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Finding Literary Inspiration in Indonesia's Varied Landscapes

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For writers Leif Randt and Andreas Stichmann, the Makassar Writers' Festival last June was an experience distinctive from events of its kind in their native Germany. The two found themselves swept up by the youthful energy of the event, as reflected by the rounds of poetry readings, live music and parties in the festival.

"The Makassar Writers' Festival is a far cry from events of its kind in Germany, not least because of its predominantly youthful participants, atmosphere and lack of alcohol," says Stichmann with a chuckle.

"In Germany, literary festivals are usually attended by older people with the time to read a book or younger people who are out to show their work."

Randt agrees with Stichmann's observations.

"The sense of community is more palpable [during the festival] and in Indonesia as a whole, compared to what we're used to in Europe," he recalls. "The rage for social media is also more tangible in Indonesia. During the festival, I could take up to 27 photos a day with various people at the festival."

During the visit, Randt and Stichmann were also invited to speak in a literary workshop at Makassar's Hasanuddin University, where they met students, artists and other intellectuals. The two 31-year-olds shared their literary insights into the writing process, how nature shapes those narratives, as well as the influence of IT on communications and how it affects the writing process.

Coming to Indonesia

Randt and Stichmann's jaunt to Makassar, as well as other parts of Indonesia like Bandung, Jakarta, Yogyakarta and Lombok, is part of their recent residency in the country that lasts from May to June. Sponsored by the Goethe Institut, a German cultural institution, and the Lontar Foundation as well as a number of German newspapers, the project is part of the German Season cultural festival which will go into full swing from September until December with a repertoire of performance and visual arts, as well as academic dialogue, among other things.

"Aside from marking German Season, the residency marks Indonesia's standing as guest of honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair next October. Their work in Indonesia also highlights the country's diversity, and is part of efforts to bring about dialogue or common ground with Germany," says Goethe Institut director Heinrich Boelcke.

"In the residency, the writers get to choose to go to the more than 17,000 islands that make up Indonesia, except for Bali, as its already too international. The writers will then chronicle what they saw and experienced, as well as their impressions, in a series of articles for German [publication] as well as talks at the Frankfurt Book Fair itself."

The swirl of new sensations is a stimulus that Randt, who garnered critical acclaim at the Bachmannpreis awards for his 2011 surrealist, stream of conscious-



ness novel "*Schimmernder Dunst Ueber Cobycounty*" or "The Haze Over Coby County," is all too ready to embrace.

"Going from one island to another in Indonesia is almost akin to traveling from one planet to another, as the people and cultures can be quite different. I'm sure that it'll provide plenty of ideas or stimuli for literary works that will emerge later, following stimuli from certain experiences or moments," says the Frankfurt-born Randt, whose writing is influenced by his experiences of travel and displacement.

"I'm particularly taken by Bandung, particularly how it juxtaposes elements of Western avant garde with its distinctive traditions. Yogyakarta is also an eye opener, as it manages to keep the integrity of its traditions. While Gili Trawangan in Lombok is a bit too touristy, the town of Kuta in the island itself left a deep impression because of its pristine, tranquil state."

For Stichmann, the people he encountered during his Indonesian trip left him with impressions of the country that are as deep as the surroundings he encountered.

"I had the opportunity to stay in the house of a woman with two children in Yogyakarta, after I was referred to them by the CouchSurfing community app. The experience gave me an unequalled opportunity to see Indonesians in daily life."

The openness and hospitality of the people he and Randt encountered on their travels, as well as their painstaking efforts to help them, gave them a lasting

impression. Randt also notes that Indonesians are focused on the present instead of the past, making Indonesia distinct from other countries that are more mindful of their history, such as Russia.

Incorporating travel experiences

"I'm sure that my travels through Indonesia will fit in well with my work, though I have yet to say in what way or form," adds Randt, whose writing is based on his observations of people or his surroundings.

"What is certain is that the experience will be incorporated in my work, whether its autobiographical nonfiction as well as fiction. I have kept a diary of my travels that I might make into fictional works like short stories or a longer form like novels. Alternatively, I might make nonfiction pieces about my travels in longform that I might serialize if it is too long."

The use of travel as a driving force is a familiar motif for the Leipzig Literary Institute alumnus. His 2012 novel "*Das Grosse Leuchten*" ("The Glowing"), a coming of age odyssey set in Iran, is based on his travels through the country, particularly the cities of Tehran and Isfahan.

Made in a lyrical and philosophical, yet subtly humorous and accessible style, the work has an unconventional narrative that was also highlighted in his short story anthology "*Jackie in Silber*" ("Jackie in Silver").

"I combine realism and surrealism in my work, a method that's ideal for conveying spirituality or depicting a shy

character who's gradually opening up to the world. Irony and self-deprecating humor are also other literary methods that I use," says Stichmann, who derives inspiration in his writing from the visual and written medium of comic books.

"Experiences, moments or memories of a place might occur and work itself into my psyche and get turned into a story anytime. So I'm pretty certain that my trip here will give me plenty of references".

Randt reiterated Stichmann's observations.

"I had a surreal experience of having been nearly killed by a coconut when we visited Lae-Lae island near Makassar. The fruit fell between my guide and I, so it gave me food for thought," he remembers with a laugh.

"Another experience was getting lost amid the hills and foliage in Bandung as I was walking with a group of hikers. By then my battery was running low and I had to be selective as to whom I could contact, so I guess this can be good material for a story on one's choices."

Randt and Stichmann's residency in Indonesia will be followed up by a residency of their compatriots Ulla Lenze and Antje Ravic Strubel in Bandung and Jakarta next August. Aside from writing about their travels for German newspapers, the writers will write about their experiences in a long feature at the German Season website and other sites, ahead of the Frankfurt Book Fair.

The Peak

German writers Leif Randt, right, and Andreas Stichmann will document their travels for various German based publications. The Peak Photo/ Tunggul Wirajuda