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**SO CLOSE, YET SO FOREIGN: AUSTRALIANS' AMBIVALENT VIEW TOWARDS  
INDONESIA IN THREE POEMS**

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**Abstract**

Literary works embody writers' view, which is undoubtedly a product of their cultural background and values. Thus, when a western writer writes about eastern themes, his values and worldview as westerner might influence his view towards the East. In the case of Australian writers writing about Indonesia, this notion proves to be problematic. Australians' ambivalent identity as a people and the stark contrast in sociological, cultural, and historical as well as unique relation between the two countries often result in ambivalence in their view towards Indonesia. Applying postcolonial criticism, this study was endeavoured to uncover Australians' ambivalent view towards Indonesia portrayed in three poems about Indonesia written by Australian writers. Descriptive-qualitative analysis on the poems revealed that there are ambivalences in how Australians view Indonesia which transcend the dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient. Australians see Indonesia as 'other' and at the same time acknowledge the differences and diversities as part of universal reality.

**Keywords:** *ambivalence, postcolonial criticism, Indonesia, Australia*

**INTRODUCTION**

Geographically, Australia and Indonesia are separated only by 200 km of sea, yet there is hardly more distinct neighbours anywhere in the world than these two countries (Beeson, Bloomfield, & Wiaksana, 2020) whose relationship between has been continuously marked by high tension, suspicion, and mutual mistrust (Burchill & Kingsbury, 2001; Brown, 2013). There have been times when Indonesia and Australia enjoyed warm and friendly relationship, but even these never completely abolish the latent tension, and suspicion, between the two, an attitude which has been internalized by the majority of the population of both countries and reflected in their domestic and foreign policy. A significant portion of Australian population believe that Indonesia, large, predominantly Muslim population of more than 230 million to our north, one day would pose a serious threat for them, and although these threats are largely imaginary, it is difficult to convince these people otherwise (Mackie, 2007). A survey conducted by the Australia-Indonesia Centre in 2016 shows that only 53% of Australian respondents feel they have good or moderate knowledge about Indonesia, and only 43% of Australians feel favourable towards Indonesia (theconversation.com). Polls over the years demonstrate that Australian public views of Indonesia have been marked by apparent volatile (McRae & Zhang in Lindsley & McRae (eds), 2018) and the growing knowledge of Indonesia will unlikely leads to more positive attitudes. This, more often than not, results in an ambivalent view of the Australians towards Indonesia.

In addition to the lack of knowledge, Australians' ambivalent view towards Indonesia both as a country and a people may also reflect their never-ending identity confusion. Various research have confirmed this sense of identity confusion; on one side Australians

are highly concerned about national identity, but on the other side, they are somewhat confused about what that identity might be (Castles, Foster, Iredale, & Withers, 1998; Hage, 1998). Australia as a people are apprehensive between two poles of identity; a sense of Australianness, with its myths and archetypes, as the result of ambivalent historical and cultural ties to the United Kingdom (Elder, 2007; White, 1981) and a nation who for a long time have excluded Indigenous Australians and seen them as “others” (Beckett, 2014; Hollinsworth, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Reynolds, 1996). The nostalgia (and the fact) of being part of the United Kingdom is never absent from the national identity and national consciousness; the pride of being the descendants of the “great” European civilization. It can be seen particularly from the the conservative government policy of former Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) tried to reconstruct Australian identity in its historical and cultural connection with the UK and a celebratory version of colonial and ANZAC history, and were determined to systematically generate this version of Australianness in public discourse, including in the national educational curriculum (Bonnell & Crotty, 2008; Brett, 2013; Clark, 2008; Curran, 2004). These two views represent Australian contradiction; the desire to exclusively control its own affairs and to determine its own fate and the enduring emotional stronghold that Britain retained over both the people and their leaders. As a result, Smith and Phillips (2008) suggest that there is not one single national identity that binds Australians together. Instead, it is ‘a set of overlapping, evolving and contested themes’ that are complexly engaged with by the population in its self-construction.

Beside the never-ending tension and suspicion, the Australian fascination towards Indonesia has also been apparent. No other country has the same depth or breadth of expertise on Indonesia in its universities and research centres as Australia does, or comparable numbers of people studying the language and culture of Indonesia in its schools (Mackie, 2007). Australian analyses Indonesia on many topics ranging from economy, politic, human rights issues, religion, art, music to literature. In addition, although Australian media often portray Indonesia as a chaotic and dangerous place, Australians still consider Indonesia as a beautiful and favourite tourist destinations (Indriyani & Prasanti, 2020) with the number of Australians visiting Indonesia steadily increasing over the years (BPS, 2022).

Put in postcolonial context, Australians’ ambivalent view towards Indonesia signifies the dynamic nature of postcolonial study. Traditionally referred as critical response to various forms of control and hegemony by the western powers which was the outcome of colonial and imperial interaction (Bailey, 2011; Habib, 2005), postcolonialism is later understood as critique of the process of production of knowledge about the other (William & Chrisman, 1994). In his seminal work *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), Said sees colonialism as rooted in an epistemological inquiry and project of constructing the Orient. The product of such orientalist view are sets of binary opposition between the West and the East. Europeans saw the East as primitive, savage, pagan, undeveloped, and weak who need to be governed and ‘developed’, and it was the task of the European to do so (Nayar, 2010). The Orient was all that the Europe (and the West) was not, and seen as Europe’s ‘contrasting image, idea, personality, experience’ (Said, 1991) which resulted in the binary opposition between the East and the West.

The Anglocentric or Eurocentric view to be foregrounding the mid-twentieth century, however, is no longer adequate to accommodate the dynamic relation between the colonized and contemporary situation and demands. Colonialism is not a phenomena in certain time and place in history, but ‘a trans-historical thing, always present and always in the process of dissolution’ (William & Chrisman, 1994), the implication of which is that postcolonial theory should involve a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledges, as well as needs, developed outside the west (Young, 2003). The ambivalence and the complex nature of the relation between the colonized and colonizer is centre to Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) in which the relation is not monolithic, and at the same time unstable and relational (Nayar, 2010; Castle, 2007). While Said’s *Orientalism*

keeps the spheres of colonizer and colonized rather firmly apart, Bhabha, with his interest in their interaction, sees important movements going both ways (Bartens, 2002) and the cultural interaction of colonizer and colonized leads to a fusion of cultural forms that from one perspective (Bhabha, 1994). This results in cultural identity which always emerges in contradictory and ambivalent space, thus makes it impossible to claim a hierarchical purity.

This ambivalence best describes Australians' view and attitude toward Indonesia portrayed in three poems under the study. The strict dichotomy between the Orient (Indonesia) and the Occident (Australia) tends to simplify, and at the same time, generalize the complexities of cultural and historical aspects of both nations (Burchill & Kingsbury, 2001). Three poems by Henry Dutton (1922-1988), R.F. Brissenden (1928-1991), and John Mateer were selected as they explicitly talk about Indonesia, with Indonesian settings and themes. Employing postcolonial criticism, this paper seeks to uncover how the poets see Indonesia through their poems in relation to their status as Australians who, as mentioned above, might hold ambivalent view towards Indonesia. This is particularly important to see how the dual identity of Australian people (as proud Australians and British race patriotism) (Ward, 2001) influences on how they see other people. Australians (particularly of older generations) embraced the idea that all British people were part of a 'single, indissoluble community through the ties of blood, language, history and culture' (Ward, 2001) which made them view the world through the imperial imagination and reacted to the world with an 'imperial instinct' (Waters, 1995). This paper will further trace this 'imperial instinct' as residue of colonial view and Australians' ambivalent attitude towards Indonesia explicitly or implicitly depicted in the tree poems under the study.

## **METHOD**

This study is a descriptive-qualitative analysis employing postcolonial criticism to uncover Australians' ambivalent view towards Indonesia in tree poems by Australian authors. The source of data were three poems entitled "Baron-Kukup, South Java Coast" written in the early 1980s by Henry Dutton, "Takbiran" (1988) by John Mateer and "Walking Down Jalan Thamrin" (1981) by R.F. Brissenden. The data were in the form of expressions (words, phrases, lines, stanzas) which correspond to the to the problem of the research, which is the writers' view on Indonesia in relation to postcolonial paradigm. As this is qualitative research, the researchers played the role as research instrument, equipped with data sheet utilized to take note and categorize the data. Data analysis was conducted in several steps which include data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and or verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

After examining the data gained from three poems under the study with the aim of uncovering the authors' views on Indonesia using postcolonial criticism, the researchers found several results. First, all three poems embody the authors' view on Indonesia which might have been influenced by their identities and cultural backgrounds as Australians. In general, through their poems, the authors view Indonesia and its people as a different geographical, social, and cultural entity. Indonesia and Indonesians are perceived as "the other" East and viewed as identical with romanticism, traditionalism, exoticism, spiritualism, and backwardness as opposed to the rational, modern, and advanced West.

Second, the authors' view on Indonesia in the three poems are presented through the poems' persona, characters, and subjects. In all three poems under the study, the speakers of the poem are westerners who are encountered with local characters, settings, and events and observe the East with their western beliefs and values. The subjects selected by the authors in their poems are all particular (particular places, particular events, particular people) which represent the themes of "Indonesianness" seen by the outsiders. Third,

although there are still residues of colonial views which can be seen from the way the speakers of the poems perceive the local characters and subjects, the ambivalence of the view is also apparent. In “Baron-Kukup, South Java Coast” by Henry Dutton presents Indonesia as an exotic and mysterious place, and at the same time tries to understand all the peculiarities and connect them to his cultural background and identity and to universal values and reality. “Takbiran” written by John Mateer displays writer’s fascination towards foreign spirituality and consider the *malam takbiran* a distinctive religious experience which holds universal meaning. The third poem, “Walking Down Jalan Thamrin” by R.F. Brissenden pictures Indonesia as traditional and backward as opposed to the writer’s modern country. However, the poem also depicts the transformation towards modernity and the harmony between traditional values and modern life.

## Discussion

### *Lost in Exoticism and Mystery in “Baron-Kukup, South Java Coast” by Henry Dutton*

The poem written in the early 1980s by an Australian poet Geoffrey Piers Henry Dutton consist of nine stanzas each of which is a triplet (three-line stanza). As a whole, the poem narrates an encounter between the persona (who is probably the writer himself) and a foreign place in the form of the southern seacoast of Java. The title of the poem explicitly mentions the name two beaches in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia which were (and still are) in the eighties and nineties among the most popular beaches in the region. As the poem progresses, the encounter is not merely a physical contact, but a more cultural one, which ends in a state of contemplation. In general, the poem confirms colonial view perceiving the East as “exotic and mysterious” (Barry, 1995; Gemie, 1998), but further reading shows how it resides in ambivalent space where cultural identity emerges (Bhabha, 1994).

The poem starts with an interesting oxymoron “We came to the strange, familiar sea” (line 1) which truly embodies the ambivalent view of the speaker. The sea is a familiar sight which can be found anywhere in the world, yet among all those seas there is always something peculiar; something that represents the locality of the place. This particular sea, though it carries common features of other seas, is “strange” for the speaker as it is geographically distant and, more importantly, attached to locally different culture. The second line of the poem “By hills of rock terraced with stones” (line 2) intensifies the speaker’s amazement of the sight. The southern seashores of Java are characterized by rows of rocky hills. These hills are terraced using hollow rocks and used for farming. For local people nothing is peculiar about the sight. However, for the speaker this poses unfamiliarity as he says, “Like black, socketed skulls.” “The strange sea” now becomes more contextual as it is fenced by strange objects, “stones like black, socketed skulls.” The writer’s choice of the words “black” and “skulls” is interesting since the stones are not black, but more like grey, and they do not actually look like skulls. However, it can be argued that the writer, coming from western world and trying to make sense of what he sees, might employ his perceived belief about the East which is identical with mystery and mysticism symbolized by the black color and skull.

In the second stanza, exoticism is presented through the choice of objects which are unlikely to be found in Australia or other western countries. The stanza begins “Slender fishing boats balanced on outriggers” in the first line, and then continues with “Whiskered fish and hammerhead sharks” in the second line and “Hung from mango trees” in the last line. Whiskered fish and hammerhead sharks can be found in many seas in the world, but double outrigger fishing boats are local only in certain areas, mostly in tropical regions. Seeing this kind of boat makes the speaker realizes that he is not at home. He is not in the cultural milieu he is familiar with. Furthermore, “mango trees” in line three strengthens the notion of being in different geography and different culture. Mango trees are native only to tropical regions, and together with double outrigger fishing boat, they represent exotic objects for the speaker. It is interesting, however, how the writer blends the familiar and

the unfamiliar (which is started from the very first line of the poem in the phrase “strange, familiar sea”) in the stanza and following stanzas. The unfamiliar “Slender fishing boats balanced on outriggers” is encountered with the familiar “Whiskered fish and hammerhead sharks”, which in turn, is encountered with the unfamiliar “Hung from mango trees”. This technique gives the readers both visual and mental pictures of the meeting of two worlds. The same of technique blending familiar objects or activities with the unfamiliar ones is used in the third and fourth stanzas:

We swam in the friendly sea, inside the sandbar  
Where warm springs bubbled against our cool limbs.  
A man brought his creamy oxen down to drink  
And they stood belly deep in the pale water  
As he washed them.

[Dutton, 1981]

The first two lines of the third stanza describes familiar activities and objects such as “swam”, “sandbar” and “warm springs”. However, starting from the third line of the same stanza, and continues to the first sentence of the fourth stanza, the poem presents a very contrasting sights which represent the locality of the objects and activities being described. The sight of a man leading his ox (or buffalo) to a river drink and bathe is obviously unfamiliar for the speaker. The speaker of the poem who can be considered the representation of Western subject seems amazed by what he is witnessing. This can be seen from the way the speaker describes the scene by using a compact, descriptive, and visual language. When we are encountering something which we can not fully comprehend, we, more often than not, rely on sensory identification with only a slight use of our perception. Standing in awe, the speaker perceives the scene visually without any attempt to discern what he sees as his cultural background does not provide him with pre-acquired knowledge about it.

The rest of the lines from the fourth stanza, and continues to the fifth stanza, describe the activities of traditional fishermen, which seem trivial but really captivate the speaker’s attention. As in the description about a man leading to and bathing an ox in a river, the descriptions in these stanzas are dominated by visual and kinesthetic imageries. It seems that the speaker is describing all the objects and all the people he sees to fellow westerners who have the same cultural background as he does. This visual and kinesthetic technique produces a concrete effect as if the reader (or listener) saw with his or her own eyes. Although fishermen activities on the sea or by the seashore are common scenes around the world, but geographical and cultural aspects make them particular, especially when seen from the perspective of an outsider. The effect is a display of exoticism of the East for western readers:

A fishing boat slid  
Down the surf by the cape, and everyone ran  
To push it by the outriggers up on the sand  
And peer into the belly of the boat at the sharks,  
Ribbon-fish, mackerel, starfish and murex shells

[Dutton, 1981]

The sixth and seventh stanzas describe different objects and activities from the previous stanzas but employing similar technique; blending the familiar with the unfamiliar and using concrete imagery and kinesthetic imageries. Familiar objects and activities are presented together with the unfamiliar ones to produce a unique effect of the blend between the ordinary on one hand, and the exotic and the strange on the other hand. In these stanzas

the speaker, together with his fellows, were enjoying grilled fish when a very strange scene interrupted the dining, “a man came jogging down the hills with a python in a plastic bag over his shoulder.” Visiting a beach and grilling fresh fish (or have them grilled) are common activities in many parts in the world. In the poem, this familiar, common activities, however, are presented in the scene with unfamiliar sight of a man approaching from the hills with a python in a plastic bag over his shoulder. The writer uses similar technique to describe this blend of activities; visual and kinesthetic imageries packed in concrete, economical words. It is a mode of telling what one sees when he or she does not fully comprehend what he or she saw. The familiar activity for the local residents becomes an unfamiliar sight for a foreigner:

We bought five fish and had them grilled,  
And as we were eating a man came  
Jogging down the hills with a python  
In a plastic bag over his shoulder

[Dutton, 1981]

The next two lines of the seventh stanza describes another familiar activity of eating fish, but then once again blends it with particular notion. The familiar dish is blended with the unfamiliar sensation of the seasoning. Western food is commonly less rich in flavor and seasoning compared to that of Eastern. Westerners tend to preserve the original flavor of the food ingredients rather than cook them in rich spices and seasoning. In the the lines the speaker is shocked by the hot sensation of chilis added to the fish. The writer uses not only simile to describe the spiciness of the chilis, but also hyperbole in order to create the effect of unfamiliarity and exoticism of the meal (“The chilis / On the fish cut like the sun through thunderclouds”). The speaker’s western culinary reference and preference make him perceive the spicy food as unfamiliar, and presumably exotic.

The last line of the seventh stanza and the three lines in the eighth stanza make up one sentence that introduce the speaker’s contemplation about his encounter with eastern culture. In his way back, he and his fellow(s) passed through patches of small, terraced farmlands with stones stacked one on top of the others. In these lines, the speaker finally admits that he was a stranger to the land (“foreigners in the terraces”). Watching the small patches of farmlands with corns and tamarind, the speaker realized that he was in a foreign land with foreign cultures different from where he came from. Even the farmlands were different. They were not large farmlands with cultivated using modern tools and modern farming commonly found in his country, but “desperate patches of earth / The size of a minibus.” The last stanza presents the speaker’s conclusion about his journey encountering a new world. In a contemplative tone, the speaker admits that only the sea was the same, the rest was either mysterious exoticism or exotic mystery. Watching a man drifting his ox home, the speaker was once again reminded of his “know nothing” about everything he had seen in this foreign land, except that he saw it:

Only the sea was the same, the salt on our skins  
Gently prickling as we edged past  
The washed oxen drifting home

[Dutton, 1981]

### ***Drown in Spirituality in “Takbiran” by John Mateer***

Born in di Roodeport, South Africa in 1971 and grew up in the suburban of Johannesburg, John Mateer spent most of his childhood in Canada before he came back to South Africa in 1979. In 1989 he moved to Australia with his family and has live there since then. He has published several poem collections, including a travel book about Indonesia. His poem entitled “Takbiran” studied in this research was written during his stay in Medan

1988 and published in his poem collection *Elsewhere* (2007). John Mateer called himself a “Traveler Poet” as his poems represent his recollection and contemplation on his encounters with different cultures as he travelled different countries. The poem “Takbiran” is composed in twelve lines divided five asymmetric stanzas. It takes spiritual encounter as its theme with special moment in the form of *takbiran* as the subject. For Muslims in Indonesia, the night before Eid el-Fitr is a special occasion during which for the whole night they chant God’s name. The night also marks the end of Ramadhan (the fasting month) when Muslims around the world conduct religious fasting for the whole month. *Takbiran*, thus, signifies both Muslims’ gratitude for having accomplished fasting during the Ramadhan and joy to welcome Eid el-Fitr Idul Fitri, the biggest religious celebration for Muslims. Eid el-Fitr also is perceived as a moment of rebirth for Muslims as they have been purified during the Ramadhan. During the night of *takbiran*, chants are heard from all mosques’ loudspeakers, creating a mystical atmosphere for those who hear. In many places people hold parade of vehicles around their neighborhoods chanting “takbir”. This tradition can be found only in Indonesia and perhaps in several areas in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia is a multi-ethnic country with a large population who are predominantly of Islamic background. Different from Australia, Indonesia’s society is profoundly religious (Kalidjernih, 2001) which not only marks the cultural distinction between the two countries, but also often triggers suspicion among Australian (McKenzie, 2007). In the past, orientalist depicted Muslim religious practices as being picturesque, a term to describe the pious, traditional and unthreatening Islamic world, while Muslims were portrayed as being irredeemably different from, more backward than and culturally inferior to the Europeans (Macfie, 2002). The religious East was seen as the contrasting image of the more worldly West, which in turn generated prejudice as well as wonder. This sense of “otherness”, however, was not the only result of this dichotomy as also reflected cultural proximity, historical parallelism and religious familiarity (MacKenzie, 1995) by which the anthropological gaze on others could be turned on to one’s own religious and cultural practices (Macafie, 2002).

The amazement of seeing the other as different and the reflection of one’s own spiritual experience are the essence of the poem “Takbiran”. In the first stanza, the writer describes the speaker’s amazement of the mystical atmosphere of the night. Beginning with short expression “There is a night”, the speaker seems to invite readers to enter mystical-spiritual world of a very special night. This opening resembles those commonly found in fairy tales where mysticism and miracles are not unusual and are integral parts of the story. It is interesting, however, that this fairytale-like introduction is directly followed by the use of objects which represent two opposing realities: the religious and the profane, the traditional and the modern, commotion and tranquility in the special night. Simile in the first line compares “radios” as a symbol of modern device to “minarets” as a symbol of religious architectural shape. During the night of *takbiran*, almost all radio stations (at least until late 1990s) broadcasted *takbiran* until dawn. Like minarets of great mosques in the past, radios chant God Almighty name in the air. This can be interpreted in two ways; there is a change in people’s attitude towards religious ceremony brought about by the invention of modern technology, or modern technology change the mode of the celebration. The spirit and the meaning of *takbiran*, however, remain unchanged.

The second line of the poem vividly captures the local phenomena commonly found during the night of *takbiran*. The two objects, “Engines” and “firecracker” realistically describe the atmosphere during the special night in Indonesia when the roaring sound of vehicle parade (“Engines”) is interrupted now and then by the blasting sound of fireworks and “firecrackers”. However, the writer’s use of the phrase “the chanting of” instead of “the sound of” to describe the boisterous sound produced by both engines and firecrackers signifies that these commotion does not reduce the solemn and mystical nature of the night. “Chant” is a repeated rhythmic phrase, commonly shouted or sung in unison by crowd and

typically part of a (religious) ritual. This verb gives profane objects of engines and firecracker religious nuance. In the last line of the first stanza, the speaker compares the festive parade and the deafening sound of firecrackers to the warmth of private space “any loved room.” This leads to the idea that the solemn chanting of God’s name, the boisterous commotion of parade, and deafening sound of firecracker are all parts of tradition and collective consciousness of Muslims in Indonesia as well as manifestation of religiosity and communal and private celebration of a particular night.

There is a night when all radios transmit like minarets,  
when the chanting of engines and firecracker  
is as comprehensive as the space in any loved room

[Mateer, 2007]

In the second stanza another religious symbol and allusion are employed to stress the sacredness and religious importance of the night. The writer uses simile to compare the greatness of the night of *takbiran* to the might of the Israelites when they invaded Canaan as narrated in the Bible. As described in Joshua 6, Joshua's army marched around the city for a week, blowing rams' horns, and on the seventh day, combined shouting with the piercing horns, and the wall fell down flat. The use of the religious allusion of the Walls of Jericho is essential as it draws similar symbolical spirituality between the sound of *takbir* and the blowing Israelites' ram's horn and shouting in that both produce immense power to make not only physical objects (“Walls of Jericho” and “windows”), but also the souls who hear them tremble. The sound of *takbir* trembles not only the windows tremble, but also “the unbelievers” behind them sitting in front of their wide-screen TVs “acquiesce”, as the sound of the Israelite' ram's horn and shouting made the Walls crumble and the people of Canaan tremble. The windows, as the Walls of Jericho, is, thus, viewed as the border between the believer and the unbeliever which is unable to stand against the power of divinity and the sound of faith:

It's the night when windows tremble like the walls of Jericho,  
when unbelievers acquiesce to the silence of their wide-screen TVs

[Mateer, 2007]

The third stanza further describe the spiritually festive atmosphere of the night after a full month fasting (“That night is stalked by a fasting moon and its thirsty day”) when Muslims are obliged to strengthen their faith by both physical and mental tests. During Ramadhan Muslims are not allowed to eat and drink during the days (“thirsty day”) and commanded to ovoid any kinds of bad deeds. It is a harsh physical and mental training for purification before the moment of rebirth manifested in Eid-el-Fitr celebration. The night of *takbiran*, thus, can be perceived as the celebration of passing the test as well as a prayer for a new beginning. The auditory imagery dominating the poem successfully captures the common atmosphere during the night of *takbiran* in most places in Indonesia. The *takbir* is chanted in various voices and melodies (“with vibrato and reverb is everywhere breeding voices”) and through various media which makes the whole country sing in unison to praise for God. The writer describes this enchanting and almost-miraculous night in a beautiful simile “like engineered wheat or a mirage in an Arabian desert”. The use of the verb “is stalked” in the first line implies that the night of *takbiran* is not only the end of the test during the Ramadhan, but also the beginning of the journey towards the next Ramadhan. This signifies a never-ending spiritual cycle for a Muslim as long as he or she lives in this world:



That night is stalked by a fasting moon and its thirsty day,  
and with vibrato and reverb is everywhere breeding voices  
like engineered wheat or a mirage in an Arabian desert

[Mateer, 2007]

To stress central role of the night in Islam and its special place for Muslims, the writer uses two personification verbs to start the stanzas. In the previous stanza the night “is stalked by a fasting moon and its thirsty day” or Ramadhan, in the fifth stanza it is “pursued by pursued by the single-eyed sun who squints at the field of newspapers where families have knelt” or the Eid prayer. The night of *takbiran* is not like other nights; it one night in a year that marks transformation and purification of the self as well as the beginning of spiritual cycle. The Eid prayer conducted in the following morning of the night of *takbiran* is a ritual that initiates the celebration of Eid-el-Fitr. It is usually held in big mosques or open spaces such as squares, football fields, or parking lots as it is normally attended by people in large number.

When held in mosques, some people usually bring their own praying mats, and some do not as mosques are usually well cleaned. However, when the prayer is held on open spaces, people need something on which they can sit on and pray. Some people bring praying mat, but others use any material they can use such as sheets of newspapers. However, this ordinary object becomes extraordinary since it is used in a religious ritual. “The field of newspapers” is where “families have knelt”; the earthly object is used to serve religious purpose. Nearly similar notion is also found in the last line in this stanza when “scooters” as a modern vehicle is used to take the families to visit their ancestor burial site; an object from the earthly realm is used to take them to spiritual realm. It is a common practice in many parts in Indonesia where people visit burial site on Eid day bringing various flowers and pray for their ancestor (in some parts it is done on the last day of Ramadhan), although some factions in Islam and Islamic scholars consider it a heresy since it is not explicitly taught both in the Koran and sunnah. Some scholars argue that this practice is actually a form of localizing Islamic teaching. This is a common sight during Eid prayer in Indonesia even today and the writer perfectly captures the local color of the religious ceremony. This kind of scene is surely foreign for most westerners as it is not familiar with their prior knowledge about religious ritual practices commonly practiced in their culture:

That night is pursued by the single-eyed sun who squints  
at the field of newspapers where families have knelt,  
and squints again at them on scooters speeding to their ancestors

[Mateer,2007]

The last stanza which is also the last line of the poem serves the conclusion as the speaker contemplates all that he hears and sees during the night of *takbiran* and Eid-el-Fitr celebration. The speaker undergoes a kind of spiritual experience as he encounters with different religious practices and rituals of different culture. The night, the one night in a year when Muslims, especially in Indonesia, are drown in spiritual liberation. The chanting and praising God’s name leaves a deep impression on the speaker. The chant of *takbir* from the mosques’ loudspeakers and the boisterous sound of motor engines and firecrackers do not reduce the sacredness and the spiritual nuance of the night. It is the night when all souls chant and praise God’s hoping to be given chance to undergo the next spiritual cycle. On that night “all is awake to the sound of the one Name”. From the poem we can see how the writer, with his western values and world view, through the speaker of the poem, is left amazed by the different sense of religiosity of Indonesian people, and at the same time, compelled to connect the experience to universal values.

### ***Traditionalism, Backwardness, and Transformation in “Walking Down Jalan Thamrin” by R.F. Brissenden***

Robert Francis Brissenden (1928–1991) was an Australian poet, novelist, literary critic and academician. His poems were published in several collections including *Winter Matins* (1971), *Elegies* (1974), *Building a Terrace* (1975), *The Whale in Darkness* (1980), and *Sacred Sites* (1990). Some of his poems were published posthumously in 1993 in a book entitled *Suddenly Evening* edited by David Brooks. Together with Indonesian poet Sapardi Djoko Damono, he published an anthology entitled *Mendorong Jack Kuntikunti: Sepilihan Sajak dari Australia* (1991). The poem entitled “Walking Down Jalan Thamrin” studied in this research is included in *The Whale in Darkness* (1980) and *Mendorong Jack Kuntikunti: Sepilihan Sajak dari Australia* (1991). In 1981 Brissenden visited Jakarta to give lectures on Australian Literature in Faculty of Arts University of Indonesia. It was during his stay in Jakarta when he visited Denpasar and wrote “Walking Down Jalan Thamrin”. Written in free verse with three asymmetrical stanzas the poem depicts a main road in Denpasar as the epitome of the Orient with its backwardness, traditional values, chaos, and irrationality (Said, 1978; Gemie, 1998; Nayer, 2010) as the opposite of the rational, modern, and liberal Occident. The depiction of the people and the place as primitive further establishes and justifies the binary separation of the Orient and the Occident, thus underlines the naturalness and primacy of the Occident’s culture and world view (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Deeper analysis, however, reveals the ambivalence of the poem as it portrays *Jalan Thamrin* (and Balinese culture and its people) as a milieu of transformation and harmony.

“Walking Down Jalan Thamrin” takes a main road in Denpasar in early eighties as its setting as well as its subject. The poem depicts familiar sights of city roads in Indonesia in the eighties packed with people, cars, bikers, and street sellers, which create chaotic scenes as if there were no rules to govern them. This kind of scene is common in Indonesian cities and town even today; a sight which probably amazes foreigners since in western countries rules in general are strictly applied which makes traffic, and roads, more orderly. The lack of social discipline and rule enforcement are more apparent in third world countries, including Indonesia. Roads and traffic are sometimes good indicator of the entire nation’s attitude toward laws and orders. The first stanza talks about the transformation of Jalan Thamrin, from a narrow road which “Was made by feet— / The feet of men, horses, dogs, pigs, cattle”, to a modern street with “the petrol-stinking bitumen / Roaring with motorbikes, bemos, cars.” This transformation, however, does not automatically change people’s attitude and their way of thinking towards order, environmental awareness, or even hygiene. From the fourth line through the sixth line the speaker explicitly expresses his negative perception towards everything he sees on the street. Phrases like “narrow dusty strip”, “open ditch” and “petrol-stinking bitumen” clearly represent the speaker’s view on how in third world countries modernity is merely perceived as the existence of symbols in the form of modern objects, but not accompanied by modern attitude and way of thinking. *Jalan Thamrin* which is crowded with motored vehicles as symbol of modernity still displays the backward side of a third-world country:

Jalan Thamrin in Denpasar  
Was made by feet—  
The feet of men, horses, dogs, pigs, cattle.  
Now we walk narrow dusty strip  
Between the open ditch  
And the petrol-stinking bitumen  
Roaring with motorbikes, bemos, cars

[Brissenden, 1981]

The second stanza presents a very different idea about modernity in Bali. In first stanza modernity is described as only manifests itself in symbols and not in essence; people are familiar with modern streets, modern buildings, and modern vehicles, but they still can not change their attitude to keep up with the transformation. Second stanza, however, presents a very different idea of modernity and its impact in Bali. In this stanza modernity is not contrasted to backwardness but is perceived as in harmony with traditionalism. Five lines in this stanza depicts an old woman who appears to be physically fit (“An old woman / Delicately erect”), with a rolled mattress on her head walking towards the speaker. For the speaker this is a jarring sight. And old lady, a symbol of traditionalism, walks through traffic packed with any kinds of vehicles as symbols of modernity trying to preserve the traditional way of life and culture. She represents Balinese tradition which has survived amidst waves of modernity and ever-growing tourism. The association of the old woman and Balinese tradition is visually depicted by the word “Balancing” in the third line. Balinese women are known for their ability to carry loads of objects on their head by balancing them and without even holding them. The old woman, ignoring the crowded street with its all sort of commotion, walks straight (“Threads her way towards us through the traffic”), probably towards a shrine or temple as a symbol of the bond with tradition:

An old woman  
Delicately erect  
Balancing a pink rolled mattress  
On her head  
Threads her way towards us through the traffic

[Brissenden, 1981]

The third stanza is a continuation of the previous stanza with similar character as the subject (“An old woman”) of the sentences. The first part of the stanza repeats the idea of the chaotic atmosphere that signifies backwardness found in the first stanza. Dirty street, with strong scent of spilled gasoline, and open ditch on the side of the street revealing dirty water are all indication that people have not yet embraced the modernity in their attitude and way of life. This stanza further gives more vulgar description on how backwardness still manifests in the people’s culture. As the old woman walks through the traffic, the speaker observes “Two pigs / Root and snuffle through a heap of garbage”. The street is thus a space where various contrasting images and symbols intermingle one another creating a chaotic harmony.

The second part of the stanza depicts yet another contrasting scene to the first part, and in general, to all previous parts of the poem. Jalan Thamrin with its dirty and greasy asphalt, with its dirty and smelly ditch, with pigs scavenging food from garbage, is contrasted with a young boy in clean, white shirt pedaling his new bike with a flower in the handlebar. This depiction can be interpreted in two ways. First, the young boy is the antithesis of the old woman mentioned in the previous part. He is the representation of the new generation embracing new values symbolized by his “White shirt fresh as photograph from *Vogue*” contrasted to the old woman as the symbol of tradition and old values. This indicates progress, that life progressively moves forward, and the older generation sooner or later must give a to the new one. Whether the tradition will be carried forward by the new generation is a question to be answered later. Second, the writer intends to give a romantic side to the story. Amidst the hustle and bustle, the nasty smell and dirty look, there is romance. The young boy, with his brand-new bike, is heading towards his lover to give her a flower. Among tree poems studied in this research, “Walking Down Jalan Thamrin” is the most explicit in expressing colonial view toward the East. However, there is also ambivalence in this view as the poem acknowledges the harmony between the modern and the traditional of Balinese culture.

## CONCLUSION

The three poems studied in this research depict Indonesia in quite unique perspective. There are sense of wonder and estrangement commonly found in works about the East produced by western writers, and at the same time also attempts to understand the foreignness of the subjects. As westerners, the writers are obviously influenced by their cultural background and values in seeing Indonesia. For Australians, Indonesia presents an intriguing entity; it is geographically so close, but culturally remote; familiar and at the same time unfamiliar. It is a large and diverse nation full of mystery which fascination as well as suspicion. Australians' ambivalent view towards Indonesia is a result of their ambivalent identity. Their cultural and emotional ties to Britain have shape their identity as part of "great" European civilization with its hundreds of years of colonization of the third world. Overtime, however, the desire to develop their own identity, or "Australianness", free from Britain has also been apparent.

This ambivalent identity clearly manifests in the poems under the study. In the poem "Baron-Kukup, South Java Coast" written by Henry Dutton, Indonesia is seen as mysterious and exotic. The speaker of the poem encounters both familiar and unfamiliar phenomena, and while he tries to comprehend everything he sees, some things are beyond his understanding due to cultural differences. In the end, he honestly admits that only the sea is the same and everything else are differences to be accepted. The second poem, a short poem entitled "Takbiran" by John Mateer, depicts a spiritual encounter as the speaker coming from wester culture witnesses religious celebration in different country. The writer presents various local practices during the night of *takbiran* in wonder and amazement as they are foreign to him, and at the same time attempts to bridge the gap between the foreign phenomena during the night of *takbiran* and his religious and cultural background. This lead to his conclusion of universal spiritual theme and experience in the end of the poem. In the last poem entitled "Walking Down Jalan Thamrin", through the speaker of the poem, the writer views Indonesia as still a traditional people living in the midst of symbols of growing modernity. As Indonesia becomes more modern, especially in the existence of modern objects, its people at large are still incompatible with modern values and way of thinking. There is, however, a sign of transformation from traditionalism to complete modernity presented through two characters from two different generations.

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