THE MOTIF OF SI ANAK HILANG IN THE POETRY OF SITOR SITUMORANG

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Abstract: Recently the Indonesian poet, novelist and essayist Sitor Situmorang reached the age of eighty. Situmorang has a Christian background; his origins are to be found in the Batak area in North Sumatra. His life and work have been summarized as ‘to love, to wander’; in a way he has been a perennial wanderer and pilgrim, roaming around in many places of the world and being home, finally, in his poems. Part of his life he spent in prison as a political detainee. In this article we analyse the motif of ‘the lost [prodigal] son’ which occurs no less than four times in Situmorang’s lyrical work, each time in a different context and with a different meaning. Connected with the role of the father and the mother and of a deep longing for his native village, this motif forms an important thread in his poetry, which often has religious allusions.

Introduction

The very first piece of Indonesian literature that we read as students of the Hendrik Kraemer Institute in the town of Oegstgeest (near Leiden, the Netherlands) during the fall or winter of 1968 was Sitor Situmorang’s short story ‘Ibu pergi kesorga’ (Mother goes to Heaven). We read this moving, brief narration (‘a gripping story’, according to Andries Teeuw, belonging to ‘the best which Indonesian literature has produced so far’), written in an uncomplicated style and language, when Situmorang was already imprisoned. From 1967 until 1974 or 1975, he was detained in the Salemba prison in Jakarta for his involvement in the Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional (Institute for National Culture — LKN). According to the rulers of the Orde Baru (and others, including his former friend and fellow poet Ajip Rosidi) the LKN had, in fact,
become an ally of the Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Institute for the People’s Culture — Lekra), which had ties to the communist party Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI).

I am still grateful to the late Dr. Fokko Siebold Eringa, who facilitated my introduction to Situmorang’s work. Since that time, I have maintained my interest in his poetry and short stories, albeit it only as an amateur. In October of 2004, Situmorang reached the age of eighty. This paper may therefore be seen also as a small tribute by one of his common readers. He was born in the Batakland of North Sumatra, in the village Harianboho at the shore of Lake Toba, at the foot of the volcano Pusuk Buhit. In 1862 the famous missionary Ludwig Ingmar Nommensen started to christianize the Batakland which now hosts one of the biggest Christian communities in Indonesia. Besides, the role of the extended families in this society with their traditional rituals which are connected with the pre-Christian religion, continue to be important. Whereas the early mission and the young independent churches after 1945 rejected this returning to the original Batak culture, from the early 1970s church leaders started to revalue this culture, including its religious meaning. In Situmorang’s work we find both Christian and general religious allusions.

In this paper, I seek to pay special attention to the motif of si anak hilang (the lost son), in Situmorang’s poetry. His work has obviously been defined by a variety of key terms, including ‘to love, to wander’ (according to the title of an English anthology of Sitor’s poetry)5 which is the translation of rindu kelana, as a recent anthology of 100 poems (1993) has been named.6 The terms perantau (wanderer),7 manusia teras-

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ing (alienated man, Subagio Sastrowardojo), and kesepian (solitude, according to Riris K. Toha-Sarumpaet in Rindu Kelana, 144-5) have also been used to describe his work. Other phrases used to elaborate on the heart of Situmorang’s poetry could be mentioned as well. For example, the catchword ziarah (pilgrimage), a word with a definite religious background, occurs fairly often, sometimes in combination with gereja (church). The frequency with which the poems focus on cemeteries or death is also striking. The key phrase si anak hilang, which is our focus here, is not intended to replace these other characteristics but may add a stratum to them. In defining that layer, we must indirectly pay some attention to the role of the mother and that of the father, and to the religious dimensions in his poetry in general.

Two Preliminary Comments

I would like to make two preliminary comments. First, the English translation of si anak hilang (literally, ‘the lost son’) as ‘the prodigal son’, and the French translation l’enfant prodigue (in the most recent anthology, Paris la Nuit) are understandable, but not correct. In these cases, the translators of Sitor’s work followed the common English and French headings above the parable in Luke 15. These headings, of course, were added by later Bible translators, and Western readers certainly hear an immediate reference to the biblical image. These translations do no justice to the original context and meaning of the parable itself, however, which forms a cluster together with two other parables in which, respectively, a sheep and a coin are lost and subsequently found. Furthermore, they miss the point of Sitor’s position. In no way is he a prodigal child or son, in the sense of being extravagant or squanderous. Instead, he is lost and found — or not found, as the case may be. It is not entirely clear whether the elder son in the parable is lost as well; recent biblical commentaries therefore prefer to speak of ‘a father who had two sons’, or even of ‘the father of two lost sons’.

A second comment concerns the extent to which Situmorang’s poetry can be interpreted as autobiographical. According to Wing Kardjo, Situmorang was unhappy with critics ‘who link the work with the personality of the author’. In other words, the actual person of the poet does not matter. What matters are the poems:

>Pembaca yang tercinta,
jangan bertanya
laharinya sajak,
jawabnya pulang maklum
pada dirinya,
apabila ia berkata sesuatu padamu
seperti padaku juga,
sebagai karya kita bersama
menjelani hidupnya sendiri

[...]

Sajak bagi penyair, sama seperti anak
— bukanlah milik Ibu yang melahirkannya—
(kata penyair Kahlil Gibran)

Dear reader,
Don’t question
the birth of a poem,
indeed, that answer returns
to self knowledge
should it mean to you
what it means to me
as something we created on together,
but then takes on
a life of its own
[. . .]

For the poet a poem is like a child
— but not one owned by the Woman who gave it birth—
(or so said Kahlil Gibran)

Wing Kardjo appropriately remarks, however, that Situmorang himself has written an autobiography, as well as other essays in which he explains the creative process of his writing and his life as a poet. His


12 In Bunga di atas Batu, 283; English translation in To Love, To Wander, 126.

poetry was therefore not a *creatio ex nihilo* (‘Puisinya bukanlah *creatio ex-nihilo*’). I will cautiously follow Wing Kardjo’s position in this regard.

The ‘Lost’ Son as Recurring Metaphor

Three times — and, as we will see later, even a fourth time — Situmorang uses the metaphor of *si anak hilang* in his poems, each time in a different way and setting. Although the theme may be seen as accompanying the autonomous spiritual development within each of these poems, the hermeneutical process is connected to the specific context of the time at which it was born, according to the poet himself. We will first provide a brief description of these poems and their immediate contexts, together with developments in Sitor’s thinking at that period. We will then pay brief attention to the role of the mother and the father in connection with the metaphor. Finally, we will attempt to draw some conclusions.

‘*Si Anak Hilang*’ in Dalam Sajak (1955)

The first reference to the ‘lost’ son in the title of a poem is in *Dalam Sajak* (In Poems), Situmorang’s third collection of poetry, which was published in 1955. After an intensive time in Yogyakarta and elsewhere, during which the revolution left existential marks upon the poet, scholarship took him to Amsterdam (1950-1951) and Paris (1951-1952). Once back in Jakarta, he suffered from emotional and intellectual crises (Krisis emosional menyangkut antara lain soal cinta, percintaan, dan sebangsanya. Krisis intelektual menyangkut identitas social di negeri sendiri), problems that would recur among the great themes in his work. In that state of mind, as if in a trance or by divine inspiration, he wrote his poems. *Surat Kertas Hijau* (Green Paper Letters, 1954), *Dalam Sajak* (1955), and *Wajah Tak Bernama* (Nameless Face, 1956) were all written within a few days — less than a week — as a way of overcoming his crisis. The poem ‘*Si

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Anak Hilang’ depicts a son finally coming home from abroad in the faraway village near a lake. He has many stories to tell. Several details come to our attention, in comparison with the biblical parable: the active, emotional role of the mother; the passive, expectant role of the father (seakan tak acuh menanti, [as if to wonder, ‘what’s the bother?’]); and the absence of siblings. Although a restrained tension permeates the entire poem, the kind of conversation in which the whole village participates concerns only trivial matters: ‘Did you marry?’ or ‘Do you have children yet?’ The son remains reticent; it is he who wishes to ask questions. After the meal, in the small family circle, the mother asks, ‘Is it cold in Europe?’ Then they both fall silent — the mother out of joy, the son because of memories about Europe and the city where he had lived, although he seems to have forgotten about its chill and the seasons. The last stanza of the poem provides a surprising turn-about:

Late at night the mother quits her chores
The father long before had begun to snore
On the sandy shore waves hiss and foam
Knowing the prodigal son has not come home17

Some aspects of the theme, such as the son’s sense of melancholy, loneliness, and alienation in contrast to the simple, unequivocal life of the parents with their village as a complete universe, had already been apparent in Surat Kertas Hijau, for example in ‘The Tale of Two Continents’, and also in ‘Orang Asing’ (‘Foreigner’), ‘Percakapan Malam’ (‘Nighttime Conversation’), ‘Di tepi danau’ (‘At the Lake Shore’), and ‘Matinya Juara Judi’ (‘The Death of the Gambling Champion’, all in Dalam Sajak). Beate Carle defines its theme as ‘the gap between generations and the call for self-determination against traditional family bounds’,18 and Subagio Sastrowardojo speaks of a divided heart (hati yang berdua) and of the lost son as having been tempted by souvenirs of the life abroad (tergoda oleh kenangan hidup di negeri asing), as if only his body is back in the ancestral village while his soul remains in Europe.19 Taken together, however, these do not yet justify and explain the title of the poem and its overtly religious connotation. We will return this point later.

17 Translation from To Love, To Wander, 42-43.
18 Beate Carle, ‘Homicide and Suicide: Deadly Conflict Resolutions as Part of Literary Concepts’, paper read at the 8th European Colloquium of Indonesian and Malay Studies, 1997, 2. Thus far, I have been unable to trace the thesis by this author, Das Motiv des verlorenen Sohnes im lyrischen Werk von Sitor Situmorang (Universität Köln, 1986).
19 Subagio Sastrowardojo, Manusia Terasing di balik Simbolisme Sitor, 37-38.
'Pulanglah Dia Si-Anak Hilang' in Zaman Baru (1961)

The second time that ‘si anak hilang’ appears in a title is in the last poem of Zaman Baru (A New Era), published in 1961. Twenty years later, Situmorang dissociated himself from the poetry that he had written during this period. None of the poems from that collection are included in his main anthology, Bunga di atas Batu (Flower on a Rock, 1989), because ‘...from the beginning [...] Sitor did not consider to include poems of the Zaman Baru period (1961) within this anthology’ (...sejak semula [...]. Sitor tidak mempertimbangkan sajak-sejak periode Zaman Baru (1961) dimasukkan dalam kumpulan ini), according to Pamusuk Eneste in his ‘Catatan Editor’ (p. xv). Three poems from Zaman Baru are included in the last anthology (Paris la Nuit, 2002), however, including ‘Pulanglah Dia Si-Anak Hilang’ (The lost son returns). It is not entirely clear why Situmorang rejected the work from his Zaman Baru period. His autobiographical essays do not mention the volume at all, and the entire period has been omitted. The anthologists themselves give no comment. The prevailing explanation is that most of these poems were intended to serve a certain ideology and therefore did not meet the literary standards he sought to maintain. Similarly, many poems from his Angin Danau (Wind from the Lake)20 period (1982) later found no favor in his eyes, perhaps because they were too overtly Christian. Nevertheless, Zaman Baru fits well within the three poles of his poetry, which he defines according to the type of world which he experienced himself (sesuai corak ragam dunia pengalaman saya sendiri): (a) Indonesian, (b) international, and (c) regional (Batak) (keindonesiaan, internasional, dan kedaerahan [Batak]).21

Earlier reviewers of Situmorang’s work tend to speak negatively of Zaman Baru. Teeuw (1967) writes that they ‘are songs and battle cries for the new era under the aegis of Manipol Usdek, and leave a nasty taste in the mouth’.22 Subagio Sastrowardoyo (1976) hails Situmorang’s earlier work for its genuine existentialist inner crisis, while he criticizes Zaman Baru for its a sudden shift in attitude that does not match his earlier philosophical awareness. This rupture, which Sastrowardoyo

22 A. Teeuw, Modern Indonesian Literature, 181. The Manipol Usdek was a political manifesto by president Soekarno in 1960, which was intended to get the masses acquainted with his nationalistic ideology. See also Goenawan Mohamad, Potret Seorang Penjair Muda Sebagai Si Malin Kudang, Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya 1972, 36: ‘Karja-karja jang sarat dengan slogan atau jargon mengungkapkan betapa totalitarisma sikap pengarang.’
considers to mark a shift in cultural loyalty from Europe to Asia, reportedly brings Situmorang’s sincerity into question.  

More recently, however, Henk Maier and Wing Kardjo describe a tense continuity between these phases in Situmorang’s creative work. According to Maier, Situmorang had, from the beginning, ‘found himself somewhere in between the two extremes that were represented in concrete literature as well as in criticism’ In other words, the work simultaneously expressed ‘the idea that art could be appreciated solely on its own merits’ without paying attention to the concrete world of the reader and ‘the communist analysis of society and the idea of a “people’s culture”’. Within this field of tension, Situmorang sought a ‘meeting place’ for national culture. In that sense, the Zaman Baru collection can be considered ‘a fine witness to the spirit of the time’. These poems ‘may lack the depth and ambivalence of his earlier poetry but rhetorically speaking, they still reveal the competence of a poet who had a feel for the signs of the times and tried to express them.’ Further, Wing Kardjo emphasizes the fact that, in Situmorang’s work, man is torn between solitaire and solidaire, to use the words of Albert Camus. His poetry moved from a period of dekaden to a time of l’engagement, from individuality to solidarity (dari kesendirian ke kebersamaan). As a result, the form of his work changed and became more prosaic. Nevertheless, Wing Kardjo concludes that, deep in Sitor’s soul, ‘the “engagement” did not satisfy his heart; he continued to love personal ways of expression.’ That — rather than a certain mea culpa — would explain the 1976 publication of the collection, Dinding Waktu (Wall of Time), which had been written before 1965.

The above-mentioned ‘Pulanglah dia si-anak hilang’ can be understood within this context. The first two stanzas are as follows:

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\text{Tulisakan disemua dinding:}
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\[
\text{‘Aku mendjumpai tanahair,}
\]
\[
\text{Tapi tak pernah aku}
\]
\[
\text{Kehilangan dia!’}
\]

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13 Subagio Sastrowardojo, o.c. 66: ‘Perubahan tema sajak-sajak di dalam Zaman Baru, yang sebelumnya, membayangkan suatu perubahan sikap yang mendadak yang tidak sesuai dengan kesadaran kefilsafatan sebelumnya.’ On the same page, ‘Tetapi tidak dapat saya sangkal kenyataan, bahwa dalam membahas sajak-sajak Sitor ini, pertanyaan-pertanyaan mengenai sincerity Sitor ini timbul-timbul saja dalam benak saya.’ See also p. 38.
15 Maier, To Love, To Wander, 10.
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As the final poem of a collection in which the poet provides a positive, lyrical account of a visit to China, the content of the poem may appear transparent at first glance: the ‘lost’ son has really returned home to his home country and people (‘_Si Anak Hilang betul-betul pulang menemukan tanah air dan bangsanya_’, writes Wing Kardjo.)

Below the surface, however, things are more complicated. A dialogue takes place between the _si aku_ (the ‘I’), his soul, and the people in the poem. A certain tension is also evident between the thrice-repeated command to write (_tuliskan_) in the first three stanzas and the final two stanzas, in which the _si aku_ obeys that command. Similar commands, by the way, were given to prophets like Moses, Isaiah and John (Revelation). The poet does not obey triumphantly on the whole earth (_diseluruh mukaair_), however, or on the horizon (_dikaki langit_), but more humbly on all leaves of grass (_disemua daun rampat_) and all doors (_disemua pintu_). Is it there that the poet, who had been lost, meets himself, because his soul has returned from its wandering?

At the same time, however, this soul seems to be both his individual soul and the soul of the people and the fatherland. Does this collective-individual soul regain its identity (as the father regained his status as father in the biblical parable) because the poet comes home as a lost son and is welcomed? Does ‘poet’ refer to the individual author of this poem who returns from China or to the poet _sui generis_, who leaves his ivory tower and descends to participate in the struggle of the people?

Though this poem evidently contains no religious layer, it is clear that it gives a collective extension to the parable. This is in accordance with many contemporary exegeses on the parable from Luke.

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27 Wing Kardjo, _Paris la Nuit_, xxxv.
28 In the original type setting of the poem, the last two stanzas have been printed in italics, thereby emphasizing the dialogue between _aku_ and _kau_.
29 The two sons are often compared to Cain and Abel or to Jacob and Esau, who stand for Israel and the _goyim_.

‘Si Anak Hilang’ in Angin Danau (1982)

Out of necessity, Situmorang was silent for more than twelve years after *Zaman Baru*: he was not allowed pen and paper while detained. As we have seen, *Dinding Waktu* consists of work written before 1965. Following his years in prison, which he apparently experienced without bitterness and which changed him into a kind of mystic, he wrote the English collection *The Rites of the Bali Aga* (1977) as if in a trance. Poems from that collection never became part of a later anthology, and they occupy a separate place in his oeuvre. He published *Peta Perjalanan* (Road Map) in the same year. In 1981 and 1982, he published his incomplete autobiography *Sitor Situmorang Soorang Sastrawan 45 Penyair Danau Toba* (Sitor Situmorang, man of letters belonging to the '45 generation, poet from the Toba Lake), as well as four short stories in a booklet entitled *Danau Toba* (Lake Toba). During the same period, he published a new collection of poems, *Angin Danau* (Wind from the Lake). The ancestral region and *adat* had clearly become prominent in his life, as he stated in the final pages of his autobiography. It is no wonder that the first section of this collection takes place almost entirely in the Batak land, and that the second of the four sections of *Angin Danau* bears the title ‘Si Anak Hilang’.

This section contains many poems that have a direct relationship with Christianity. During the years immediately following 1976, Situmorang also published several ‘Christian’ poems in *Berita Oikoumene* (Ecumenical News, the monthly paper of the Indonesian Council of Churches) and

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10 Sitor Situmorang, *The Rites of the Bali Aga*, first published in *Indonesia*, 23, April 1977, 113-126, and published separately in 2001, Jakarta by publishing company Metaphor with an introduction and a closing note by Harry Aveling. In an Editor’s Note in *Indonesia*, p. 113, Situmorang is quoted as saying, ‘Bali was then a spiritual bath after so many years in jail. I found there a brotherhood of wanderers among low-budgeted young foreign tourists, some of them called hippies. [I] interviewed them and had intensive contacts with them. English was the language we conversed in. And then, with my interest in mysticism of longstanding heightened [by being] in isolation for so many years, [I wrote this piece].’ The author wrote continuously over a period of two days, during which time, in his own words, he was “in some kind of trance”;

For more about this ‘trance’, see also ‘Usaha Rekonstruksi Yang Dirundung Ragu’, 352: ‘Saya yakin bahwa yang dialami si penyair, yang terilhami, mendekati pengalaman seorang mistikus [..]. Ada aspek trance, lewat usaha konsentrasi hiar biasa untuk mencapai “kekosongan” (kosong dari rutin sehari-hari) . . .’ See also p. 371.


12 Sitor Situmorang, *Angin Danau*, Jakarta: Penerbit Sinar Harapan 1982. It comes to our attention that this collection was published by a Christian publishing house.
in the daily newspapers *Sinar Harapan* (Protestant) and *Kompas* (Roman Catholic). Unlike most other poems written in 1976 and 1977, many of these ‘Christian’ interpretations did not reappear in later collections or anthologies. One exception was the poem titled ‘Si Anak Hilang’, with its suggestive sub-title, ‘Membaca Injil dalam Kenangan’. This omission is understandable in the same way as the omission of work from *Zaman Baru*, as discussed above. They lack the fine, ambivalent layers of meaning contained in much of his other work. It may be that, during his years in prison, Situmorang felt his Christian identity more strongly than before. In an interview with George Adicondro in *Tempo*, he states that, during the years in prison, he was allowed to read only religious literature. This literature — not only Christian, but also Islamic, Buddhist and Taoist books — was brought to him through the kind offices of T.B. Simatupang, a retired chief of staff whose roots like Situmorang’s were to be found in the Batak land and who had become a leading lay theologian and chairperson of the Council of Churches in Indonesia. The works about Buddhism, Tao and Zen were of particular interest to him, ‘though not as religion — I am still a Christian — but as a cultural expression. And after I was released, that interest continued’.34

In the same interview, he confesses that the weeklong experience at Bali, which resulted in 40-50 poems, led him to sense a melting together of Krishna and Christ. According to Sitor, this could be considered syncretistic, but his effort was aimed at searching the roots of the original national culture, which can still be found in Bali.35

In any case, ‘Si Anak Hilang’, which consists of 18 stanzas and has a rather classic, traditional form and rhyme, apparently has something special to say to the poet. It maintains a close parallel to the biblical parable until the final verse. Then, like the earlier poem in *Dalam Sajak*, it takes an astonishing turn:

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33 Some other scattered poems, including ‘Galileo’, ‘Belajar Kembali Alifbata’, ‘Pergola’, and ‘Genesis Negeri Robert Frost’ (all originally in *Kompas*, 7 December 1976) found a place in *Peta Perjalanan* and later in *Bunga di atas Batu*.


35 ‘Mungkin ini sinkretis, tapi bagi saya ini merupakan usaha penggalian akar-akar kebudayaan nasional kita yang asli.’ See also *The Rites of the Bali Aga*, 33: the vista of Gunung Agung/open/to the heavens and/the oceans/to the rivers/watering/your fields/trod upon by Krishna as Christ/and by Christ as Lord Krishna/without the superstructures/of technology or theology/except for the abstract design/of rice terraces...
Si Sulung berpaling, lalu lari ke rumah,
Menjumpai adiknya, berdiri di ambang,
Mereka berhadapan, tangan hendak membunuh,
Lunglai — membelai ubun adik tersayang.

The elder son turns, rushes to the house,
Runs into his brother, stops at the doorstep,
They face each other, his hand is about to kill
Relaxes — fondles the crown of the beloved brother’s head.

Wing Kardjo does not consider this poem to belong to a level of poetry that is touching (‘tingkat puisi yang mengharukan’), and the only message that it carries is one of reconciliation between two brothers (hanya membawakan pesan ‘rekonsiliasi antara dua saudara’).36 It is exactly at this point, however, that the verse leaves the reader with interesting, unanswered questions. Who are these two brothers? Is it Situmorang’s sole aim to provide an answer to the open end of the biblical parable itself in its own context? The poem is placed in the midst of other ‘biblical’ poems: poems about the 99 sheep and the one that was lost; the murderer crucified together with Christ; and Ruth, along with an Easter sermon and yet another Easter prayer. As mentioned above, however, the poet himself clearly links the exegesis (tafsiran) of the theme to the context in which the poem was created.

We must therefore consider other possibilities. Does he refer to aspects of his own private life, the deep experience of his reconciliation with his family and ancestors? ‘I am accepted as suitable (Aku dianggap layak!’), he writes, after having participated in an initiation rite (ritus pemulihan tondi-ku ke dalam alam marga) at the end of 1976 in Harianboho.37 In any case, the father in this poem, so important to preserving the tradition of the marga (clan, extended family), receives a prominent place, whereas the mother receives no mention this time. At the same time, a reconciliation also took place between Sitor and a group of younger Batak pastors and theologians, who seem to have been more open to the Batak tradition than earlier generation Christian leaders had been.

Yet another possibility is that the poet wanted to emphasize the need for reconciliation between the reds and whites in Indonesia’s society, between those in power within the Orde Baru (Suharto’s so-called New Order) and all those despised ones who had been in prison and were still were stigmatized, in particular, a reconciliation between literates from different camps who still harbored antagonistic feelings. Sitor

36 Paris la nuit, xli. Italics mine, AGH.
37 Sitor Situmorang, Seorang Sastrawan Angkatan 45, 218, 220.
Situmorang’s successful return to the stage of literature and culture in general also aroused feelings of jealousy. In any case, even though the poem itself may not have achieved the high literary, aesthetic level of his early work (which had been almost canonized by reviewers), it was indeed a sign of the times, much as the Zaman Baru had been.

Questions after Reading Three Poems

Assuming that Bunga di atas Batu and Paris la Nuit can be seen as the most authoritative anthologies of Situmorang’s work as a poet (his short stories have not yet been collected), it is striking that the first and the third si anak hilang poems appear in Bunga di atas Batu, which also carries si anak hilang as its sub-title, while 13 years later, only the second one (from the Zaman Baru collection) was included in Paris la Nuit. Even though Paris la Nuit amounts to little more than a rather coincidental collection of poems from different periods that happened to have been translated and subsequently published in several literary magazines and books in France, we nevertheless wonder whether it could be interpreted as setting the religious aspects aside to make room for a more secular approach. Is there a rupture, or are there ruptures between his earlier and later work?

A Brief Digression on the Roles of the Father and the Mother in Situmorang’s Poetry

Before attempting to answer these questions, I would like to digress and reflect briefly on the roles of the father and the mother in Situmorang’s work. The short story Ibu Pergi Ke Sorga (Mother Goes to Heaven) portrays the mother as a faithful church member. The father apparently shows no interest in the Christian faith, and the son, in

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38 In 1990, Kees Snoek edited a Dutch anthology of Situmorang’s poetry under the same title, Bloem op een rots, Breda: De Geus. Remarkably, he omitted the sub-title of the Indonesian edition (Si Anak Hilang). He also did not include the ‘si anak hilang’ poems from Dalam Sajak and Angin Danau, but included the one from Zaman Baru instead.

39 In Sitor Situmorang Seorang Sastrawan 45, 20, the author states that his father had been baptized in 1918, together with other members of the family. He was, however, a ‘pemangku adat yang sangat sadar akan tradisi leluhurnya, sampai saat wafatnya di tahun 1963, pada usia 123 tahun. Ibu dan kami anaknya 9 kakak-adik diserahkan kepada pendidikan gereja dan gubernemen.’ Elsewhere, he tells that his father had been removed from the church several times because of his philosophy of life, but had nevertheless been reinstated each time.
any case, does not attend church. Both the mother and the father recur in several poems throughout all periods of Situmorang’s life, though not very often in the 45 poems that are included in *Paris la Nuit*, all of which were written after 1988. At times, they are both addressed. In ‘Harianboho’, he writes, ‘I am always sure to return to you/ in the end,/ when the roaming is finally over/ and I, this traveler, am aware’. Both are also mentioned in ‘Membalas Surat Bapak’ (Answering Father’s Letter), first published in *Dinding Waktu* (1976), in a tender farewell to the deceased father, in which Situmorang expresses his inability to mold his mourning into a poem:


I am no longer able to use a plow. When mother died I wrote a poem on suffering — The world forgot about it. Then I wrote a story on how she went to heaven. The world was moved — about sorrow not a single word.

What can the poet now say to his father, to this general and ancient farmer (*Jenderal dan Petani Purba*)?

> Pedang dan tombak kini terbalut debu. Tinggal aku mencatat: Penyair selamat menyeberang danau perahu nya di pantai tinggal kerangka... Sword and lance Now are wrapped in dust. I can only write down: Safely the poet crosses the lake Of his prow at the beach a hull remains...
The Father: Guarding Batak Tradition

The father, Ompu Babiat (1850-1963), is thus the ‘Jenderal dan Petani Purba’. In several poems, he is tied to the history and adat of the marga, as the successor to Singamangaraja XII.40 At least, he was commander (pemimpin perang) after Singamangaraja died in 1907 during a final struggle with the Dutch army in the woods near the desa Lintong. Ompu Babiat’s father was Raja (sovereign) of Lintong, and Singamangaraja’s mother came from this family.41 It is no wonder that he is also the protagonist in some short stories, notably ‘Perjamuan Kudus’ (The Lord’s Supper),42 and in another way in ‘Harimau Tua’ (Old Tiger).43 Incidentally, it is not difficult to recognize elements of the motif of the lost son in ‘Perjamuan Kudus’. As the old father is dying, he asks that a young cow be slaughtered to honor the exceptional occasion of all six sons being together. The fifth son, who is the first-person narrator of the story, leaves soon thereafter because his dying father orders him to do so.

Situmorang recounted the history of his marga, including the position of the father in it, at length in both his autobiography and the results of his historic research into the Batak culture. The latter were published in 1993 as Toba Na Sar and Guru Somalaing dan Modigliani “Utusan Raja Rom”, Sekelumit Sejarah Lahirnya Gerakan Ratu Adil di Toba.44 The father connects him to the adat, and especially to Mulajadi Nabolon, the Batak High God. His interest in this adat grew after 1976, along with his awareness that he was a participant in it. In ‘Upacara Sulang Bao di Lereng Pusuk Buhit’ (Adat Ceremony at the slope of Pusuk

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40 As early as 1954, Situmorang wrote a poem about Singamangaraja at a time when the official views in the Batak church about this freedom fighter were still negative. He also wrote an essay, ‘Si Singamangaraja’ in Penelitian Sedjarah II, 4, September 1961. Later, during the 1970s, a much more positive opinion about Singamangaraja arose within the Batak church, along with a different appreciation of tradition, including traditional religion. An early fruit of this changing insight was Walter Bonar Sidjabat’s study Ahu Si Singamangaraja. Arti Historis, Politis, Ekonomis dan Religius Si Singamangaraja XII, Jakarta: Sinar Harapan 1982. Sidjabat was professor at the Sekolah Theologia Tinggi in Jakarta. He interviewed Situmorang as part of his research. In his turn, Sitor dedicated a poem (‘Kristus di Danau’) to Sidjabat in Angin Danau.

41 Information by Sitor Situmorang, in a letter to the author, 15 February 2004. See also Sidjabat, Ahu Si Singamangaraja, 275-296.

42 Danau Toba, 5-17.

43 Perempuan dan Suljja di Paris, 47-53.

Buhit), written between 1977 and 1988, Sitor describes how, coming from Europe, he returned to Lake Toba to attend the ceremony, which he also mentions at the end of his autobiography. That poem ends with these lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{Aku besok pulang, tapi} \\
    \text{Seperti tak pernah pergi.}^{45}
\end{align*}
\]

Tomorrow I come home, but
As if I never went away.

Here the lost son has come home, or rather, he never has left the parental home.

The Mother: Village Life and Christian Faith

When the mother is mentioned, she is sometimes the central person, as in ‘Potret Ibu’ (Portrait of Mother) in Dalam Sajak (1955) — the poem in which he tries to put his sorrow after her death into words. As we noticed above, in ‘Membalas Surat Bapak’, the poet seems to lament the fact that nobody had paid attention to a poem (possibly ‘Potret Ibu’?), in which he had expressed his feelings of grief after her death, whereas the short story ‘Ibu pergi kesorga’ had caught the attention of the entire world.

In other poems, the mother appears only peripherally. Her image is often connected with such childhood memories as ‘Percakapan Malam’ (Nighttime Conversation, in Dalam Sajak) or with the daily life at home in the desa. It can even be said that, in ‘Silsilah’ (Family Tree), which tells of ancestral tradition and the desa where the author was born and will eventually be buried, the mother is not mentioned, but she is always present (Bunda tak tercatat. Tapi selalu hadir). The poem ‘Negeri Kelahiran Terkenang di Bukit-Bukit Provence (le randonneur)’ (Remembering the Native Country in the Hills of the Provence), links the mother image with faithfulness (kesetiaan), and the father image with wisdom (kearifan).^{46} In ‘Lakon Paskah 1986’ (Easter Drama),^{47} the poet accidentally enters the cathedral in Colognne at Easter and attends a performance of an Easter drama which brings him back to his village:

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45 ‘Upacara Sulang Bao di Lereng pusuk Buhit’, Bunga di atas Batu, 300-301.
46 Paris la Nuit, 230.
47 Bunga di atas Batu, 305.
Anganku ikut mengambang
di atas irama nyanyian Gregorian
seperti berdoa mohon Peta
petunjuk jalan
ke Danau Kepercayaan Bunda

My memory keeps rocking
on the rhythm of the Gregorian song
as if it is praying and asking for
a Road Map
to the Island of Mother’s Faith

The mother, therefore, represents the line of childhood, everyday vil-
lage life, and Christian faith.

At this point, we must mention the most recent poem in which *si anak hilang* appears. It was published in 1999 in the first issue of the literary periodical *Mitra*. Unlike some other poems that were printed on the same page, it did not find its way into *Paris la Nuit*, either for literary reasons or because of its ultimate finality. The text of this poem, ‘*Tatahan Pesan Bunda*’ (Chiseling Mother’s Will) sounds like a simple and moving last will:

Bila nanti ajalku tiba
kubur aku di tanah Toba
di tanah pantai danau perkasa
terbujur di samping Bunda

Bila nanti ajalku tiba
bukalah batu alam letakkan
pingganti nisan di pusara
tanpa ukiran tanpa hiasan
kecuali pesan maha suci
restu Ibunda ditatah di batu:
*Si Anak Hilang telah kembali!*
Kujemput di pangkuanku!

When the hour of my death arrives
Bury me in the land of Toba
In the soil at the beach of the mighty lake
Stretched out alongside mother

When the hour of my death arrives
Place a piece of rock
Instead of a gravestone at the cemetery
no carving no decoration

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48 Sitor Situmorang, ‘*Syair Karma di Musim Bunga, Untuk Sylvia Plath dan Ted Hughes*’, *Mitra, Jurnal Budaya dan Filsafat*, 1 April 1999, 64.
Chisel only the most holy will
And prayer of mother in that rock:
The lost son has come home!
I take him into my lap!

The metaphor that he had used in an autobiographical way since 1955
had apparently remained a central expression in the eyes of the poet.
Near the lakeshore, where the mother was buried, the son hopes to
find his final place. The lost son has definitely come home.

Conclusions

Earlier reviewers of Situmorang’s work have questioned whether he
was religious any longer. On the basis of poems from *Surat Kertas Hijau*
(Green Paper Letters) and of the short story *Ibu Pergi Ke Sorga* (Mother
Goes to Heaven), Nasution concludes that Situmorang had chosen the
side of the autonomous individual in place of religious (Christian) tradit-

tion, although he did not dare to be as radical as Achdiat K. Mihardja’s
protagonist Hasan in *Atheis.* Several times, Subagio Sastrowardoyo
describes Sitor as being alienated from God (‘terasing dari Tuhan’), break-

ing off relations with God (‘putusnya hubungan dengan Tuhan’), and being
unable to establish loving contact with God (‘kegagalan hendak menam-

batkan diri dalam hubungan kasih dengan Tuhan’). He further interprets the
poem ‘Kristus di Medan Perang’ in an antagonistic sense, as if Sitor
was comparing his soul to an image of Christ who shows no mercy.

I subscribe neither to that interpretation of the poem nor to their
line of thinking. As far as I can see, the feelings of being part of the
Batak community, with its two facets (ancestral tradition and Christian
faith), were never absent in Situmorang’s lyrical work. Even in *Zaman
Baru,* a tiny trace of this belongingness might be found in the poem
‘Surat untuk Iman’ (Letter on Faith) where, once again, a reference is
made to the mother, although ‘iman’ obviously carries a broader mean-

ing than ‘faith’:

*Djika teringat kau
 teringat Bunda*

When I remember you
I remember Mother

49 J.U. Nasution, *Sitor Situmorang sebagai Penjair dan Pengarang Tjerita Pendek,* Jakarta:
Gunung Agung 1963, 32-34 and 62.
50 Subagio Sastrowardoyo writes, ‘Sitor telah memproyeksikan keadaan jiwanya pada
bayangan Kristus yang tak kenal ampun itu.’ *Manusia Terasing di Balik Simbolisme Sitor*,
52, and also 48, 49.
Does Situmorang’s poetry therefore simply convey continuity? Yes and no. According to my interpretation, there are two areas of tension or shifts in meaning. The first involves the tension between ‘lost’ and ‘not lost’, between ‘wandering’ and ‘coming home’, and between ‘found’ and ‘not (yet) found’. A constant spiritual dimension is present beneath the surface, however. Chronologically, the years that Situmorang served in prison form a borderline, but that is only partly due to the internal struggle within the soul of the poet. In addition to these inner processes, external changes — including theological developments within Indonesian society as a whole and within the Batak community in particular — also had roles to play.

In his early poetry, the poet wanders restlessly, exploring many aspects of life: revolution, other cultures, love, and solidarity. During this period, the poet is constantly accompanied by a quest for God. He has taken leave of the traditional Christian image of this God, as it had been taught in the Batak church of his youth. This does not mean, however, that he has lost his faith all together. Instead, he looks for new ways, images, expressions, finding them, for example, in Buddha, Krishna, and Sufi mysticism. He is often only nominally a Christian, in a manner similar to that of the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo, who had to carry along his Christian background. It apparently does not bother him that he is a syncretist in the eyes of others. Time and again, however, he returns to biblical imagery, sometimes surprisingly at the heart of a poem, sometimes only in the margins.

In his later work, the restless wanderer appears to have reconciled himself with his destiny. He is aware of the fact that he is basically a cosmopolitan who lives ‘dalam sajak’ (in poems). The uneasiness has gone. He sometimes seems to be a tourist on earth. An even better expression might be that he is a perennial penumpang (wanderer) on earth — not alienated but alien, almost in the sense of the biblical παροικος. Wherever he goes, he takes along the tradition of the marga, the clan, the memories of his native village, and the Christian lessons of the mother. They, too, are present and live in his poems. He has come home — but home means everywhere.

The second field of tension concerns the roles of the mother and the father in the eyes of the poet. It is possible that the influence of


52 See, for instance, I Peter 2:11, Hebrews 11:9, where παροικος is translated as ‘alien.’
the mother and his warm, deep feelings towards her appear more prominently in his earlier poems, while the line of the father becomes dominant later, after his participation in the ancestral rites in 1976, which had caught him by surprise (Situmorang had initially expected only to attend a 'happening'). Each line also has a spiritual and a religious dimension. It is amazing that neither of the two is ever totally absent, and in the end, the two lines intersect. From that point, they seem to concur definitively: ‘Si Anak Hilang Telah Kembali’, and ‘Seperti tak pernah pergi’.

The poet needed the metaphor upon which we have reflected in this article, and in the course of his life, it became a necessary means of keeping all of these areas of tension together in his work.

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