

Digital Technology and the Resurrection of Modern Literature in Javanese: Redefining Indonesia's Mono-Lingual Literary Nationalism?

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Guest Address at the International Seminar on Language Education and Culture (ISoLEC)

ABSTRACT

With at least eighty million speakers, Javanese is a major world language. Its heritage of written literature stretches back more than a thousand years. Since Indonesia's independence, Javanese has been relegated to the status of a provincial vernacular without official standing or functions. Its modern literature is accorded secondary status by comparison with writing in the national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*. Like many once-vibrant languages and literatures across the world, Javanese has withered under the shadow of nationalist culture.

But a new age may be dawning for the Javanese language and its literature. Over the last two decades there has been an astonishing take-up of digital technology across Indonesia. Smartphones are ubiquitous, tablet computers and laptops widely used, even by people on relatively low incomes. In compact, heavily populated Java, access to the internet is cheap and fast. This has had a stimulating effect on creative writing in Javanese. For many decades, new writing in Javanese has appeared mostly in small-circulation magazines. Now the three main Javanese-language magazines – *Panjebar Semangat*, *Jaya Baya* and *Djaka Lodang* – offer readers online access. Many new literary sites in Javanese have appeared on the internet. There is now instant access to Javanese-language performance arts – *wayang kulit*, *kethoprak*, *sandiwara* and cinema productions – through technically sophisticated streaming sites.

Digital technology has wrought a dramatic change in the field of Javanese-language book publishing. Here, improved editing and design, nimble publishing and re-printing, plus online distribution have suddenly increased the number of new novels, anthologies of short stories (*cerkak*) and collections of free-form poetry (*geguritan*). The future of Javanese literature is still uncertain, but digital technology has profoundly changed the rules of the game.

Keywords: *Javanese language, Javanese literature, digital technology, modern literature in Javanese, literary nationalism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The financial Crisis of 1997-1998 (called the *krisis moneter* in Indonesia, abbreviated *krismon*) triggered the downfall of the authoritarian, military-based New Order government of President Suharto. Between 1999 and 2002 the Constitution was comprehensively rewritten, making possible the radical decentralisation of political and administrative power. Electoral processes were liberalised. Centrally-regulated censorship of the mass media was relaxed and governments became much more receptive to

expression of diverse opinions in public. From around 2004, Indonesia's economy recovered and embarked on period of growth that was sustained until 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic brought it to an abrupt halt.

One of the products of Indonesia's post-*krismon* prosperity was the extraordinary penetration of digital technology into the mass of the population. Java's huge, dense population, crammed into the small confines of the island, has made smart-phones and related technologies relatively affordable, even for

people on lower-than-average incomes. According to Datareportal – the respected online clearing house of statistics on use of digital technology across the world – in January 2021 there were 202.6 million internet users in Indonesia, equating to 73.7% of the population. The same site reported that there were 170 million social media users in January 2021, equivalent to 61.8% of the total population.¹ Datareportal does not give a breakdown of figures for the island of Java alone, but other sources estimate the population of Java to be around 147 million in 2021, or about 53% of Indonesia’s total population. This suggests that, conservatively estimated, over 100 million people on the island of Java now use smart phones to access the internet, and almost as many use social media apps of one kind or another.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

During the years of the New Order government (1966-1998), it was common to hear the view that creative writing in the Javanese language was moribund, even dead.² But over the two decades since 2000 a startling renaissance has occurred in the vitality of this rich tradition, a tradition that has existed in written texts for more than a thousand years.

Three main factors have triggered the change. First, decentralisation and the relaxation of censorship have allowed Javanese writers to publish more boldly without fear of offending an censorious government. Second, rising prosperity has placed more disposable income in the hands of readers and writers of Javanese literature. This is especially the case with those employed in the education sector, who traditionally have been the biggest producers and consumers of new writing in Javanese. Among the Constitutional reforms of 1999-2002 was a stipulation [Chapter XIII, Clause 31, sub-section 4] that “the state prioritizes the budget for education to a minimum of twenty per cent of the state budget and of the regional budgets”. This has resulted in substantially improved income for schoolteachers and educational administrators, an improvement that has flowed through into the production and consumption of books and magazines in Javanese.

Third, the extraordinarily rapid and widespread take-up of digital technology has improved access to works of literature in Javanese, and reduced the cost of their production, dissemination and consumption. It is having a dramatic impact on publishing in Javanese,

and an equally dramatic impact on the general profile of modern Javanese literature. In fact, since 2015 there has been a veritable digital explosion of publishing in one form or another in the world of modern Javanese literature. This has happened in four main domains: (i) printed periodicals with online access, (ii) dedicated literary sites on various online platforms, (iii) downloadable or streaming videos of *wayang*, *kěthoprak* and short movies, and (iv) printed books.

The three weekly variety magazines in Javanese, *Panjèbar Semangat*, *Jaya Baya* and *Djaka Lodang*, now have online editions on various platforms.³ There are weekly Javanese-language supplements or columns in big circulation Indonesian-language newspapers: “Sang Pamomong” in *Suara Merdeka* (Semarang), “Jagad Jawa” in *Solopos* (Solo) and “Mekar Sari” in *Kedaulatan Rakyat* (Jogjakarta). Plus, there are a good number of specialist magazines in Javanese (print and online) mostly for school teachers and their students. These include *Ancas* (Purwokerto), *Pagagan* (Jogjakarta), *Sempulur* (Jogjakarta), *Jawacana* (Jogjakarta), *Swaratama* (Semarang) and *Carakita* (Jogjakarta), the latter being remarkable for being printed almost wholly in Java’s pre-Latin *hânâcarâkâ* script.

Literature discussion groups and communities of writers have always played an important role in the life of modern Javanese literature. Over the last two decades these have proliferated, and many have gone online. In the Special Region of Yogyakarta alone, for example, there are at least fifteen such groups, several with a very prominent online presence.⁴ There are also now many sites that offer downloadable or streaming videos of *wayang*, *kethoprak*, *sandiwara* and short movies in Javanese. Some of these have achieved a huge number of views. For example, in 2021 the short movie in Javanese *Tilik* (Ladies on top,) by Ravacana Films (Jogjakarta), claimed twenty-five million views on YouTube since its release in 2018. And some sites now host a veritable library of downloadable *wayang* performances of high technical quality. Probably the most successful of these is the YouTube channel Purbo Asmoro Official which, in October 2021, had more than thirty-three thousand subscribers.⁵ A glance at the repertoire of *wayang* performances on this site

¹ Reported at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-indonesia> (accessed 21 October 2021). The population of Indonesia in 2021 was estimated by the same source to be 274.9 million.

² For a brief account of the malaise in Javanese writing under the New Order see Quinn 2010, especially pp.207-211. Ibnu Wibi Winarko 2021 gives a well-documented account of the New Order’s attempts to directly censor new writing in Javanese in the 1960s.

³ The platforms include Facebook, YouTube and weblogs. *Panjèbar Sēmangat* (Surabaya) was founded 1933 and currently has a print circulation of around 20,000. *Jâyâ Bâyâ* (Surabaya) was founded 1945, print circulation currently around 12,000. *Djâkâ Lodang* (Jogjakarta) was founded 1967, print circulation currently around 5,000. I don’t yet know what the impact of online access has been on the readership of these magazines, but it has certainly opened them up to more immediate access by a wider circle of readers.

⁴ Among the most active of these are the Sanggar Sastra Jawa Yogyakarta (SSJY) see: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ssjykotabaru/>, and the Jawasstra Cultural Movement (see: www.jawasstra.weebly.com and “F***in’ virus!...”

⁵ See: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC73gCjOdvbZNNw8oaYgiZ6A>

reveals that some have attracted between 100,000 and 200,000 views. By any measure (national and international) these are “best sellers”.⁶

Although much of modern Javanese literature continues to appear in magazines and newspapers, printed books still have high prestige, and digital technology has dramatically transformed the publishing of them. Thanks to digital technology, Javanese-language books are now cheaper, more quickly produced, much better edited, as well as more attractively designed and illustrated. Of particular importance is the remarkable rise of hybrid publishing – in Bahasa Indonesia usually called *penerbitan buku indie* – in which the author bears all (or much) of the cost of publication with the discretion to determine the number of copies printed. In return the publisher provides professional editing and design expertise, the management of printing, assistance with publicity and distribution, the obtaining an ISBN, and other services.⁷ The improved financial circumstances of today’s authors has made hybrid publishing the principal avenue of book publication for Javanese authors. Initial print runs may be small – 200 to 2,000 copies – but if a book sells out, it can be quickly and economically reprinted.⁸

The number of titles published in Javanese has also increased dramatically. Since 2016, well over one hundred new novels, anthologies of short stories (*cĕrkak*) and anthologies of free-form poetry (*gĕguritan*) have appeared in printed book form. In 2019, the online bookstore *Warung Buku Sastra Jawa* was offering eighty-eight titles of novels and anthologies of short stories in Javanese (but not anthologies of *gĕguritan* poetry), all of which had been published within the previous five years.⁹

You will not see this digitally driven explosion of print publications in major bookstores like Gramedia, Gunung Agung or Periplus, though some online book dealers are starting to carry a few titles in Javanese, among them Bukalapak and Shopee. The hybrid publishing mechanism places primary responsibility for promotion, distribution and sales on authors. Some writers’ communities are very proactive in assisting their members with this task. The Pamarsudi Sastra Jawi Bojonegoro, for example (one example among

several that could be cited), very actively supports the publication and sale of works by its members.¹⁰ The online bookshop *Warung Buku Sastra Jawa* advertises through a Facebook site,¹¹ and corresponds with customers by way of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Purchases are delivered by post. Its motto is: “*Nyepaki buku-buku sastra Jawa. Mboten dipun keparengaken promosi sasanipun buku sastra Jawa*” (We stock books of Javanese literature. We will not allow the promotion of any books except works of literature in Javanese.)

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, digital technology is poised to disrupt Indonesia’s long-standing nationalist distinction between “national” and “regional” in the field of language and literature. The Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia – the *Undang-Undang Dasar* – states that “The language of the State is Indonesian (*Bahasa Negara ialah Bahasa Indonesia*)”. The Young People’s Oath (*Sumpah Pemuda*) of 1928 – a key document in the development of Indonesian nationalism – states that “We, the sons and daughters of Indonesia, hold high the language of language unity, Indonesian” (*Kami poetra dan poetri Indonesia, mendjoendjoeng bahasa persatoean, bahasa Indonesia*).

Indonesia’s linguistic nationalism – like all nationalist ideologies – conceals, denies and overlooks as much as it asserts, reveals and explains. One reality that it “overlooks” is the role of nationalism and the national language in the decline and the extinction (to be provocative we could say the *killing*) of local languages and literatures. Most nation states are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. By giving priority to a national identity – embodied in national institutions, national history, national arts. and a national language – almost inevitably local cultures within that state are assigned subaltern status. With the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945, Javanese, with its rich, thousand-year history of written literature and its internationally admired *wayang* shadow theatre, has been relegated to a provincial patois, without official status in government, education, or the judiciary.

Nevertheless, the Indonesian government is officially committed to preserving and developing the regional languages. Official policy is summed up in the slogan of the central government’s language preservation and development authority, the *Badan Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa*: “Give pride of place to Indonesian (*Utamakan Bahasa Indonesia*); Safeguard and preserve the regional languages,

⁶ Several of Ki Purbo Asmoro’s performances on this site are accompanied by a simultaneous English translation provided in a side panel by Dr Kitsie Emerson.

⁷ For a succinct comparison of hybrid publishing with the traditional mode of publishing, see: <https://www.stilettobook.com/penerbitan-buku-mayor-buku-indie/>.

⁸ Tulus Setyadi, author of more than 40 novels, claimed in a 2017 interview that his novel *Uran-Uran Katresnan* published in 2016 had already been reprinted “five or six times”, see Agung Hermawan 2017: Lampiran V.

⁹ The list includes modern reprints of four previously published works, including reprints of two novels originally published in the 1920s.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/392237104222412>.

¹¹ See: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/747012092044305>.

(*Lestarikan bahasa daerah*); Master foreign languages (*Kuasai bahasa asing*)." The *Badan Bahasa* operates branch offices (called *Balai Bahasa* or *Kantor Bahasa*) in most provinces. The central office and these branch offices conduct research on regional languages, help with preservation of regional languages and publication of reference works and other books in regional languages. Yet despite its commitment to safeguarding and preserving the regional languages, the government is an instrument of, and a propagator of, nationalist ideology. So it is fundamentally conflicted about the preservation and development of the country's regional languages. Certainly, in the case of Javanese there are many who believe that, despite having at least eighty million speakers, the language is dying, and its literature with it. Here is a typical example of this gloomy rhetoric.

It is hard to hope for the birth of a new "golden generation" of Javanese writers in the midst of the current twilight of publishing in Javanese. [...] The present generation of writers are merely surviving, nothing more. They are not striving to improve the quality of their work. [...] Javanese literature is fading away, in fact it has died altogether as a subject of study in schools. Many teachers of Javanese language and literature [...] have failed to actualise their function as facilitators who introduce their pupils to Javanese language and literature and help them internalise it. (Ari Kristianawati [6])

But today, as we have seen, the widespread use of digital technology casts fundamental doubt on the pessimistic claim that Javanese literature is dead or dying. It also casts doubt on the future of the current mono-lingual conceptualisation of Indonesia's national identity.

Will Javanese one day (soon?) become an acceptably "national" language? Will "Indonesian" literature one day include study of Javanese literature? Will Javanese *hânâcarâkâ* script be adopted as a script for writing Indonesian? Will the *Sumpah Pemuda* one day be pronounced in Javanese in addition to Indonesian?

These are no longer weird or unimaginable questions. Many countries have accorded national status to all their major regional languages, among them Timor-Leste and South Africa. The *Prasidatama* awards bestowed annually by the Indonesian government's *Balai Bahasa* branch in Semarang were once exclusively for accomplishments in the field of Indonesian language and literature, but, since 2021, now include a category of awards for accomplishments in the field of modern Javanese *gêguritan* poetry. The new, youth-oriented tabloid *Carakita* carries a number of articles in Indonesian written in *hânâcarâkâ* script. And it is now not

uncommon to see Indonesia's state philosophy of Pancasila translated into Javanese.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps these are straws in the wind generated by the typhoon of digital technology. Perhaps they herald a new definition of what is acceptably "national" in the realm of Indonesian language and literature. The future is always unpredictable, and digital technology has made it especially uncertain. The mutability of Indonesia's linguistic nationalism is on display in this ISOLEC conference. Ninety per cent of the papers and discussions here involve Indonesian people addressing other Indonesian people, at a venue in Indonesia, talking about Indonesian society, and yet doing so in English. On the face of it, this looks contrary to Indonesia's nationalist ideology. English is becoming a *de facto* "national" language. It is now possible that Javanese, and other regional languages, may also "go national". It is digital technology that makes this a real prospect, though whether it is inevitable remains to be seen.

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