

# Letters of Indonesian nationalist Sjahrir to his beloved Maria Duchâteau

## A transcultural case of travel writing

KEES SNOEK

### ABSTRACT

The letters Indonesian nationalist Sjahrir wrote between 1932 and 1940 to his Dutch beloved Maria Duchâteau illustrate a transcultural case of travel writing. They also illustrate how much he was convinced that Western ideas and attitudes could assist Indonesian people to develop and gain sufficient self-confidence to shake off the colonial yoke. Born into an elite Minangkabau family, Sjahrir studied in Java and the Netherlands, before taking up campaigning for a non-cooperative political party which emphasized the importance of education. This article discusses the period between early 1932 and 26 February 1934, before Sjahrir's arrest and following imprisonment and exile. In this period of relative freedom (but without Maria, who on 14 May 1932 had been extradited to Holland), Sjahrir travelled a lot throughout Java. In his letters, he gives examples of social injustice and colonial abuse, of the contrast between the beauties of nature and the poverty-stricken inhabitants of Java, and of differences along the lines of ethnicity, social class, and gender.

### KEYWORDS

Indonesian independence, Western influence, education, anti-imperialism, colonial abuse, inequality, apartheid.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a remarkable fact that of the four recognized founding fathers of the Indonesian Republic, proclaimed on 17 August 1945, three were born in Sumatra, more specifically in the ethnic region of West Sumatra known as Minangkabau. The four founding fathers were: Sukarno (1901-1970), Mohammad Hatta (1902-1980), Tan Malaka (1897-1949), and Sutan Sjahrir (1909-1966). The last three belonged to families rooted in the Minangkabau, where they were born. Sukarno was the son of a Balinese woman of the Brahmin caste and a Javanese Muslim aristocrat who was a primary school teacher. The values of this dual heritage nourished his political ideas and activity, contributing to his popularity among the Indonesian people. In 1930, the number of Indonesians was estimated at 60.7 million, out of which 41.7 million lived on the densely populated isle of Java and 19 million in the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup> Sukarno became the first president of the Indonesian Republic, Mohammad Hatta was its first vice-president, Sjahrir (as of 15 November 1945) its first prime minister.

The prominence of three Minangkabau men in the Indonesian nationalist movement is perhaps less surprising when we know that this ethnic group makes up the world's largest matrilineal society. The women control land inheritance; after the wedding ceremony men habitually move into the households of their wives, but soon thereafter they leave their homes in order to provide an income for their family, often in trade. The term associated with this custom is *merantau*, meaning: to leave your home area to make a living, to go to frontier territories or even overseas. The word *rantau* has two meanings for the Minangkabau: 1. the coast (from which you can sail to other destinations), 2. any area beyond the village or region where you were born; 'abroad', 'overseas', encompassing the isle of Java and more remote destinations, such as the Netherlands. Due to this custom, the mental horizon of this *perantau* was expanded, while the contact with other cultures sharpened their critical sense. This custom has contributed to the over-representation of Minangkabau, in proportion to their numbers, in the public life of Indonesia. Minangkabau men of better-situated families were able to pursue higher levels of education, thus gaining notoriety as intellectuals within the Indonesian nationalist movement. Those who took up a more advanced course of study in the Netherlands became aware of the fact that they would remain second-class citizens in the Netherlands East Indies, unable to attain the highest ranks of the colony's administrative hierarchy. This also applied to the Javanese students in the Netherlands, who were in the majority. Mohammad Hatta, Tan Malaka, and Sutan Sjahrir all followed a course of study in the Netherlands. What is more, Hatta, while he was a resident of the Netherlands (1921-1932), was also a prominent member of The League against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression. The opportunity to study in the country of the colonial power contributed in no small measure to the students' awareness of colonial reality in their native land.

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Indonesia 1974. *The population of Indonesia* [World Population Year], p. 8. [C.I.C.R.E.D. Series], retrieved from: [www.cicred.org/Eng/Publications/pdf/c-c24.pdf](http://www.cicred.org/Eng/Publications/pdf/c-c24.pdf).

This article focuses on Sjahrir, the youngest of Indonesia's founding fathers, whose special position in the nationalist movement is highlighted by his relationship with a Dutch woman, Maria Duchâteau (1907-1997). Raden Soetomo (1888-1938), the founder of Budi Utomo, the first nationalist movement in Indonesia, had also married a Dutch woman, but he became the leader of a cooperative political party, whereas Sjahrir was a leader of a non-cooperative party, Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (PNI).

In this article, I investigate how Sjahrir, precisely because of his social background, was able to take a critical look at ethnic and cultural differences in general and within the Indonesian context in particular, and how his orientation towards a Western progressive spirit nourished his ideas of Indonesian independence. My analysis will be based on unpublished materials, namely the letters Sjahrir wrote to Maria Duchâteau between December 1931, when he set off for his native land in order to lead his political party, and 26 February 1934, when he was arrested. I have compiled an annotated edition of the 272 letters Sjahrir wrote to Maria and a few others between 2 December 1931 and 8 November 1941, which it is hoped will be published in the near future. Maria Duchâteau used passages from Sjahrir's letters written between March 1934 and March 1938 for her book *Indonesische overpeinzingen* (1945), which was presented as Sjahrir's diary in exile. In this article, I discuss the letters which he wrote before his arrest, in the relative freedom that allowed him to travel throughout Java as a political campaigner and nationalist activist.

#### SJAHRIR, A WESTERN ORIENTED NATIONALIST AND TRANSCULTURAL TRAVELLER

Sjahrir ("Sutan" is an honorific title, not a first name) was from a Minangkabau elite family. Born in Padang Panjang, he grew up in Medan, where he attended the Europeesche Lagere School, and after that the Mulo, at the time the best secondary school in Medan. In 1926 he became a *perantau* when he enrolled in the Algemeene Middelbare School (AMS) in Bandung, which had opened in 1920 (Figure 1). He joined the Algemeene Studieclub, which was campaigning for Indonesian independence. But he also felt drawn to Western ideas and to the Western thought that he found in Greek-Roman philosophy. His favourite author was Goethe. He organized excursions with other youngsters to places in the surroundings of Bandung that were popular with European tourists, such as the lake of Pengalengan, the volcano Tangkuban Prahau and Situ Aksan, a small lake not far from the city.

After obtaining his AMS-diploma, in May 1929, Sjahrir took leave of his family in Medan before going to the Netherlands for the continuation of his education. Before leaving the Netherlands East Indies, he spent four days roaming the Preanger region on foot, from Bandung to Tasikmalaya and onward to Garut.<sup>2</sup> He took delight in the varied landscape of this region, with

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Maria Duchâteau, 28-9-1932. All quotes from Sjahrir's letters have been translated into English by the author of this article. A selection of Sjahrir's letters was published in *Wissel op de toekomst: brieven van de Indonesische nationalist aan zijn Hollandse geliefde* (Sjahrir 2021). This book contains a biographical portrait of Sjahrir (Snoek 2021).

its rice paddies, coffee plantations and tree groves, and chains of shadowy blue volcanoes on the horizon. He revelled in the beauties of nature, not unlike European travellers in the colony.

In early September of that year, Sjahrir moved in with his sister Siti Sjahrizad (1907-1991) and his brother-in-law Djoehana (1896-1986), who studied medicine at the Gemeente Universiteit (Municipal University) of Amsterdam. Sjahrir enrolled in the law faculty of the same university (Figure 2), and he also followed courses in Indology at Leiden University. Soon he began to draw wider circles, favouring the *rantau* experience over steady progress in his studies. He became involved with the Perhimpunan Indonesia, an association of Indonesian students that had become a significant outpost of the Indonesian nationalist movement.



Figure 1. Sjahrir in Java, November 1926, when he attended the Algemeene Middelbare School in Bandung (photograph from the collection of the late Maria Duchâteau).



Figure 2. Sjahrir in Amsterdam, around 1930, when he attended university (photograph from the collection of the late Maria Duchâteau).

After the graduation of his brother-in-law, who returned to his home country to take up his duties as a medical doctor, Sjahrir found new accommodation in the house of his socialist friend Sal Tas (1905-1976), Sal's spouse Maria Duchâteau and their two young children. Sal Tas was always very involved in politics, while Sjahrir enjoyed the family life with the children (Josine and Hugo), and increasingly also with Maria (Figure 3). After a lot of soul searching, Sjahrir and Maria couldn't deny any longer that there was more between them than simple companionship. Their love had become

obvious during a stay, with the children but without Sal, on the coast of North Holland. Recognizing that he was at fault by having neglected his spouse, Sal Tas had virtually no qualms to resign himself to the new situation. The couple separated, Sjahrir and Maria moved to a house in Rotterdam that belonged to one of their socialist friends.



Figure 3. Maria Duchâteau around the time she got to know Sjahrir (photograph from the collection of the late Maria Duchâteau).

However, at the end of 1931, Sjahrir's expatriate life was cut short since Hatta had asked him to take up the leadership of a newly formed nationalist political party, which had evolved from the so-called Freedom Groups (Golongan Merdeka). Sjahrir obliged, Maria followed him to the Netherlands East Indies with her children. Believing that Sal Tas had already finalized the divorce proceedings, she and Sjahrir were married by an Islamic judge in Medan, on 10 April 1932. However, as it turned out, the divorce procedure had not yet been finalized in the Dutch court, consequently Maria's marriage to Sjahrir was by law considered bigamy.

The colonial government, believing that Mrs. Tas-Duchâteau was a revolutionary, had now a legal argument to have her marriage to Sjahrir annulled and proceeded to extradite her. On 14 May 1932, she was put on a ship back to the Netherlands. After this dramatic moment, the correspondence between Sjahrir and Maria became their only lifeline, amounting to 253 letters and two telegrams Sjahrir sent her before the outbreak of the Second World War when the mail connection between the Netherlands and the Netherlands East Indies was severed. Sjahrir's letters – Maria's have not been preserved – illustrate his activities as a nationalist militant, his views on his fellow Indonesians and his impressions of Indonesian nature.

As a campaigner and organizer for his political party Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia, Sjahrir travelled a lot throughout Java. After his arrest on 26 February 1934 and his exile to the detention camp Boven-Digoel in New Guinea, a good year after his arrest, Sjahrir became necessarily a much more sedentary travel writer, which, however, takes nothing away from the acumen of his observations, even though his letters from Digoel were subjected to censorship before being sent. After having spent nine months in Boven-Digoel, Sjahrir and Hatta, both recognized as outstanding intellectuals, were moved to a new place of exile, the tiny Moluccan Island of Banda-Naira, where they enjoyed more comfortable living conditions (9 February 1936 - 31 January 1942). Sjahrir continued to write down his observations, which illustrate his trajectory as an Indonesian nationalist who, during the course of his self-education, became more familiar with the archipelago's ethnicities, their different beliefs, and ways of life.

#### SJAHRIR'S LETTERS: A COUNTER-NARRATIVE AGAINST THE COLONIAL CONDITION

According to Eve Tavor Bannet (2020: 115), a letter is "an intrinsically fragmentary, discontinuous and miscellaneous form" of writing. In letters, she continues, were accommodated:

reported dialogue, commentary, reflections, political or theological argument, thematic essays, commercial or administrative reports, military or diplomatic dispatches, and travel information that complied with contemporary scientific, historical or ethnographic investigative and discursive norms.

Sjahrir's letters to Maria contain some of these elements, but they are also "love letters", as Maria Duchâteau insisted when I met her in January 1994. Being Sjahrir's lover, she also functioned as a sounding board for him during the years of his political activity and ensuing imprisonment and exile. She was a daughter of the colonizing country, but also his comrade in arms, equally committed to the Indonesian struggle for independence. This position contributed to the intricacy of their correspondence, especially after Sjahrir's arrest, which occurred just before his planned return to the Netherlands. His letters to Maria expose the colonial oppression and relentless bureaucratic cruelty of the authorities, both in the Netherlands East Indies and in the Netherlands.

On the political level, Sjahrir's discourse in his letters to Maria is a counter-narrative against the Dutch imperialist colonizer, but on other levels his narrative is much more complicated than that. Because his affinity with the dynamic spirit of the West forms the basis of his nationalistic endeavour and his striving for independence, Sjahrir would have been surprised to learn that post-colonial theoreticians consider this affinity as an "ambivalence", or "a split in the identity of the colonized other", as Homi Bhabha (1994: 108) suggests. In Sjahrir's imperturbable vision, there was no doubt that Indonesia, once independent, would pursue the same way to progress as Western

European countries had pursued since the early modern age and the industrial revolution. One passage from his letters (as cited in *Indonesische overpeinzingen*, the fictitious diary Maria put together on the basis of Sjahrir's letters written between 29 March 1934 and 25 March 1938) has become well-known. Here is, in my translation, the complete quotation from Sjahrir's original letter, dated 3 January 1937:

I love the west because of you, but you could also reverse it; because I love the west, I love you so much. You are for me the incarnation of the west in my life. That is the effervescent, forward-pushing life, that is the dynamism of the west. That is the Faust of the west that I love, and I am convinced that only the west, in the sense of that dynamism, that activism, is able to redeem the east from its servitude. To experience and accept life as a pursuit, as strife, as movement, to which the concept of tranquillity is subordinate, that is what the west teaches the east, and that is good. To love striving forward for its own sake, how that may be the highest goal in life, that is what Goethe teaches us. (Unpublished letter of 3 January 1937.)

In an effort to describe transcultural encounters, Marie Louise Pratt (1992: 7) uses the term "contact zone", which according to her involves "partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror". In the case of Sjahrir and other non-cooperative nationalists, however, it would be absurd to speak of "partial collaboration" when they draw upon Western ideas and Western spirit – along with its associated terminology and idiom – in order to construct an assertive political identity which is capable of breaking the colonial chains.

In the 1930s, Sjahrir is an active participant in the nationalist fight for independence; in his articles but also in his letters he writes against an empire that denies its subjects their freedom. In another passage of the same letter to Maria he writes – I translate: "Every vital young man or young girl in the East should therefore focus on the West, for only from the West he or she may learn to feel like a power centre, capable of changing this world, of mastering this world" (unpublished letter of 3 January 1937). In the colonial era of the 1930s, the West (in this case: the Netherlands) was still the master, and the East still the slave, a situation leading in some Indonesian cases to an inferiority complex. Speaking for himself, Sjahrir says that he never had this feeling of inferiority, even not before coming to Europe. Even though at the time, in Sjahrir's words, the East was the slave and the West the lord, he never felt like a slave himself. It is this notion of equal status that he also wants to instil in his fellow countrymen. The East should attain a vitality and a dynamic awareness just as large as in the West.

Faust should also reveal himself in Eastern man. And it is already happening. So it is not surprising when people say that I am Western oriented, that I am half or three quarters a Westerner, and that I thus should be mistrusted by those who idolize Eastern civilization and culture and who are opposed to Western "materialism". (Unpublished letter of 3 January 1937.)

Sjahrir embraces Western vitality as a means to educate the people of his native country (meaning: the Netherlands East Indies within its established borders), and to make them aware of their potential. His political party, Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia, put a heavy emphasis on education (*pendidikan*), and on forming political frameworks, striving for the ultimate goal: national independence.

After Maria's forced return to her native Holland, Sjahrir wrote her about his campaigning for his political party which took him to major cities as well as rural areas on the island of Java. Travelling in the Preanger region in West Java, he relived his experience of mid-1929, when he roamed about its mountains and valleys before heading to Europe. This had been just a few years ago, but in the meantime his outlook had become sharper and harder. Writing from Garut, 28 September 1932, Sjahrir tells his "Mieske", or "Miesje" – the two pet names he used to address Maria – that he had been wandering about for two days:

A wonderfully beautiful region, Miesje. Right now, the plains are green, the *padi* is on the *sawah* but still young. The plain is enclosed by five very beautiful, blue mountains. Once I climbed one of them, the Guntur, in the northern part. [...] It is like in Malang, Miesje, but over here there are no sugar plantations. The whole region seems so rich and prosperous, but there is hunger. In the *desa* where I was yesterday night, most of the people eat once a day. There is only one hanging lamp in the whole *desa*. After about seven all houses are closed and dark. The people go to bed at seven o'clock, yet there isn't a factory in the neighbourhood. In the entire village live  $\pm$  3000 people. Nearly all of them do have a home, albeit that these sometimes aren't much bigger than pigsties, and almost every family owns a *sawah*, but only one family in the whole village owns more than two *bahu* (one *bahu* =  $\pm$  700 square meters); most have one *bahu* or less, so one family of about four people needs to subsist on one *bahu*, which yields an annual harvest of  $\pm$  sixty guilders, people pay  $\pm$  thirty guilders on expenses and eighteen guilders on taxes, so the family has to live on twelve guilders a year. And this region is, as I have said, one of the seemingly richest regions. (Unpublished letter of 28 September 1932.)

The beauty of the landscape forms a stark contrast with the poverty of its villagers. But things could be worse. Less than a month before, Sjahrir had been in Java's most densely populated region, belonging to the Kedu residency in Central Java, a region where most coolies for Deli and Surinam were recruited.

On 30 August 1932, he attended his first *desa* meeting 15 kilometres removed from a main road. He and his fellow party activists had come there on foot since there was no transport to Kebokuning, as this village was called. About 25 villagers attended the meeting; Javanese was spoken since most of the *desa* people didn't have a good grasp of Malay, the lingua franca which developed into Indonesian. Nevertheless, they did understand Sjahrir's explanation of the reasons for his political struggle: the misery suffered by the people in the cities and on the other islands as well. Sjahrir based his plea on the difficulties of the *desa* people themselves, gradually leading them to an understanding of the concept of Indonesia free as opposed to being under the imperial yoke.



This *desa* had the only PNI branch that was not in a city or a big place, and thus it functioned as a kind of test case for nationalistic action in the countryside. Comparing the villagers to Javanese of noble ascent, Sjahrir made the remark that among the former, there are some “brave, open faces”, whereas the latter by contrast shows signs of degeneration. The term *degenerate* with regard to the Javanese nobility in the so-called *Vorstenlanden* ‘princely states’, is often used by Sjahrir. In his opinion, these Javanese noblemen, secluded in their *kraton*, enjoyed a degree of autonomy due to their collaboration with the colonial authorities. He despised their inactivity, preferring the revolutionary potential of the “have nots” in the *desa*. He goes on to say that propaganda in the villages should be done very carefully, because “the *desa* is like gunpowder, very flammable, very susceptible to provocation”. Around midnight, Sjahrir and his company left Kebokuning, on foot, arriving at the main road three hours later.

The following day, Sjahrir wrote Maria how he had travelled that morning from Magelang to Mataram (as he used to call Yogyakarta), by bus, 42 kilometres, through this poverty-stricken region, in spite of the fertility of its soil. All along the roadside, he saw women clad in dark clothing, carrying loads bigger than themselves to the market. They leave their houses in the dead of night, at two or three o’clock, arriving at the market four hours later, and after having sold their goods they return home, arriving there at six in the evening or later. Their day’s income, if they get lucky: 20 cents, from which a family of five people needs to live. Sjahrir was struck by the fact that he only saw women, describing them to Maria:

It was miserable, those tight, at times desperate, famished faces, sometimes pale yellow, and they drag along with difficulty, bent over, their giant loads on their back. At times it seemed to me as if they would fall down at every step, but mostly they do reach the *pasar*. Sometimes haggard faces, haggard due to misery. And all of them in those gloomy dark clothes. And the region itself is awesomely beautiful, Mieske. All along to our left side the blue Merapi. Nice yellow rice paddies, heavy clay soil, but everywhere sugar cane gardens as well. And here and there we saw men who were cultivating former building plots with rakes and hoes in order to plant them with *padi*. Those working men over here are exceptions. Only when the sugar cane gardens can take advantage of those that because of their miserable situation were driven out of their houses, do the men work; otherwise they idle at home, the bigger part of the year, or they prepare the food. Over here, the workers belong to the female gender. In the streets, on the markets, you see almost exclusively women. The men do help on the rice paddies, but the women still do the lion’s share of the work. (Unpublished letter, 31 August 1932.)

In some letters, like this one, Sjahrir’s observations acquire an almost anthropological slant. He doesn’t stop at the registration of social injustice and colonial abuse, but he also points out differentiation along the lines of ethnicity, social class, gender, and cultural practice. As a nationalist, intent on throwing off the colonial yoke and on developing his country, he often looks

upon his fellow countrymen as the “other”. But the basis of his conviction is that colonial subjugation is detrimental to a people’s selfhood and vitality. Hence his often-repeated remarks about degeneration.

In a letter of 31 August 1932, he proceeds to tell an anecdote which shows the root cause of the misery of the people, especially in densely populated areas:

In Muntilan, we were assailed by beggars, of all ages. The miserable begging is still ringing in my ears. Famished faces, yellow trembling hands, bone and skin. It almost made me sick. All were Christians, Catholics. Imperialism feeds the starving population with the Bible. The Bible, that needs to intoxicate, and makes people acquiesce in their misery. The place itself is the dreariest place that I have seen on Java. Everything equally tasteless and dilapidated, and on the sidewalks forever those gloomy dark shapes that offer their wares or just sit or lie there. All miserable. I saw a few deformed faces that made me sick. Over here, no reforms will help. The conditions are rotten to the root. Only a radical change may help here. The misery in the *desa* is becoming bigger and bigger, in spite of the fact that official reports write that there is no starvation, that there is enough food in the *desa*. I learnt quite a bit in this short period of time [...] (Unpublished letter of 31 August 1932.)

Sjahrir’s letters to Maria from the period before his arrest are sometimes supplemented with reports to be published or passed on to Indonesian friends and other kindred spirits in the Netherlands. Two reports cover Sjahrir’s political party, one is an essay about the national movement, and another, most interesting report (annexed to his letter of 4 November 1932) is titled “*Gruwelen van de Tjilatjapsche gevangenis*” (Horrors of the Cilacap prison). Cilacap, on the south coast of Java, had one of the most infamous prisons in the Netherlands East Indies. This detailed report, dictated by Sjahrir and written down by his fellow party member Gyo (Soebagio Mangoenrahardjo, 1905-1969), tells about the inhuman treatment, abuse, and torture in this prison. One of the paragraphs details the food regime:

*The nutrition.*

The prisoners designated with the letter A receive one bowl of rice and in addition salted fish, full of little creatures. The fish is just a little bit roasted, and besides there are some vegetables that are collected in the river and that are still full of dirt when served. Everything is prepared in a very unhygienic and filthy way. The prisoners designated with the letter B are a little bit better off. And the C people are best off. (Unpublished supplement to Sjahrir’s letter of 4 November 1932.)

During Sjahrir’s years spent in freedom, Gyo, whom he had known since his early Bandung years, was his most trusted bosom friend. Gyo was born in Tegal, on Java’s northern coast. A mechanical engineer by training, he had sailed around the world in his early twenties. He was very dedicated to the nationalist cause and the party as an officer in charge of the propaganda. Gyo was not an intellectual but a man with a simple belief in God, driven by a

strong feeling. An unassuming man, he felt close to the lower class. Sjahrir, born in a rather privileged family, was well aware of his own bourgeois origin. In some ways, Gyo was for him the “other” he wanted to get closer to.

In a letter to Maria, dated 22 December 1933, he tells her that Gyo had married a lower-class *kampung* girl. Sjahrir would have wished another kind of wife for him, but this girl loves Gyo very much, and Sjahrir admires him for his ability to adjust to his present social environment:

Children with dirty noses, unbathed, naked, halfway in the mud, and they look so pitch-black and so dirty. I'm ashamed, Mieske, but I had to force myself to look at one of them for any length of time, let alone touch him. Yet they are nice fat children with round rice bellies. And Gyo kisses them, romps with them, carries them on his arms. That feller is surely a wondrous guy. (Unpublished letter of 22 December 1932.)

Gyo's example makes that Sjahrir trains himself to get accustomed to more primitive conditions:

Through habit you learn a lot. Nowadays I sleep just as well on the hard stone floor as on boards or a bamboo bed, or on a soft mattress. I sleep just as well in damp conditions or in the glowing heat, in a clean cool room or in a lice nest. When you're always travelling, you have no choice. Sometimes you get a nice bath, other times you need to share your bathwater with ducks and dirtier beasts, sometimes you are indulged with soap, then again you can walk around with the stench of “bathwater”. (Unpublished letter of 22 December 1932.)

#### SOCIAL AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Towards the end of 1932, Sjahrir suffered from headaches and a feeling of lameness in his legs. He was dogged by frustration that he wasn't able to join Maria, who was expecting their son. A few days after Christmas, he travelled to Ambarawa, a small town in the highlands of Central Java, where his brother-in-law Djoehana worked at the hospital. After a thorough examination, Djoehana's diagnosis was that Sjahrir suffered from nervous exhaustion; he advised him to take rest, complete rest, in addition to good nutrition and breathing in fresh air. In order to make a full recovery, Sjahrir was to stay several months with his sister and brother-in-law. In the course of February, a letter from Maria arrived, with the devastating news that their son had died soon after birth. Sjahrir tried to console the woman he had worried about so much in the previous months. He told her they could have another son in the future, the main thing was that Maria had recovered her strength.

In a following letter, dated 28 March 1933, he writes that he needs her. He is still in Ambarawa, where all his physical needs are cared for. Nutrition, space, time in abundance. But he cannot help developing an aversion to the kind of privileged bourgeois life he is leading now. The Djoehana family lives in a house “as big as a castle, with annexes”, and they own a luxury car that seats seven people. The elite lifestyle of his family troubles him.

It was indeed quite a different life Sjahrir was leading in this place that

gave the impression of a holiday resort. He probably thought back to the cramped living conditions in Gyo's house. After some time, he took up his activist life again. Although Hatta had obtained, in July 1932, his economics degree in Rotterdam and had returned to Java by the end of August 1932, it took another year before he was confirmed as the new leader of Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia. This took place during a general meeting of members on 18 August 1933 (see *Soerabaiasch Handelsblad*, 22-8-1933). In mid-March 1933, Sjahrir travelled for the first time since his illness to Bandung, where he usually stayed with his PNI friend Hamdani (1909-1995) and Hamdani's wife Suzanna (1910-1991) (Figure 4), who jointly had a monthly income of over one hundred guilders; they could therefore afford a reasonable middle-class house, albeit in the *kampung*.

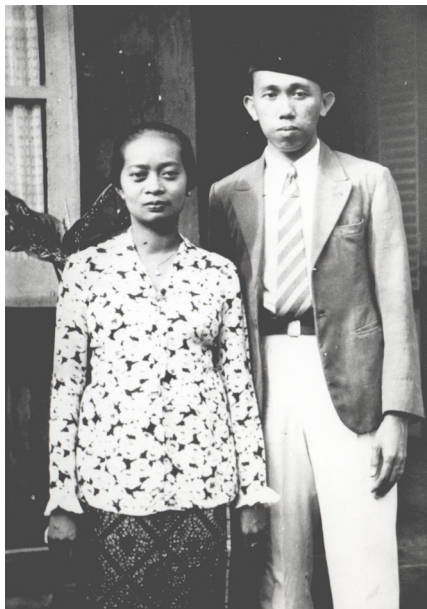


Figure 4. Sjahrir's PNI-Baru friends Hamdani and Suzanne, around 1939 (photograph from the collection of E. du Perron, Literatuurmuseum, The Hague).

In the colonial era, Indonesians used to stay with friends or acquaintances when they were travelling. In the Netherlands East Indies, there existed a semi-official system of apartheid: indigenous people were not expected to stay in European hotels. There were some hotels uniquely for Indonesians, but they were only to be found in the big cities. When Sjahrir travelled to Malang on 23 August 1932, he expected to stay with the president of the PNI section in that town, but the man, overcome with sleep, said he couldn't receive him for he was too tired. Later that day, the man recognized the mistake he had made; he apologized, and in the end, Sjahrir did stay at his place. As Sjahrir was killing time in a restaurant, before the man came over to apologize, he wrote to Maria:

I wish I could lie down somewhere. I made inquiries about accommodation. It seems there is not a single Indonesian hotel in the entire city of Malang. That says a lot, doesn't it, Miesje. Malang is a city bigger than Medan. I told you already, with just about 100.000 Indonesian inhabitants. The fact that in the whole city not a single indigenous accommodation is to be found is telling for the economic strength of the population. People are just not used to spend money on lodging. They crawl in with family or friends, or they sleep, as is habitual with our tourists, in the open air. (Unpublished letter of 23 August 1932.)

Sjahrir was looking forward to his reunion with Maria after Hatta had taken over the PNI leadership, but his comrades in PNI wondered why he would want to return to the country of the colonial oppressor when his place was with their struggle. And why was he in a relationship with a white woman? Sjahrir had always been a loner, but in the face of such comments, he felt even more alone. Moreover, he didn't have the money for his passage to Holland.

In the beginning of December 1932, Maria sent him a letter with some practical proposals. Sjahrir showed this letter to Gyo, who recognized the strong spiritual bond that existed between the two. On 16 December, Sjahrir discussed his replacement with Gyo, Hatta, and some others (for he was intent on coming back), and he began to prepare for his departure. His brother Sjamsam, who was living in the Netherlands, had sent a postal money order to Hamdani's house, but when Sjahrir came to collect it, the repression of figureheads of the non-cooperative parties was already under way, and on 26 February 1934 Sjahrir was arrested in Batavia, in the house of his half-sister Radena (1891-1972), one day after Hatta and other leading PNI-members were arrested in Bandung. Although Sjahrir and Maria married, by proxy, on 2 September 1936, she in the Haarlem town hall, he in exile on Banda-Naira, they were not to see each other again until 20 March 1947, at an Asian conference in New Delhi. By that time, their marriage had become an administrative fiction that only Maria still wished to believe in. Reality proved otherwise. Their divorce was pronounced on 12 August 1948. On 1 September 1948, Maria married Sjahrir's younger brother Sjamsam (1911-1980), with whom she had shared her life since he had arrived in the Netherlands as a student, in July 1932. He had helped her through the war and been a good substitute father for her children. Sjahrir was to marry, on 25 May 1951, Siti Wahyunah Salleh, his Javanese secretary during the Indonesian-Dutch negotiations in Linggarjati, October-November 1946.

#### THE END TO TRAVELLING AS A FREE MAN

After his arrest, Sjahrir was imprisoned in the Cipinang prison in the south of Batavia. Behind bars, he tried to maintain an open horizon, but his "horizontal" travels were over indefinitely. As we saw, Sjahrir was sentenced to exile in Boven-Digoel, where he stayed for nine months, and in 1936 he was transferred to Banda-Naira, where he stayed for nearly six years. In the boats that transported him to these places of exile, he took delight in the beauty of the archipelago's nature, but not as a free man.

In Boven-Digoel and Banda-Naira he continued his observations on the ethnic groups and individuals he came into contact with. All along, he championed the cause of Indonesian independence, which he didn't doubt would arrive. His travels across Java while still a free man had confirmed him in his belief in the revolutionary potential of the masses of the Indonesian people. In the articles he wrote in his years as a campaigning activist, he showed his socialist convictions, his abhorrence of the self-satisfied, feudal attitudes of many Indonesians of the bourgeois class, and of the defeatist demeanour of the Javanese nobility, isolated and neutralized in their palaces.

In Boven-Digoel and Banda-Naira, he came into contact with different ethnic groups, which broadened his horizon. Due to the limited area his exile had confined him to, he became, to use a term coined by Michael Cronin, a "vertical traveller". This enabled him to probe deeper into the cultural practices of his place of exile.<sup>3</sup> When he was named Indonesia's first prime minister on 15 November 1945, he was able to draw on his rich experience of the Indonesian archipelago in his struggle to unite his country and to develop it into a modern state.

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<sup>3</sup> "Vertical travel is temporary dwelling in a location for a period of time where the traveller begins to travel down into the particulars of place either in space (botany, studies of microclimate, exhaustive exploration of local landscape) or in time (local history, archaeology, folklore)" (Charles Forsdick 2020: 100).