptions, the reader would wonder which city was “S”—Surakarta (Solo), Semarang, Surabaya, or even Sukabumi!

The story continues:
The entire country was shaken to hear of the death of Hoesain and the entire country mourned. Therefore, half of the people did not believe that he died due to illness. Although any thought of murder clearly must be dismissed, because it was impossible for anyone to enter Hoesain’s room because the guard outside was very tight, while signs that could indicate that there was the hand of some wrong-doer in this case seem not to exist, and suspicions of suicide must also be completely rejected, nonetheless one party did not want to believe that this death was an ordinary death. People’s strong suspicion was that there was a reason for the death of Hoesain. For that reason, this party requested the help of Raden Pandji Soebrata, a private-eye who was well-known, and a close friend of Hoesain as well. (Ketjindoean, 1941b, pp. 4-5)

The story also describes Hoesain Damiri’s character, particularly his frugality and his willingness to help financially or in other ways when necessary, characteristics which seem only slightly contradictory, and which cast doubt on any theory about Hoesain having special enemies because of his behavior.

Raden Pandji Soebroto quickly reached a conclusion about the death of Hoesain. Although Hoesain had been alone in a room in a house which was carefully guarded by the police, and there were no signs of forced entry, Soebroto found circular marks on the bedsheets, pillow and cheek of the victim, as well as the heavy smell of poison on the floor. Further investigation showed that soap bubbles filled with a heavy poison gas had been blown from a tree through the open space for ventilation above the window, killing Hoesain. While the style of killing was suggestive of the formidable Patjar Koening, Raden Pandji Soebroto and his wife Aida also concluded that a public debate with Soelaiman about party affairs was suspicious, as it had suddenly stopped.

“In general, the impression that person presents is alright, his work seems normal. It’s just that he really likes being prominent in public. However, for whatever reason, people seem not to fully trust him. In his argument with Hoesain, what interests me is why did the debate suddenly stop? Especially as there are reports that there was a party with power in the public arena who wants to oppose in connection with the debate with Hoesain, which was blown up by Soelaiman, but this opposition also suddenly stopped.”

“Is it possible that Soelaiman had some power over Hoesain, in other words he had some weapon which could shut up Hossain and his friends?” asked Aida.

“To the best of my knowledge, Hoesain was a very careful person, so he would not have accidentally given a weapon to his opponents.” (Ketjindoean, 1941b, pp. 13-14)

Following up on his hunch about the dispute between Hoesain and Soelaiman, Raden Pandji Soebroto paid a visit to Soelaiman’s house, arriving as a frightened woman jumped into a taxi and sped away. In the house, he found Soelaiman dead, killed by a knife thrown from the doorway behind a chair in which a certain lady “L” had been sitting. A diary/notebook indicated that Soelaiman had been blackmailing Hoesain with an innocently written letter: “The content actually isn’t significant, he was just expressing his thoughts in accordance with his feeling at a

5 This irritatingly vague statement is somewhat clearer in the context of the conflict during 1940, discussed in the pages below.
particular moment, but if I were to publicize the contents and twist the meaning, it would certainly be uncomfortable for Hoesain” (p.41). Hoesain’s wife later confirmed that Soelaiman had been extorting money from Hoesain.

In unraveling the mystery, Raden Pandji Soebroto discovered that Soelaiman had been blackmailing a woman named Lasmi, and that she had witnessed Soelaiman’s death. Soelaiman’s killing of Hoesain with Patjar Koening’s poison had enraged Patjar Koening, and now Raden Pandji Soebroto’s interest in Soelaiman’s death led to renewed conflict between these two enemies, this time with the shadow of some unnamed foreign power behind the freelance criminal Patjar Koening.

The story did provide hints about the identity of the mysterious foreign power behind Patjar Koening. While the traditional mysterious boogeyman of communist Russia was conceivable, so was the newer, more concrete enemy of Germany or potentially Japan. Through references to Japan, it gradually becomes clear that the author imagined Japan to be Patjar Koening’s current employer.

Ultimately, Raden Pandji Soebroto was saved by a police raid; the police burst into the Patjar Koening’s hideout and killed most of the plot members. Patjar Koening, naturally, miraculously escaped. Regular readers of the series would soon learn that Raden Pandji Soebroto and Patjar Koening subsequently became involved in a case involving a black bag from Tokyo and the sinking of the Tjisidane (Ketjindoean, 1941c), a real ship on the Java-China-Japan line.

More than Just a Story: Mohamad Hoesni Thamrin

Given the context of 1941, many readers were likely to have suspected that the victim, Hoessein, was the famous Mohamad Hoesni Thamrin who had just died and whose name now graces one of Jakarta’s major thoroughfares. After all, nationalist leaders under house arrest in 1940-1941 were limited in number, and there would have been none occupying prominent government positions. This much would have been known by readers, as most would have had substantial knowledge about the 46 year-old Thamrin from newspapers, or even from memorial
publications of early 1941, such as Matu Mona’s account of Thamrin’s life published in around February 1941 (Matu Mona, 1950) or Imam Soepardi’s biography and reminiscences probably also published in February 1941 (Soepardi, 1941). The information in these publications seems to be representative of common knowledge in 1941 and would have provided part of the basis for a comparison.

The story, though, makes the association clear through even simpler means. Indications of the true identity of Hoesain Damiri begin with the similarities of the names, which seem to have been scrambled (ain→ni; iri→rin) and the pronunciation slightly adjusted (d→th) to retain similarity while becoming a different name:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictive name:</th>
<th>Hoesain</th>
<th>Damiri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Real” name:</td>
<td>Hoesni</td>
<td>Thamrin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With little doubt about the identity of Hoesein, the mysterious city “S” becomes particularly significant. In naming the city “S”, the author seems to be playing with the reader and government authorities; while it presents an interesting puzzle for Indonesians to solve, it protects the author through plausible-deniability. “S” had been the site of stories for decades, for example, it was the setting for some of the stories published in the leftist Semarang daily Api in the mid-1920s. Politically conscious Indonesians in 1941 would all have known that Thamrin lived in the Sawah Besar area of the city of Batavia; hence, the “S” is not Semarang, Soerabaia, or Soerakarta.

Once this puzzle is solved, readers are left with stronger conviction that the author is indeed not just intending to tell us a story about Thamrin, but particularly truths that the colonial censors did not want told. What were these truths that they story might tell readers? Any point which was new to, or not fully understood by a reader was a secret revealed, like Thamrin’s ownership of many properties, the rumored connections to a foreign power, or even the possible dynamics of conflict with another nationalist. Above all, the relationship to a foreign power and real cause of Thamrin’s death must have been important questions on readers’ minds, although the scandalous conflict with the prominent journalist M. Tabrani was already a
focus of news and probably gossip; naturally, active imaginations could perceive a potential link to a murder, even without the explicit reference to an “opponent” who “gave indications” which “forced” the government to act!!

Politically aware residents of the Indies in 1940 would have known about the very public conflict between Thamrin and M. Tabrani, who was then the director-editor of Pemandangan and the head of Perdi, a journalist association. It was the subject of Volksraad discussions—published in full—and many newspaper commentaries. For those very few who missed it in 1940, both Imam Soepardi (1941) and Matu Mona (1950) included substantial information about this affair.

One of the critical points in this affair was the banning of Pemandangan for a week in May 1940. The police had become increasingly strict over previous months, and in March, Thamrin himself was gavelled twice while reading the words of a Dutch member of the Volksraad; the meeting eventually suspended after several other speakers were gavelled by the police observing the meeting (Matu Mona, 1950, pp. 53-59). On May 17, 1940, a week after the German invasion of the Netherlands and immediately following the Dutch capitulation (May 15), the Pemandangan office was searched by police and Pemandangan was subsequently banned for the publication of an article entitled “Sumbangan Indonesia” [Indonesia’s Contribution]. That morning, Tabrani had visited Thamrin in his home, and Thamrin had reportedly asked Tabrani to write a lead article about the Queen’s government relocating to London.

The follow-up letter from Thamrin with details about their discussion arrived before the police came, and sat on his desk untouched by the police during the search. Tabrani then began to suspect Thamrin was trying to destroy his reputation by getting Pemandangan banned for a month and possibly Tabrani detained for a “bis and ter” violation. Tabrani then reportedly prepared a negative of the letter which was explicitly critical of the Queen and her government, and prepared to publish it—something which became an open secret among journalists (Matu Mona, 1950, pp. 60-63).

After several political activists of the PNI and Parindra were arrested on June 20, 1940, including Mr. Amir Sjariffudin, the conflict reached a new stage. On June 28, in an article entitled “Abang Kita,” Tabrani attacked Thamrin because Thamrin had not taken action to secure the release of fellow Gapi central committee member Amir Sjariffudin. After a series of attacks in mid-July, Thamrin briefly responded on July 24, insisting that the Amir issue was only an excuse,

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6 For a more complete consideration of the other points, see Horton (forthcoming) or either of the memorial volumes mentioned above.
7 Matu Mona (1950, p. 60) mistakenly states that Pemandangan was led by M.H. Thamrin, a typographic mistake repeated two more times on the same page. M. Tabrani was the Directeur-Hoofdredacteur [Director-Editor-in-Chief] while R. H. O. Djoenaedi was the Eigenaar [Owner].
8 The facts in this case are hard to ascertain. Goto (1997, pp. 375-6) misinterprets a misleading explanation by Tabrani, concluding that the letter was from a year earlier (1939). Matu Mona seems to be more likely to be correct when he claims the letter was from earlier that day. Tabrani later claimed that a negative was in the safe that day and was confiscated by the police, which seems clearly impossible if the letter was written and delivered that morning.
9 This is a shorthand reference to precise legal statutes governing press and speech offenses. The laws changed, so examination of the published legal regulations in around 1940 world provide the most accurate definition, but in popular parlance, it merely meant press and speech offenses.
10 The PNI and Parindra were both major parties of the time, while Gapi was an association of political parties.
that his relationship with Sukarno and his comrades was still close,\textsuperscript{11} and that Tabrani, who had visited and called many times, could have asked him directly about the “various rumors” which Tabrani vaguely mentioned in his June 28 attack. However, as Matu Mona (1950, p.95) noted, there were also rumors that Tabrani demanded \$15,000, perhaps intended as compensation for losses during the ban, but certainly resembling extortion. The “Thamrin-Sjariffudin affair” continued in Gapi, with Amir and Thamrin resigning from their positions, and the committee considering the question of whether it was Gapi’s business to consider whether Thamrin had acted appropriately when he did not take action in assisting Amir Sjariffudin. By a vote of 4-3, Gapi decided that the issue of Thamrin’s solidarity with other party members was outside the purview of Gapi’s central committee.

![Figure 8: M. Tabrani c. 1958 (Sudarjo, 1958, p. 55)](image)

New developments occurred when the P.I.D. [Political Investigation Service] discovered the existence of the negative prepared by Tabrani, which they somehow obtained. This rebirth of the cliché-afaire was preceded by Tabrani entering colonial government service on October 19, 1940, becoming the head of the data section of the new wartime government information [propaganda] bureau R.P.D. (Rijkspubliciteitsdienst) and relinquishing editorship of \textit{Pemandangan} to Mr. Soemenang. As he owned the negative, logically, it should have come directly from Tabrani, though he denied this.\textsuperscript{12} A wave of searches followed, including the home of Dr. Ratu Langie (editor of \textit{Nationale Commentaren en Critieken}) who was rumored to have received capital from Japan, and the home of Saburo Kondo (editor of the Batavia-based \textit{Tohindo Nippo}, and Domei News correspondent).\textsuperscript{13}

Thamrin did indeed have connections to “a foreign power,” a fact known to the colonial government and well-connected individuals. Of the most elite Indonesian nationalists, who

\textsuperscript{11} Taniguchi’s testimony suggests that Sukarno and Thamrin were indeed very close, and that Sukarno had been staying the night at Thamrin’s house when the police arrested Sukarno and sent him to Flores. However, Tabrani twisted this fact to attack Thamrin (part of a series of attacks) saying Thamrin should have forced the PID to arrest him along with Sukarno. See also Goto (1997, p. 369).

\textsuperscript{12} His denial may have been carefully designed, as he denied violating any laws or providing the letter to the authorities. Goto states that it was confiscated on January 6, 1941 in a raid on \textit{Pemandangan} (Goto, 1997, p. 375), but this seems to be a misreading of Matu Mona’s narrative.

\textsuperscript{13} Matu Mona (1940) is not clear about the timing of these searches, however, some may have followed the search of Thamrin’s home.
generally tended to take the side of the Dutch with whom they worked and by whom they were educated, Thamrin was one of the few with wide international connections and known to be relatively “pro-Japan.” During the course of 1940, he reportedly first reached out to the US to see if they would put Indonesia under its protection in facing Japanese expansion. Failing to get a positive response, Thamrin reached out to Japan to ensure their favorable attitude towards the Indonesian nationalist movement. The head of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Commerce Department, Batavia Office, located on Kali Besar (Jagatara, 1978, p. 322), depended on Thamrin for his economic data-collection in preparation for the upcoming economic negotiations. His contacts with the Japanese probably contributed to the decision of the Dutch government to place him under house arrest, although the official purpose was to search for “the letter” to M. Tabrani, and Dutch officials later denied that the investigation was related to a foreign power. However, their concern about contacts with Japan led to another significant arrest, that of E.F.E. Douwes Dekker who had been introduced to Satō Nobuhide of the “Batavia Office” by Thamrin.14

The Japanese had been very concerned about Thamrin’s safety, and had been discussing ways to get him out of the country. The idea of using a Japanese freighter was discussed, but it seemed unlikely to succeed. Thamrin reportedly asked whether using a small fishing vessel to rendezvous with a larger ship outside the harbor might work, but he died before this plan could be put in action (Taniguchi 1975).

The novel’s insistence that the possibility of Hoesain being murdered must be dismissed because it was not possible for anyone to administer the poison suggests that indeed some Indonesians were suspicious about the death—a fact explicitly noted by the author. In the 1970s, the former manager and editor of the Tohindo Nippo, Taniguchi Gorō (1901-1980), told Japanese readers an interesting story about Thamrin’s death (Taniguchi, 1975). Having been neighbors, he knew Thamrin well, and was able to talk to Joesoef Hasan, M.H. Thamrin’s “nephew” (the fiancée of Hadjidah Thamrin), after Thamrin’s funeral. Taniguchi had a rather sad memory of his own first daughter suffering from pneumonia at age two. A German doctor was called, and he told them they should just let her pass in peace. The doctor gave her a shot and left. Taniguchi saw she was sleeping peacefully and held her hand, discovering there was no pulse. A continual stream of black saliva came out from her mouth, and Taniguchi concluded she had been given a lethal injection and the black saliva was an indication of the poisoning. When Taniguchi met Hasan, he asked about whether the doctor who cared for Thamrin had been their normal family doctor, and was told that he had been sent by some unknown person. Taniguchi then asked if Thamrin had black spittle when he died, and Hasan reacted with surprise: a seemingly unending flow of black saliva had dripped out of Thamrin’s mouth at the time of his death! This was not the only reference to Thamrin’s poisoning or to this novel in Japanese. In 1943, the gravely ill lexicographer and linguist Miyatake Seidō described Ketjindoean’s novel in his discussion of Southeast Asian languages and literature, clearly stating that it was about Thamrin’s death (Miyatake, 1943, pp. 210-11) and rumors of Thamrin’s poisoning remained for decades in Japan (Oshikawa, 1990, p. 20). The appearance of these stories in Japan as late as the 1970s confirms that rumors about Thamrin’s assassination were rampant in 1941, circulating not merely within the Indonesian community, but also the Japanese community and the Japanese economic delegation to Indonesia. In Japanese eyes, the culprit

14 For details about Douwes Dekker and this arrest, see Horton (forthcoming), Goto (n.d., Chapter 11), Goto (1997), and Veur (2006).
could not be an independent agent working for a foreign power (Japan), but rather the Dutch authorities, as they had placed a pro-Japanese nationalist under house arrest, controlled access to him (including the doctor) and allowed Thamrin to be killed. Even Indonesians, knowing of his pro-Japanese stance, would have likely suspected the Dutch of killing Thamrin, or alternately succumbed to the fantasy world of Patjar Koening.

If we were to carefully consider what we know about the history of Moh. Hoesni Thamrin and this story we could conclude that the most “factual” representations in the story are the vaguest statements. When the descriptions become clearer, they generally are fiction. Perhaps describing true events—obviously part of the purpose of the author—was still very risky, and could result in arrest for slander. Describing Thamrin’s character as “frugal” or “cheap” would not have resulted in an arrest as he was dead, but this was information which may not have been known to the general public, adding an additional thrill for readers. For the author, playing the role of Raden Pandji Soebroto in rationally unraveling and bringing to light this case, Hoesain and Hoesni were pretty much the same.

**Conclusion: The Rise and Fall of the Detective Novel**

The Patjar Koening stories, and this story about Moh. Hoesni Thamrin’s death provide us with an opportunity to speculate about the development and ultimate failure of the genre of detective novels in Indonesia and Malaysia.

While this and other novels in the series seem to be inspired directly by current events covered in various local newspapers, and thus can be described as “realistic” in some manner, it was also filled with fantastic, obviously imaginary events. Thus, while there are obvious links with the real world which could provide a spark of interest or even a thrill of the illicit, there also was more-than-plausible-deniability in the clearly—even wildly—fictional elements.

Why would this be important? Significantly, this genre developed along with the colonial state apparatus controlling the press in the 1930s and 1940s. Translations of “safe” European detective novels and thrillers appeared in the 1920s, alongside the Sino-Malay and Eurasian novelized narratives of real events. This was paralleled by the efforts of the state to control and repress any potentially problematic political discourses, and to regularize the legal protections of individuals and institutions though prosecution for libel. Thus, restrictions on his participation in politics may have kept the radical nationalist Abdoe’lxarim M.s. largely silent in the 1930s, but it was libel laws which resulted in the banning of *Leider Mr. Semangat* in November 1940 and the sending of its author Maisir Thaib to jail for 1 ½ years. Even editors and publishers were not immune to such legal actions, making otherwise careful individuals like Matu Mona victims of colonial era press laws.

Telling the story of the assassination of a nationalist leader, under suspicion of cooperating with a foreign power and under house arrest by the Dutch, with his local archenemy newly employed by the colonial government, would almost certainly be risky, if exciting to write about! The obviously fictional elements allowed the author and publisher to show unambiguously that this is not about Thamrin, and thus evade any potential legal problems. Done once, this is just a twist in the plot, something of little importance. Done a hundred time over, this forms the genre.
Our knowledge of the genre of detective and mystery stories in Indonesia is still fractured, both due to the discontinuities in writing and publishing, and the relatively small total number of publications. It seems likely that there were peaks in production and reading in around 1941, in the early 1960s, and perhaps a rebirth in recent years. We can surmise that there may never have been hundreds of novels (though there were almost certainly more short stories), but there was a recognized “genre” and label in around 1941 which attracted readers. One series of seven books was significant in this context, and it seems not to have been unique in its mixture of these elements.

If poison gas bubbles are perhaps clearly “imaginary” in 1941, how would such a story be taken in 1942-1945, 1945-1949, or in the blood-drenched years immediately following October 1965? I suspect that there was no space for any discussion of “imaginary” killing. There was simply too much happening in Indonesia for readers to accept the frivolousness of fantasy or reality melded into sensational story form. Lives would almost certainly be lost. Curiously, Patjar Koening stories were approved for circulation in late 1942 by occupation authorities. In this context, it may be important to note that Thamrin’s doctor died at the hands of the Kenpeitai during the occupation, but that despite being detained by the Japanese authorities at some point, Tabrani was able to survive, even acting as editor for Tjahaja in Bandung for part of the occupation period (see Horton, forthcoming). However, new mysteries were not written or published. In this kind of context, the context of a period like 1942-45, 1945-49, or 1965-66, if such elements were critical to the genre, the genre would not simply fade, it would vanish overnight, leaving politically safe translations, or simply other genres. Consideration of these novels of the 1940s thus suggest that perhaps politics, crime and fantastic events don’t always mix.

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15 Doris Jedamski has made several interesting forays into this field (Jedamski 1995, 2002, 2009).
16 This is in reaction to one of the interesting and provocative suggestions offered by Eric Wilson during the conference in Sunway, Malaysia in May 2017.
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