

Biography

Putu Oka Sukanta is one of Indonesia's most important authors of poetry, short fiction, and novels. He is also the founder of the Indonesian Traditional Healing Foundation and an internationally recognized leader in efforts to use alternative medicine to treat people living with HIV/AIDS.

At home and abroad, Putu is often asked to lecture on the topics of alternative health care, human rights, and Indonesian literature. At first glance, these sides of Putu Oka Sukanta might seem to be unrelated. But they are among the few positive things that came out of Indonesia's decades-long nightmare of military repression, which ended in 1998 when free national elections were held for the first time.

Born in Bali in 1939, Putu was a young poet in 1965 when Indonesia's military government began a campaign to eliminate hundreds of thousands of Indonesians suspected of being communists or communist sympathizers. In the following years, tens of thousands more Indonesians were arrested, held without trial, tortured, and murdered. Putu was swept up in these arrests and spent ten years as a political prisoner. In his cramped cell, Putu developed a friendship with a Chinese doctor, also a prisoner. Schooled in traditional medicine, the doctor began directing Putu in an intense study of Chinese medicinal practices. Because he was a writer, Putu was forbidden to have pen and paper in prison. Consequently, his study of Chinese medicine largely consisted of an intensive hands-on schooling. For seven years, he treated people living under the harshest conditions. In the absence of needles to perform acupuncture, he primarily relied on acupressure (the use of fingers instead of needles to stimulate pressure points). However, he eventually managed to fashion needles from smuggled guitar strings. Once sterilized, the needles allowed him to learn and practice acupuncture as well.

Following his release in 1976, Putu continued to be under surveillance by the government and his fiction and poetry were censored. Nevertheless, he managed to write. Among his works was an account of the experience of returning to society after his long imprisonment. Putu also continued to study Chinese medicine, traveling to Taipei and Hong Kong. By 1980 he had organized the Indonesian Traditional Healing Foundation. However, because some of the foundation's practitioners were ex-political detainees like himself, the Indonesian government banned the organization's work.

In spite of this, Putu and his wife, Ibu Endah, continued to collect Indonesian herbal plants—many of them endangered—and to grow them at the foundation. Today, Putu is Central Chairperson of the Indonesian Naturopath Association. The foundation houses over 340 varieties of herbal plants and provides training in various forms of alternative medicine. It also operates a clinic and plant pharmacy for people in economically disadvantaged communities, providing

free health care and natural medicines. In addition, the foundation facilitates Putu's research on using alternative and holistic health methods in treating HIV/AIDS patients. He has written ten books on the subject. Putu also continues to publish fiction and poetry. His publications include several books of poetry, a collection of short stories, and two novels. In addition, he has translated books of poetry and short fiction from German, and he has edited an anthology of Indonesian poetry.

An excerpt from his novel *Leftover Soul* appears in the recent volume *Silenced Voices: New Writing from Indonesia*, published by Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing and the University of Hawai'i Press. Following an appearance in Honolulu, Putu's speaking tour will take him across the United States and to Vancouver and Amsterdam. More information about the tour.