

Language Change and Regional Literature after Soeharto

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Introduction

In this paper, I will explore aspects of changes in the regional languages and literatures of Indonesia. In particular, I will use the Sundanese case as an example to argue the following three points:

- (1) there is an increasing presence of regional languages in the public space
- (2) efforts are being made to revive regional languages and literatures; and
- (3) new developments are occurring in regional cultures

Before going on to discuss the three points, I will explore changes since Soeharto left office which would constitute a context for regional languages and literatures. Since 1998, Indonesian society has been more directly exposed to the global flow of information. While the demise of the Soeharto regime may not be directly related to this, it was partly caused by technological development, in particular the widespread use of computers and access to the internet. On the other hand, since the regional autonomy law was issued in 1999, regional voices have been heard more loudly than before. The law has had impacts on various aspects of the social and cultural sphere and encouraged the expressions of regional aspiration, as we are seeing in this workshop. It can be assumed that the two flows, from outside and inside, meet and the mixture of the two flows produces a new cultural dynamic.

Another important change is the abolition of censorship in journalism and in various forms of artistic representation. In terms of literature, authors in the New Order period were very careful to meet with unwritten norms in order to escape oppression by the government. Since 1998, such self-censorship has become unnecessary and authors are able to write more freely. I assume this situation also facilitates new development in regional cultures.

1. The increasing presence of regional languages in the public space

Since the *reformasi* period, the language policy of the state has become less coercive than in former times when *Bahasa Indonesia* became a symbol of nationalism and of uniting diverse ethnic groups. In other words, the long-held one language policy of the state has experienced change and the monolingual practice in the public space is also changing.

In 2003, the provincial government of West Java enacted a law concerning the preservation and development of regional language and script (*Perda No. 5*). By this law, some government offices adopted a policy of using Sundanese at the offices. For instance, the *kabupaten* office of Bandung has decided to use Sundanese on Mondays and the provincial office for culture and tourism on Fridays (Anggadhitya 2005). This can be considered as an ‘implementation of regional autonomy which provides its region with a specific feature which is supposed to make it distinct from other regions’, in Ninuk Kleden-Probonegoro’s words in her abstract.

Another example, Indonesian is not the only language used for broadcasting news; regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese and Balinese are also starting to be used on TV. In Bandung, there are a variety of regional television channels which started broadcasting some programs in Sundanese a couple of years ago.¹ They are the government-operated TVRI Jabar & Banten (Television of Republic Indonesia in West Java and Banten), a private channel S-TV or Sangkuriang Television, and another private channel Bandung TV in 2005.² Programs using the Sundanese language have variety now in comparison with the New Order period when the Sundanese language was used only in cultural programs such as *wayang golek* and

¹ I owe this information to Hawe Setiawan, one of the prolific writers on Sundanese culture and a chief editor of Sundanese monthly magazine, *Cupumanik*, through a personal communication in August 2005.

² Bandung TV is owned by a Balinese entrepreneur who operated Bali TV. Seemingly the Bali TV is broadcasting programs in Balinese.

traditional music. News programs are broadcasted every day and talk shows and variety shows are regularly broadcasted by the above mentioned three TV channels.³

These changes will undermine the single national language policy promoted by the state for such a long time and will diminish the central power over regions. In other words, the central authoritative discourse will be confronted with regional discourses and such new language circumstances will open possibilities of expressing regional aspirations in their own languages. This is indeed a startling development and, in my view, should be closely monitored.

2. Efforts to revive regional languages and literatures

In 1989 Mr. Ajip Rosidi, a well-known writer, a *budayawan* (prominent figure in cultural activities), a publisher and a Sundanese nationalist, established a literary award “Rancage” (this Sundanese word means ‘creative’ according to his own translation).⁴ He had deplored the poor condition of regional literature which has received no support and little attention from the government. He said the purpose of the establishment of the literary award was to give an incentive⁵ to create literary works, especially by giving prize money of one million

³ In addition, Chinese and English news programs are available on the local channels as well, not just on paid satellite or cable television exclusively. Viewers are watching news programs in various languages. For instance, people living in Bandung can watch Indonesian, Sundanese, English, and Chinese news in the same day. This new phenomenon of multilingual programming has emerged not only in the Sundanese-speaking areas, but in other regional language-speaking areas as well.

⁴ Literary awards are not new in Indonesia. Badan Musyawarah Kebudayaan Nasional (National Council for Culture) have bestowed a literary award on prominent authors such as Mochtar Lubis and Pramoedya Ananta Toer since 1952. Other well known literary awards among dozens that exist are Penghargaan Buku Utama by Yayasan Buku Utama since 1973, Adikarya Award by Yayasan Adikarya Ikapi since 1997, and Katulistiwa Literary Award since 2001.

⁵ The Kalulistiwa Literary Award created a sensation because it awarded 100 million rupiah to a laureate in 2004 and 150 million rupiah in 2005.

rupiah (Rosidi 2004: 26-27).⁶ The best literary work, i.e. novels, short stories or poetry collection, in Sundanese is chosen among all the books published in the previous year on the basis of criteria decided by the committee. These include completeness as a literary work, rich expression and depiction, correct usage of language, novelty in the tradition and so forth (Yayasan Kebudayaan Rancagé 1998). Rosidi thought he could promote good literature by laying down certain criteria for giving this award (Rosidi 2004: 27). In the second year another prize was also presented to a writer who had made a remarkable contribution to Sundanese literature.⁷

This is not the only award to praise Sundanese literary works, however this literary award came to be known more widely in the Sundanese-speaking areas and is also considered nationally as an award to promote regional literatures since the award was presented for Javanese literature in 1994 and for Balinese literature in 1998. Not only local papers but also national papers report the annual event every year. They report the award positively and, in particular, local papers have welcomed Ajip Rosidi's efforts very well and the award winners are described in the media as successful local-based authors.

To some degree, this award has succeeded in stimulating Sundanese writers to create literary works by giving a relatively large amount of award money. For instance, the number of publications of literary works in Sundanese has increased. In 1994, only 5 Sundanese books were published, but 27 books were published in 2002 according to the Rancage annual report.

⁶ A *Detik* article in April 1994 supports the incentive of an honorarium as follows: "So, the same problem which all regional (language) literatures are facing is a lack of appropriate reward for wonderful works. It is natural to recognize that an award-giving-institution such as Rancage, which is ready to give an incentive in the form of money, could motivate literary persons to create" (Ginanjari in Yayasan Kebudayaan Rancage [1995]: 28-29).

⁷ Later on the award was given not only to a person but also to an institution which contributed to Sundanese culture in general. Besides these two awards, another literary award, Samsudi Award, for Sundanese children's books has been presented since 1993 when a book has fulfilled the criteria.

However, this award constitutes only one effort to revive Sundanese literature. For instance, the long-running award presented by *Mangle* magazine and *Lembaga Bahasa dan Sastra Sunda* (Institute of Sundanese Language and Literature) can not be overlooked.

I argue that a Sundanese cultural revival is in process when we see new developments in terms of the literary and cultural expression of regional aspirations.

3. New developments in regional cultures

The first of the examples relating to the new developments is newly published magazines. Within 2 years, 2 new Sundanese periodicals were published and one magazine was republished. In total at least 7 (possibly 9) Sundanese periodicals are running now (Dhipa Galuh Purba 2005), including *Majalah Mangle* (since 1957), *Kujang* (since 1956, but stopped and reappeared in 2005), *Galura*, *Seni Budaya Swara Cangkurileung*, *Giwangkara*, *Bina Da'wah*, *Hiber*, *Cupumanik* (since 2003), and *Sunda Midang* (since 2004). This is a remarkable development in one regional language community in comparison with other regional language communities. It is unlikely that the publication of new magazines has no relation to the deregulation of publications after the fall of Soeharto.

The second of these developments is the appearance of a Sundanese poet, called Godi Suwarna (born in 1956, Tasikmalaya). He has been composing poetry since he studied in Bandung in the 1980s. Now he lives in the city of Ciamis, near the border of the Javanese-speaking area which is located several hundred kilometres from Bandung and is working as a government official at the Education Department of Ciamis. (I remember that I met him some time in 1982-3 in Bandung and was strongly impressed by his personality and way of talking. And I met him again in 2001, at the International Conference of Sundanese Culture.)

As you know, poetry reading in Indonesia is not just about reading a poem aloud. A poet recites his poem as a performance. Godi reads his Sundanese poem in a fully expressive and

unique voice. Moreover, in a performance “*Godi Maca Sajak*” (Godi reads poems) held on 23rd April 2004 at Padepokan Seni Pageuraung, Tasikmalaya, three dancers opened the event with a Sundanese nursery song. Then, Godi started reciting.

His poems often imply social criticism though they contain philosophical insights, too. Sometimes, he was afraid of being arrested by the authorities in the New Order period because of his reading poems in public. The interesting thing is that his Sundanese poetry became popular only recently though he has constantly created and published his works since the 1970s. Why has it happened now? Are people trying to find their ethnic and regional identity in Godi’s Sundanese poems in the fever of regional autonomy? What is it about Godi’s poems now that resonate with his audience?

The last point is enthusiastic literary activities in Tasikmalaya, near the above-mentioned Ciamis, south-east of Bandung.⁸ In this Sundanese city of about half million population a group called *Sanggar Sastra Tasik* has demonstrated its initiative in literary activities since its establishment in 1996. It has constantly organized literary activities in this regional city, in particular for poetry because of a well-known poet Acep Zamzam Noor’s influence as one of the founders. This group is operating its own web site, publishing a bulletin “*Puitika*”, organizing poetry readings and contests, workshops and discussions on literature, and operating radio programs in cooperation with radio stations.⁹ This group mostly uses not Sundanese, but Indonesian as a means of their artistic representations. In fact, there are a number of such literary-lovers groups in Bandung, the provincial capital city and the centre of Sundanese cultural activities. Does this small city of Tasikmalaya have unique socio-cultural

⁸ Ian Campbell presented his paper titled “Tasikmalaya – Kota Puisi? A Case Study of Regional Literary Developments in West Java, Indonesia” on this at the Indonesia Council Open Conference 2005, held at Flinders University, Adelaide, on 26-27 September 2005.

⁹ See *Sanggar Sastra Tasik* home page. ‘Kegiatan’, WWW page at URL: <<http://www.situs-sst.freehosting.net/giatsst.htm>> (Version current at 6 December 2005).

backgrounds to facilitate literary activities? Does it have any relation to the fact that Tasikmalaya has been known for long time as the region that has produced many entrepreneurs such as moneylenders and also known as a city of *dangdut* because it has produced many *dangdut* singers? Or is it just because of the enthusiasm of one well-known poet for literature? I am wondering whether we are able to find ‘expressions and representations of local cultural identity’ in its Indonesian poems and short stories, as Michael Bodden will explore in two works of fiction. In my reading of their poems and short stories, it is difficult to find such local cultural identity in them. If anything, I see regional dynamics against the centre-oriented culture, as Will Derks mentions somewhere. It seems regional language is less important for this purpose.

In my conclusion, there is no conclusion. I would welcome your views on these issues during the discussion.

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