



Literature Written in Regional Languages: Strive to Survive – A Dilemma

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Abstract: Children's books in Indonesia are mostly written in the national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*. This condition causes literature written in regional languages to struggle for existence. It is important for these regional languages to be recognized but at the same time, a national language helps unite the various ethnic groups in Indonesia. This paper consists of four parts: (1) The position and situation of regional language at present, (2) various attempts to keep the publishing for minorities to survive, (3) the dilemma situation of folktales of the Forest People, (4) alternatives to balance the domination of national language.

Key words: publishing, minorities, regional languages.

The Position and Situation of National and Regional Languages

Indonesia is an archipelago consisting of more than 17,500 islands that stretch out along the equator for over 5,000 kilometers (3,125 miles). Of this number, 6,044 islands have been named. Only half of the islands are inhabited and Indonesia's population of 240 million is divided among 300 ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have spoken hundreds of regional languages and dialects. Each ethnic group and subgroup has their own language and sometimes even a language that is spoken only by a very small number of people has more than one dialect. There are seven major regional languages in Indonesia. These are *Javanese*, *Sundanese*, *Madurese*, *Balinese*, *Malay*, *Ambonese*, and *Minahasa*, spoken by groups of the same names. The national language, *Bahasa Indonesia* (Language of *Indonesia*), is widely used as the medium of communication. This helps unite the various ethnic groups (Bunanta, 2003: 3-5)

Bahasa Indonesia is an open language. It takes and absorbs other languages: Sanskrit, old *Javanese*, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, Chinese, Dutch, and English (Pusat Bahasa, 1996 via Wikipedia). The process of implementing foreign languages is still continuing, especially from Arabic and English languages. These enrich the Indonesian language.

At present this situation doesn't always give a positive picture of the national language because more and more people, especially the young, are encouraged to learn English. So-called national plus or international schools (mostly for upper middle class



families) offer education with English language as the main language of instruction. Gradually, English becomes the child's first language. Only at home do they speak Indonesian, and then only informally, often without knowing the grammar or vocabulary. This kind of school also equips their libraries with imported English books. The majority of children in Indonesia still receive their education in *Bahasa Indonesia* but the fact is that many schools have no libraries. This causes the children to have less and less contact with good Indonesian language. The only schools with books written in regional languages are those few which still teach regional language, such as *Javanese*, *Sundanese*, *Acehnese*, and *Balinese*. And it is important to note that the books available are school books, only rarely trade books or story books.

At present many families in the cities don't speak their regional language any more with their children. *Bahasa Indonesia* is the mother tongue of the children whose parents in their childhood used to speak in their regional languages. They usually only spoke *Bahasa Indonesia* at school or when communicating with people other than their own ethnic group. At present only children in the rural villages are still communicating in their regional languages with their parents.

Many of the languages spoken by small ethnic groups are not yet well documented and sometimes have no written words for modern concepts. So, only major languages spoken by many people that are still introduced at schools have their own publications, mostly in the form of school books and dictionaries. It has been said that 15 out of 700 regional languages have become extinct and another 150 are endangered (Kompas, July 9th, 2010). This situation is considered to have been caused by the domination of *Bahasa Indonesia*, which in turn also is threatened by the usage of English language.

Keep the Publishing for Minority Languages to Survive

Publishing of books in regional languages had been done long before Indonesia's independence. At least two school books written in the *Javanese* language were published in 1865 and 1872 by *Het Bataviaasch Genootschap* (Bunanta, 1998: 39). The numbers of



the books increased along with the establishment of the colonial government publishing house *Balai Poestaka* in 1917. Dozens of books in several regional languages, both for adults and children, were published. The children books were adaptations from local folktales, myths, legends, and also from well-known western stories. In 1921 the Dutch government started to publish books in *Malay*, the roots of *Bahasa Indonesia*. The stories were also translations from western books. But after independence in 1945, books were mostly available in Bahasa Indonesia and this publishing house was taken over by the Indonesian government and the name became *Balai Pustaka* (Bunanta, 1998: 40)

At present there are dozens of big children's books publishers. Whether school texts or reading books, all are written in *Bahasa Indonesia* because the market is big. From an economical aspect, publishing in regional languages is not attractive. This small market is taken over by small local publishers, in the areas where the regional language is still taught as a compulsory language. These small publishers do their business with idealism because even though the market is there, it is very small.

It is not easy to find publishers that are interested in publishing literature in regional languages. Concerned writers take the initiative to keep the language alive by self publishing and do direct selling when there are seminars or congresses on regional languages. In Java there are three magazines issued in the *Javanese* language that still exist. Another two newspapers which are issued in the national language provide one special page for short stories and serials written in *Javanese* (Tiwiek S.A, February 28th, 2010). This opportunity encourages *Javanese* writers even though they have to wait for a long time for their work to be published. These three magazines and the newspapers' special page have their own fanatic readers but there are no special pages with stories for children.

We are fortunate that a prominent individual, Ayip Rosidi, keeps fighting to make publishing of the regional languages alive. He is a *Sundanese* writer, editor, and was a lecturer for Indonesian culture in Osaka (*Osaka Gaikokugo Daigaku*) and Kyoto University from 1982-1996 (http://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajip_Rosidi). He set up the *Rancagé* Award in 1989, to be given annually to a writer for the best book written in the



Sundanese language. The following year, in 1990, the prize began to be awarded to an individual who rendered a service for the development of the regional language and its literature. In the first years, 1989-1993, this *Rancagé* Award was given only for *Sundanese* literature, but in 1994 another category was set up for *Javanese* literature, in 1997 for *Balinese*, and *Lampung* literature in 2008. This effort encouraged the publishing of regional languages because the *Rancagé* Award is considered a prestigious prize and receives wide publicity. The award requires strict rules and books are only selected from those that are generally available in the market, to make sure that the books given to the selection committee are not published privately in a few copies, only in order to be considered for the award. Besides a plaque, the awardees also receive Rp 5.000.000 (eq 530 USD). The books have to meet high standards or the prize will not be given to all categories (*Sundanese*, *Javanese*, *Balinese*, and *Lampung*). In 2009 there was no prize given to *Lampung* literature (*Rancagé* booklet, 2010: 82)

Ayip Rosidi, as the founder of *Rancagé* Cultural Foundation, has also set up *Samsudi* Award in 1993 given to a writer for a *Sundanese* children's book. This is the only award so far that gives attention to children's books written in a regional language. For 2010 there was no *Samsudi* Award given to a *Sundanese* children's book writer since the works available in the year of 2009 didn't meet the requirements. (*Rancagé* booklet, 2010: 21). Compared with other languages, *Sundanese* children's books are easily found because there is at least one publisher that specializes in publications of *Sundanese* children's books.

I haven't so far found any new title of reading books for children published in other regional languages other than in *Sundanese*, but in Jogjakarta in Central Java, I found one weekly Family Magazine written in *Javanese*, established in 1986, that still exists. It contains children's stories, comics, stories for the very young, poems, songs, profiles, international news, short biographies of international prominent figures (like the Dalai Lama, etc), serials, articles on food and cooking, features, etc. This means that *Javanese* is still being used and read in this area. Unfortunately the same situation doesn't happen with many other languages.



The Dilemma Situation of Languages in Indonesia

This third part will discuss the publication of folktales of *Orang Rimba*, the Forest People, in Jambi (Sumatra) province which were written by their children in *Bahasa Indonesia*. The inhabitants of *Orang Rimba* consist of various groups that number only 2.500 people in total (The Burning Season Movie – www.warsi.or.id). They are also referred to as the *Anak Dalam* (children of the forest interior) and are still leading traditional lives. In their interaction with the rain forest, they utilize its resources, such as rattan and resin. Their literacy rates and education are low and their language is considered a form of ancient *Malay*. The majority are not Moslem and live in nomadic groups that migrate to different areas of the forest depending on the season and their needs. The book entitled *Kisah-Kisah Anak Rimba* (The Stories of Children Forest), 2007 was published and supported by the initiative of *Komunitas Konservasi Indonesia – WARSI*, a network that consists of twelve NGO's that work in Sumatra whose focus is biodiversity conservation and community development (*KKI WARSI*). The book has ten stories selected from stories gathered from the children who were sent to an alternative school organized by *KKI WARSI* that teaches reading, writing, and counting. When they first started the school in 1998, only six pupils attended the class. In 2006 the numbers increase to 215 (*Kisah-Kisah Anak Rimba*: VII)

In reading and reviewing the book it could be argued that the foreword included in the book could be removed since it doesn't relate directly to the stories, but is just a kind of appeal to the adult to stress the importance of reading. Also the illustrations are dull and will not give the readers a picture of the forest people. They are not imaginative drawings. The footnotes, explanations, and comments are disturbing and unusual in a children's book. The word choices are sometimes rather inappropriate. The most disturbing issue is that each story is followed by a description of the moral of the story. This kind of interpretation will always limit the meaning of the story. But the shortcomings of this book should not cause the effort to publish the *Orang Rimba's* stories to be unappreciated. The stories can be rewritten, reillustrated and republished in a



better format for the dignity of the forest people, with the publication in the national language. Other ethnic group will realize that even though their education status is “low”, they have local wisdom no different or less important than any other. Before they were referred to as *Orang Kubu* (savage) and many people are still unfortunately using this term.

To balance the Domination of the National Language

Even if we can't save all the regional languages that are already extinct and those that are now endangered at least we still have some alternatives to try. We can publish books in regional languages with the funding of sponsors even though not without difficulties. Advised by Dr Anne Pellowski (USA) and funded by the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), we, Society for the Advancement of Children's Literature (SACL) managed to publish two books written bilingually in *Bahasa Indonesia* and *Acehnese* in 2006, entitled *Bujang Permai* and *Anak Kucing yang Manja*. These two books were given freely to hundred of schools in Aceh, the area in Sumatra island which was devastated by tsunami in December 2004. The books were also given to other schools in many parts of Indonesia. These books were most probably the first children's books ever written in *Acehnese*. Another effort we have made, when setting up the community libraries we support, was to always purchase not only books written in *Bahasa Indonesia* but also to include any books in the regional language that we could find, such as in *Sundanese* and *Javanese*. Unfortunately we couldn't find books in any other languages.

In Indonesia there are many universities in many regions that have regional language studies related to the language spoken by the people in that region and also they have faculties of art. Therefore we can offer workshops on writing and illustrating of children's book to these students so that they can work together to produce quality children's book written in the regional languages. We, Society for the Advancement of Children's Literature and Indonesian Board on Books for Young People plan to start a



pilot project by next year in cooperation with Faculty of Education in Jogjakarta (Central Java).

For several times in the past years we have conducted cloth book making led by Dr Anne Pellowski and by myself. Even though so far the stories were only written in our national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, we can try to hold similar workshops for minority languages. And surely we have to keep in mind that we should have a person who knows well the language. At least this making hand-made books is one alternative in keeping alive our minorities languages.

In cooperation with a NGO in Bali, a big television station has sponsored a series of books on environment, entitled “Seagull and Heron”, which was written in three languages: *Balinese* (the regional language), *Bahasa Indonesia*, and English. Several songs in *Balinese* were included. At the launch in 2009, a famous *Balinese* storyteller, Made Taro, presented the story in *Balinese* combined with *Bahasa Indonesia* since the children don’t understand all the *Balinese* words. This was a good step to introduce a regional language to children.

Writing contests in regional languages are also good to organize. Workshops for teachers on children’s book writing should be done, both for trade books and for text books. Reprints, rewriting, and translation taken from Indonesian stories or from other countries are worth trying. Finding sponsors from concerned companies is a good way to be able to support such a project. But the most important thing is for our government to be aware of the problem that we all have, and to work hand in hand to improve the quantity and quality of children's books in regional languages.

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