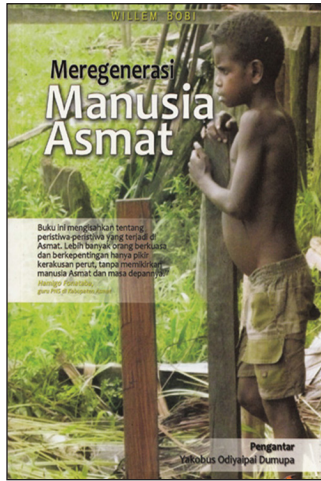


Willem Bobi, *Meregenerasi manusia Asmat*. Nabire: Lembaga Pendidikan Papua, 2014, xvi + 355 pp. ISBN 978-602-96659-4-9. Price: IDR 85.000 (soft cover).



Solita Sarwono

Freelance consultant, Wassenaar
solita.sarwono@gmail.com

The Asmat tribe in Papua is known worldwide not only for its association with the shocking death of Michael Rockefeller in 1961 but also for its woodcarvings. However, not much has been written about the present day life of the Asmat people. Since the 1998 reform in Indonesia, the Papua province has gained more attention and obtained more autonomy to govern itself. Increasing number of native Papuans is appointed to government offices. People are also encouraged to take initiatives in economic activities. In order to be able to perform well in both government and private sectors, however, a good education is needed. How much access to education do the Asmat people have?

Willem Bobi, the author of *Meregenerasi manusia Asmat*, is a native Papuan from the Mee tribe, born in 1979 in Muniopa village, Dogiyai. He had his primary and secondary education in Catholic schools in Papua. Upon graduation, he continued to go to Solo, Central Java, with a scholarship from the local government, where he studied physics and received his BA in 2005. Unable to find a job, he returned to Papua in 2008 to become a teacher at several schools in the Asmat region, teaching mathematics and physics, and worked as a freelance journalist for the local newspapers. As he was teaching and performing his journalism work, Bobi noticed several problems that he found had hindered the development and educational achievement of the Asmat youth. This observation drew his interest in the education system in Papua. He went on to identify the problems and try to find ways to address the major issues. For two years (2008–2010), he visited many Asmat villages, talked with teachers, pupils, parents, community leaders, and government officials and collected data from various reports and documents that he complemented with field observation. He wrote his findings in *Meregenerasi manusia Asmat*, which is his first book.

Bobi is very critical about the education system in Papua. The education quality is poor as indicated by the low level of skills in basic education, namely reading (*membaca*), writing (*menulis*), and arithmetic (*menghitung*), popularly known as 3M. Even at high school and university levels, some students show difficulties in performing those basic skills. From the 30 regions in Papua, Asmat ranked 25th in its educational achievement in 2010 (p. 154). The author claims that the illiteracy rates among Asmat people aged 15 years and older

is 69.9% in 2006 down to 68.8% in 2007 (p. 101). After researching for over two years, he discovered numerous factors leading to the poor situation of education in Papua.

The most obvious obstacle is the problem of education. Asmat region covers an area of approximately 18,000 square kilometres, consisting of mangroves, swamps, and rainforest. In 2010, the region is inhabited by 76,563 people, the population density of the Asmat eight districts varies between 0.92 and 7.32 persons/kilometre (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Asmat 2011: 49). There are 117 primary schools, 10 junior high schools and 4 senior high schools, with 581 teachers in total, serving the scarcely populated 139 villages. Many of the schools are accessible only by foot or speedboats, lowering the motivation of the pupils as well as the teachers to attend school. Parents prefer to have their children to help them farm or fish. School participation is less than 50%, claims the author (p. 102). The youth prefer taking low skilled jobs to going to school.

The author discovers that the most serious problem is corruption involving government officials as well as private companies taking part in education projects, and supplying the construction and teaching materials. Billions of rupiah intended to finance the education of Asmat people are not disbursed according to the plans. The non-transparent financial management in the education sector hurts the most important player in education, the teachers. Their meagre salaries are reduced and delayed for months; their monthly travel expenses are insufficient to pay even a single speedboat trip to the school; poor housing and accommodation facilities are provided only to senior teachers, whereas the young ones receive no facilities at all; and availability of teaching-learning materials are far below standard despite the huge sum of money allocated for the education of the Asmat.

In addition, the local native teachers are discriminated by the officials. Lack of manpower in Asmat schools has drawn teachers from outside Papua, mainly from Java, to come to Asmat. The newcomers, however, are assigned to the district office at higher-ranking position and thus a higher salary, or to schools in the larger towns. A handful of non-native teachers who were sent to the remote villages did not stay longer than one year as they found the work too difficult. Schools in remote areas are thus left to the responsibilities of the local teachers, who are mostly older and have a lower education compared with their colleagues from Java. The non-Papuan teachers obtain more easily their civil servants' status, which means permanent employment. The low wages and discrimination towards the local teachers demoralize them. Unable to live from a teacher's salary, many work in agriculture or informal sector to earn more money. Some even died in poverty and untreated illness. The teachers have cried for help through individual protests as well as organized demonstrations and strikes. They protested against non-transparency, corruption, insufficient facilities, and teaching materials, ever-changing school curricula, and lack of manpower. However, no change has been made to improve the condition.

An education of better quality is provided by a Catholic school established by a young American Franciscan priest (of Dutch origin) Yan Smit. Father Smit came to Asmat in October 1959 to introduce Christianity. His school teaches basic knowledge (reading, writing, mathematics, and science) and practical training in life survival (constructing a traditional house, fishing, woodcarving), also the Asmat culture (dancing, singing, and drums/*tifa* playing) as a form of character building (p. 109). Teachers of Yan Smit schools receive remunerations from the parents and the Foundation. Unfortunately, in January 1965 Father Smit was murdered by the military for defending his school and teaching. He became a hero and role model to the Asmat community. Today his school is still favoured by Asmat parents.

This book gives lengthy and detailed information on Asmat's education system, presented as a compilation of reports, complete with interviewees. Sometimes the author makes non-objective remarks, such as labelling the corruptors crocodiles. The book lacks a systematic order. The data and events could have been organized chronologically to provide a clearer picture of the Asmat (topography, demography, and educational resources) and of the types of issues identified. Such an approach would have avoided repetitions and made the book more concise. In addition, provision of a list of acronyms and references would have helped the readers to better understand the text and be assured of the authenticity of the data quoted.

Despite its shortcomings, the book candidly presents the problems faced by the Asmat youth. The author's appeal to combat corruption and discrimination against the Papuans and to make education beneficial for the Asmat community (by teaching skills in woodcarving, maritime, fishery, agriculture, animal husbandry), go in line with President Joko Widodo's policy to prioritize the development and improvement of Papua and its people.

REFERENCE

Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Asmat. 2011. *Asmat dalam angka /Asmat in figures 2011*, Agats: Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Asmat, Agats. [Retrieved from: <http://asmatkab.bps.go.id/?hal=publikasi>, accessed on 13-06-2015.]