

Wartime Dreams of Co-Prosperity on Java: The Absence of the 1945 Novel *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* in Postwar Indonesian Society

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In early 1945, during a three year period which admittedly had seen the publication of very few new novels, a beautiful new book appeared with an illustration of two birds swooping gracefully under a number of light clouds. The book was entitled *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* [Field Crops: A Novel of Total Change].¹ Published on good paper, with reassuring type and carefully made illustrations scattered throughout the book, the publication of this book should have been an event of some cultural significance. However, seen from the long lenses of 2013, it seems that this book has been almost, but not quite completely ignored, almost but not quite completely forgotten, and almost but perhaps not quite unread. We'll return to that later, but first let me explain about the contents of the novel.

Summary of the Story

The story begins with tense anticipation as it became clear that the Dutch could not resist the onslaught of the Japanese armed forces in March 1942. Although there was much rejoicing at the loss of the Dutch and thankfulness towards Japanese soldiers, the scorched earth policy of the retreating Dutch and bad feelings toward the former governments resulted in bad behavior, especially the looting of the homes of the Dutch and other local residents.

Rengasdengklok, a small town in the region of Karawang in West Java, was one of many places experiencing such conditions. Native residents of the town and nearby villages looted and destroyed homes and shops in the town. The Chinese patrol "Ronda Tionghoa" tried to secure the town with weapons, which resulted in fighting with the looting villagers. At the same time, there was a battle between the Dutch and the Japanese in Karawang itself, and the river Tjitaroem was filled with corpses.

The first scene opens with a teenage girl and her frightened younger brother taking refuge in the home of R. Harsadibrata, a retired irrigation official. The girl (Soei Lan) and her brother (Jin) are local Chinese, whose home was destroyed and looted; Soei Lan (and her brother) escaped from a worse fate by hiding behind a barrel, and were later found by the local schoolmaster, Soemardi, who took them to his father's home and informed their parents who were then in the town of Karawang. Harsadibrotro spends his time praying, but also helps to reassure Soei Lan and his own daughter, Soemarsih, who is

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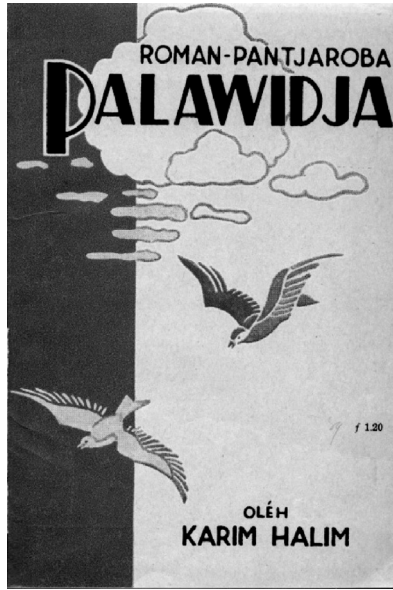


Fig. 1

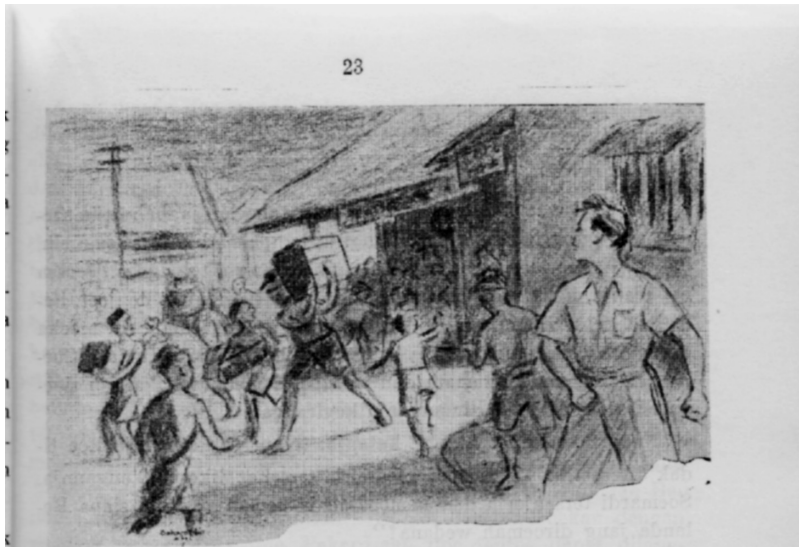


Fig. 2 Soemardi seeing the villagers looting Chinese stores in early March 1942.

worried about her brother who went out to try to combat the widespread looting and violence.

During this period of chaos, Soemardi does his utmost to restore a safe, peaceful environment, but is hampered by his lack of authority. Rather he feels the Wedono and Assistant Wedono (Soemardi's brother-in-law Kartahadimadja) need to publicly act. After a long search, he finds them at the home of the rich Chinese leader Baba Lim with a number of other Chinese leaders. To his amazement, he finds the local officials refuse to act themselves and are completely dependent on Baba Lim, and that local

security has been put in the hands of the Ronda Tionghoa, a Chinese patrol; after an argument with Baba Lim and the Assistant Wedono, and he is told to leave or be detained. That night things get out of hand as the Chinese patrols decrease due to their members' sleepiness, and as native villagers from across the river begin to loot stores and homes. By morning, chaos reigns, and the Ronda Tionghoa finds itself in a defensive mode until rifle shots begin. Soemardi, who is trying to get villagers to understand right and wrong and to return to their villages, is enraged to find the shots coming from a Dutchman at the Wedono's residence. Running there, he is first knocked over and trampled, then punched by a Ronda Tionghoa member, and eventually knocked out. Meanwhile, the Ronda Tionghoa arrest as many villagers as possible; these prisoners are then executed by Chinese seeking revenge. Meanwhile the villagers' wives and children await them on the other side of the river, regretting the lack of thought on the part of their men.

After Soemardi awakes in his home with a heavy head injury, he rests a day or two but soon goes back to work. Perceiving that government officials had failed by not trying to reason with the villagers, and that he had failed by not establishing a Komite Ra'jat, he goes to Baba Lim to explain his goals. Baba Lim is soon won over, and together they establish a Komite Ra'jat, and at a mass meeting, Baba Lim apologizes publically for the excesses of the Ronda Tionghoa. The Ronda Tionghoa is converted to a general militia, and the Komite Rakjat strives to take over the functions of the Dutch government. Then finally March 9 arrives.²

With the surrender of the Dutch to the Japanese army, Indonesians are freed from Dutch colonial oppression and all sorts of changes begin to take place. However, as Soemardi is crossing the river one day, his boat tips over and his head hits some rocks causing severe head injuries. As a result of his injuries, his efforts in Rengasdengklok are stalled. The military authorities have also ordered all political activities to stop for the time being, for already existing laws to be enforced (unless in conflict with military orders), and for the local people to obey the old government officials who were now under Japanese supervision.

This provides the setting for the rest of the story in which the Chinese are won over, and Chinese and native Indonesians work together. Baba Lim, for example, helps cooperatives which assist peasants in using their time more efficiently. Soei Lan and her brother Jin go on a picnic with Soemardi and Soemarsih, and while Soemarsih and Jin play, Soei Lan and Soemardi have an opportunity to speak more, leading to their falling in love, and eventually marrying.

However, a series of unfortunate events take place, challenging Soemardi's family. Soemarsih's boyfriend, Soeleman, a student at the medical college and the son of the Wedono, reappears but is cynical and nasty, having lost all his goals in life with the collapse of Dutch colonialism. Soeleman breaks up with Soemarsih and disappears. Soemardi is also arrested, for which Soemarsih blames her husband (the Assistant Wedono Kartahadimarta) and returns home to her father and sister. On the other hand, Soemarsih suspects Soeleman is responsible.

Soemarsih and Soei Lan work together on a unified women's organization, an important step in re-

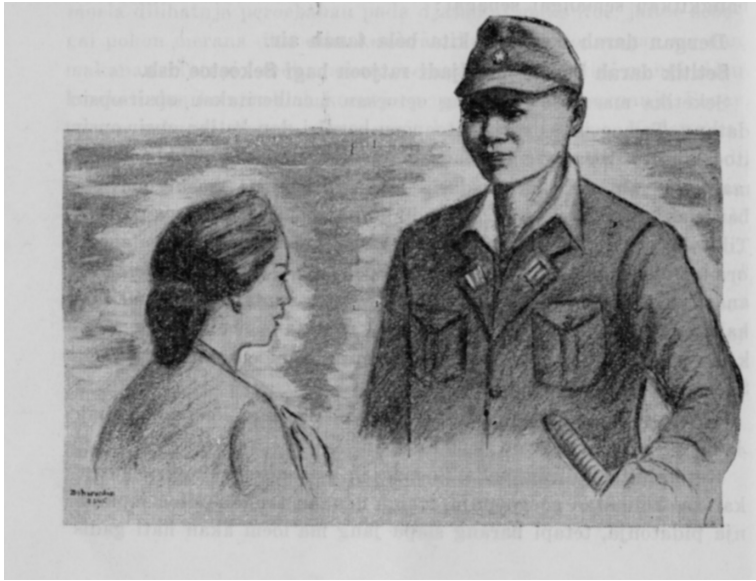


Fig. 3 The meeting of Soemarsih and Soeleman upon his appearance as a Peta officer.

alizing a multi-ethnic society, and their dedication and hard work is ultimately rewarded. Soemardi is eventually released, and to the surprise of family members, thanks his brother-in-law for helping to get him released. Soeleman reappears as a dedicated Peta officer³ and apologizes for his bad behavior. Soemardi also becomes a member of the regional council. The story thus ends with three happy couples representing the military (Peta), the administration, and the civilian political leaders who struggle to achieve social unity—especially between Chinese and natives—and prosperity within Greater East Asia.

While the main story element is the intertwined romances, most importantly between the Chinese Soei Lan and the native, civilian political/educational leader Soemardi, the author did offer his readers more than a simple romance. He strove to make his story relevant to the social context of his readers; in this it is clearly following the spirit of the 1939–40 Medan fiction debate, when authors and publishers who had been publically squabbling over morals held an unprecedented meeting to discuss the issue of pop fiction and its value to society.⁴ Achieving social unity as part of the struggle for the prosperity of all citizens based on better leadership and public understanding provided a direction for individuals to struggle while taking any of several social roles.

Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja also included elements such as descriptions and explanations of Chinese-native Indonesian violence; criticism of native officials, but then after their reform, praise; criticism of Chinese leaders who subsequently reform and are praised; non-government leaders playing important roles in helping society to develop and increase residents' prosperity; Indonesian youths becoming Peta/military members; achievement of interracial co-operation and unity both in practice and in symbolic form; descriptions of practical efforts (education, co-operatives); Indonesians working



Fig. 4 The peaceful river flowing past Rengasdengklok at the end of the story.

for the future together; and even verbatim quotations of the 1st and 3rd government regulations issues on March 7, 1942 by military authorities and published in Osamu Kan Po in the special anniversary edition of March 1943.⁵ Each of these elements adds a little something more to the picture of cooperation towards a goal of unity and mutual prosperity.

Reception of the Story

How this book was received by readers? Did the novel have any impact on Javanese society? These are very difficult questions. In fact, even the distribution of this book is a very large question. Appearing in April 1945, only four months remained until the end of the Japanese occupation; a very short period of time for the book to reach many readers unless previously established distribution networks were used. The copy available to me may not have been in circulation at all, as it was in perfect condition; I also have not located any book reviews in the local press of the time, although as they were controlled by the Balai Pustaka and the government. However, even if we assume that some copies did get distributed to readers in the closing months of the occupation, the contents may have seemed a little out of date. The “sirih kapoer” at the beginning of the work was dated December 18, 1943, reflecting the substantial gap between the events of 1942–3 narrated in between the covers and its publication. The issues of the early occupation, or even 1943–44 with the development of Peta, would similarly have seemed out of date. In the long term, however, this historical gap could play a different role, in signaling a novel set in the past.

Indonesian readers during the postwar era, if they know about Karim Halim⁶ and *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* at all, know about it through the works of H. B. Jassin or through works which depend entirely upon Jassin’s work. H. B. Jassin mentions Karim Halim’s novel as one of only two novels published by Balai Pustaka during the war, describing it simply as “the work of Karim Halim, filled with

billowing romantic idealism, but far from the real world.”⁷ From earlier comments about Nur Sutan Iskandar’s *Tjinta Tanah Air*, it is clear that Jassin was of the opinion that *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* was too favorable to Japan in that concerns of Indonesians were not included. Additionally, old styles of writing were used, with familiar old techniques. However, while Jassin finds little to talk about, he also is not very harsh in his criticism.⁸ Rather, H. B. Jassin seems content to allow the work to fade away, while works featuring individualism or other newer literary features were given lengthy discussion.⁹

If H. B. Jassin was the source for most Indonesians, most non-Indonesian scholars interested in Indonesian literature would have been introduced to Karim Halim’s novel through A. Teeuw’s classic work on Indonesian Literature. Teeuw in his *Modern Indonesian Literature* (1967) chooses 1942 as the breaking point from colonial literature, paralleling political history. In his view, 1942 serves as the break, but only after 1945 do you see characteristically “revolutionary” publications; 1942–1945 is thus essentially a dormant period where the new period characteristics are present but invisible. Teeuw mentions three novels; two from Nur St. Iskandar, and Karim Halim’s *Roman Palawija*, but these are seen as merely propaganda: “although not one Japanese appears in the book [*Roman-Pantjaroba Palawija*], it teems with Japanese slogans. As literature these books have no importance whatsoever.”¹⁰ The “real” nature of this period seems to lie in the poems and short stories written during the occupation, but not published until the revolutionary period. Teeuw’s dismissive description of literature during the Japanese occupation and *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* in particular as Japanese propaganda and not being worthy of literary interest is a pattern which appears repeatedly in the books which can be found in university libraries and the smattering of blogs, course materials and publications that appear in Google searches.¹¹

Teeuw and other writers actually build off of H. B. Jassin’s *Kesusastraan di Masa Djepang* (1947/1954) and *Gema Tanah Air* (1948).¹² Teeuw’s preference for the undated selection of prose and poetry in H. B. Jassin’s compilations and other plays published during the post-war era suggests that the nature of his objections may largely be superficial, the result of the slogans and other superficial manifestations of “Nipponcentrism,” without which he could perceive an acceptable nationalism and revolutionary outlook. Nonetheless, Teeuw does describe the contents of “*Second Crops: A novel of the change of monsoon*” by writing, “again an idealistic novel about a young teacher in the Rengas-Dengklok area (near Djakarta) who devotes himself to furthering the unity and progress of the Indonesian people, and works hard, especially for the improvement of the relations between Chinese and Indonesians in this area.”¹³ Despite the fact that Teeuw was dependant on H. B. Jassin’s work, Jassin seems much more balanced and understanding of the idealistic goals of and demands on authors during the Japanese occupation.

One important recent publication about the occupation period, the *Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, includes an article about “Literature” by Helen Pourpouras. Pourpouras depends on Teeuw for her description of novels during the war and thus similarly concludes that the two novels

were full of propaganda but that short stories became important during the war (only later noting that they too were superficial and filled with propaganda).¹⁴

The conclusion which one must reach after examination of Indonesian or foreign works related to the occupation period and literature is that Karim Halim and his novel *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* are *almost* totally ignored; They are occasionally referenced with very stereotyped descriptions and without reexamination of the original story. It's not a surprise that the general public would remember little about this novel, even if it has not truly been forgotten, and that it would also be unread. The almost total absence of Indonesian wartime cultural production in the literary cannon and historical consciousness is striking and begs serious consideration, as does the content of these works.

Absence and Remembering

A. Teeuw and H. B. Jassin conducted research on literature, and thus have less interest in history; their concern with new trends in literature is quite understandable (even if it is colored by personal experiences, personal biases, and personal relationships), however, numerous prewar novels written with similar pedantic, "old-fashioned" styles have been republished by Balai Pustaka without triggering such a negative reaction. This suggests there may be something else going on which discourages remembering of this novel. Why should it be ignored? For historians, works which are written, published and read are particularly interesting for what they can tell us about society and for their role in changes in Indonesian society. If Karim Halim wrote using older styles, it may have actually been more effective in reaching an audience than cutting-edge writing.

Actually, this novel is somewhat more complex than many prewar pop novels which focused on the nationalist movement, although it does have a similar feel.¹⁵ Rather than being a minus, the explicit mention of some practical content of nationalist activities could have even been attractive to some nationalist activists. Even more importantly, there is no question of the novel being harmful to public morals as was the case for many pop novels.

Why then should *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* be absent from both discussions of history and literature? Here I will just offer a few suggestions of possible reasons for this forgetfulness or avoidance. First, in the immediate postwar period, Indonesians were loath to admit any form of cooperation with the Japanese as it could both have put them personally at risk in dealing with vengeful Dutch or result in political problems for the Republic which had already been labeled as "made in Japan." Furthermore, a setting of 1942 and 1943 may have felt very out-of-date in early 1945 as preparations for independence were accelerating. However, both reasons would gradually evaporate, as political developments left this work as a part of history. On a different tact, many intellectuals may have been more comfortable with "a-political literature" or art for art's sake, rather than socially engaged literature. Such individuals are unlikely to be sympathetic to this novel.

Potentially even more critical is the allergic reaction of Indonesians to any discussion of racial conflict. Beyond the long-standing New Order policy of forbidding discussion of racial conflict, discus-

sions of native Indonesians or Muslims actively engaging in such racial violence is particularly taboo. This novel is virtually unique in describing the racially-colored violence of the Japanese invasion and early days of the Japanese occupation, but it is also unique in its care to present a picture where all racial and social groups are rehabilitated and who play constructive roles in the future. The Chinese leaders and their native government counterparts are clearly blamed for responding to native villagers looting with violence, but both groups are once again brought back into the fold. Similarly, while villagers are clearly to blame for looting, with proper education, they can and do play constructive roles for society. Perhaps if only the Chinese were to blame it would have been easier to discuss. Finally, it should be noted that Indonesians have developed very fixed understandings of the occupation period, particularly after Suharto came to power and enlisted the assistance of Nugroho Notokusanto as a researcher and then as Minister of Education and Culture.

What would happen if Indonesians were to begin to read this novel? If Indonesians and scholars of Indonesia have indeed been avoiding this novel, reading it could be a step towards very revolutionary change for Indonesian society. The republication of the story about events during the Japanese occupation could even open up a new space for remembering and discussing Indonesian history and interracial relations within Indonesian society.

Notes

¹ Karim Halim, *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja*, B. P. 1575, Djakarta: Balai Poestaka, 2605.

² The Dutch military commander H. ter Poorten announced the surrender of all troops in the Netherlands East Indies on March 9, 1942. His vaguely worded surrender announcement allowed the interpretation that other troops of other allied nations were included, thus inhibiting them from continuing to fight the Japanese. As the Japanese 16th Army landed on Java on March 1, Allied resistance lasted only nine days.

³ Pembela Tanah Air [Defenders of the Fatherland] was a self-defense force established under the 16th Army in Java in 1943. Numerous studies exist, but one important early study was completed and published at Waseda in the 1970s: Nugroho Notokusanto, *The Peta Army during the Japanese Occupation of Indonesia*, Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 1979. Nugroho Notokusanto's works were particularly important as part of the New Order reimagining of Indonesian history. See also Peter Post, et al. eds., *The Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

⁴ This meeting was held in Medan in December 1939 and was attended by writers and publishers from throughout Sumatra, as well as a representative of the Balai Pustaka, H. B. Jassin. H. B. Jassin's reports were promptly published in *Pandji Poestaka*. The debate, however, continued well into the next year. For one part of this continuing debate, see William Bradley Horton, "The Political Work of Abdoelxarim M.s. in Colonial and Japanese Occupied Indonesia (1930s-1940s)," *Waseda Studies in Social Sciences* Vol 13, no. 3 (March 2012): 47.

⁵ For these and other regulations published at this time, see *Kanpo: Berita Pemerintah*, diterbitkan oleh Gunseikanbu, republished edition, Tokyo: Ryukei Shyosha, 1989, Vol. 1.

⁶ Karim Halim was born in Bukittinggi on December 1, 1918, but graduated from the Sekolah Goeroe Moehammadijah. He worked as a teacher for some time, while publishing poetry (often under the name R. O. Hanka) and prose stories. Early in the occupation period, he apparently moved to Jakarta and initially lived with H. B. Jassin. In 1944, he was employed as a writer by Balai Poestaka, and was a member of Sasterawan Angkatan Baroe Djakarta (Keimin Bunka Shidosha). See H. B. Jassin, *Surat-surat 1943-1983*, Jakarta: Gramedia, 1984, pg. 4 and "Riwayat Hidoep Karim Halim," *Djawa Baroe* (15 Juli 1944), 27.

⁷ H. B. Jassin, *Kesusastraan Indonesia Modern dalam Kritik dan Esei I*, 4th printing, Djakarta: Gunung Agung, 1967, p. 163.

⁸ H. B. Jassin. 1954. *Kesusastraan Indonesia dimasa Djepang*. 2nd printing. Djakarta: Perpustakaan Perguruan Kementerian P. P. dan K., [1st printing, 1948], pg. 11. These are the final words of the chapter.

"Biarpun bagaimana pudjian dan pudjian kepada Djepang pada suatu waktu ada dirasakan oleh penjair-penjair dan pangerang2 kita sunggu2 dari hati, biarpun orang jang lain pendapatnya mentjemoohkan mereka itu dan duduk dipinggir djalan hanja melihat orang barbaris dengan tegap dan oenuh semangat. Orang boleh menedjek lembaga jang bernama Pusat Kebu-

dajaan tjap Nippon, dimana segala macam hasil kesenian dipesan dan dibikin, tetapi tidak bias disangkal bahwa hasil lembaga itu berguna djuga waktu itu dan bagi kemudian hari untuk memperpadu segala semangat dan tenaga. Disanalah seniman-seniman muda kita jang pekerdjaannya sama dengan romusha djiwa dan pikiran, disiksa dan dimasak batinnja untuk revolusi jang akan datang.”

- ⁹ There has been at least one unpublished undergraduate thesis written related to the novel, and several minor references, generally mimicking either H. B. Jassin's discussion or the Teeuw discussion mentioned below.
- ¹⁰ A. Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, KITLV Translation Series 10, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, pg. 109
- ¹¹ Books which are commonly available in research libraries, and which should have information about *Roman-Pantjaroba Palawidja* include numerous works by Jacob Sumardjo, including *Sinopsis Roman Indonesia*. Bandung: Citra Aditya Bakti, 1995 and *Konteks Sosial Novel Indonesia 1920–1977*, Bandung: Penerbit Alumni, 1999 as well as Maman S. Mahayana, Oyon Sofyan, and Achmad Dian, *Ringkasan dan Ulasan Roman Indonesian Modern*, Jakarta: Gramedia Widiasarana Indonesia, 2007, p. 101 Internet sources examined include “Sastra Tahun 1942–1945,” *Berbagi Ilmu* (12 April 2012), <http://chocoronotomo.blogspot.jp/2012/04/sastra-tahun-1942-1945.html> (accessed on 2012/06/27) and Muhammad Damhuri, “Menegasi Identitas Sastra Indonesia,” 2009, <http://sastra-indonesia.com/2009/08/menegasi-identitas-sastra-indonesia/> (accessed 2012/06/27). Note indicates that this originally appeared on *Republika Online*.
- ¹² H. B. Jassin, *Kesusastraan Indonesia dimasa Djepang*, B. P. 1616. 2nd ed, 1954. Djakarta: Balai Pustaka; *Gema Tanah Air. Prosa dan Puisi 1942–1948*. B. P. 1654. 2nd printing. Djakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1948. Strangely, for a compilation of literature, there is generally no publication information for the featured literature. The 4th edition of *Gema Tanah Air* (1959) does finally include some publication information.
- ¹³ Teeuw, *Modern Indonesian Literature*, pp. 108–9.
- ¹⁴ Helen Pourpouras, “Literature,” in Peter Post et al. eds, *Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, pg. 376.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, *Marwan Djamal*, a novel by Mahals published in 1940, or the Patjar Merah novels loosely based on Tan Malaka's activities.