



azali, to the right of the projector, facilitates a community history workshop in C20, an alternative library in Surabaya, September 2012.

Practices and Networks of Literacy: Alternative Libraries in Indonesia

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At the balcony of the house, shelves filled with books, comics, bundled magazines, and zines line the walls. A small shelf proudly displays books published by Ininnawa, a small niche press specializing in social and anthropological studies on Eastern Indonesia. Jimpe, the librarian of Kampung Buku, and the chief editor of Ininnawa, lives in this house, with his wife Piyo, his daughter Bobel, and his friend Barack. Jimpe tells me that the garage has been turned into his office, where he does his writing and editing. Displayed inside the house are bundles of yarn and some knitted works, by Barack and QuiQui, his community of knitters. As the day turns dark, a number of youths on motorcycles come in slowly. Some quickly roll out tarps on the balcony and the small lawn, some set up the projector and screen in front of the bookshelves, others are occupied with their mobile phones texting or tweeting to their followers about the double screening of Tino Saronggaló's documentaries of Toraja's burial ritual, and of the 1998 student movement in Indonesia.



Kampung Buku in Makassar, with Inninawa publishing house within its garage.

This vignette gives a snapshot of an alternative library. Since 2001, three years after Reformation, an exponential number of individuals, neighborhoods, community organizations and NGOs have initiated their own alternative libraries in Indonesia (Håklev 2008). These libraries, built using self- or collectively-generated funds, resources, and connections, are often hosted in somebody's house or in a community building, providing access to books, magazines, journals, audio-visual materials, and alternative media such as zines. Usually run collaboratively by unpaid volunteers or staff on a shoestring budget, they sometimes also serve as a community space: a venue for discussions, meetings, public lectures, screenings, workshops, music concerts, as well as a space for people to socialize.

Variants of alternative¹ space—galleries, coffee shops, libraries, bookstores, restaurants, fashion distribution outlets or *distros*—started emerging in the years leading to the 1998 Reformation, particularly in Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta, as Indonesians reached the saturated suffocating social, political, and economic reality of having activities and expression limited during the New Order (Andan 2011; Darmawan 2010; Juliastuti 2007, 2008). The period during and after the Reformation saw their accelerated growth, entangled as part of the “emergency activism” that responded to the recovering economic needs, as well as the social, cultural, and political needs to foster “class alliances and community-based networking amidst the grave conditions of the economic crisis of 1997-8” (Budianta 2003, 169). Since the New Order had tightly controlled information, education, and expres-

sion, particularly among youths (Shiraishi 1997), many emergency activists work in (re)producing and distributing information and knowledge that were suppressed heavily during the New Order through a comprehensive policy of restrictive licensing, censorship and propaganda on media (Hill & Sen 2005, 7:17-32; Juliastuti 2013).

In this article, I focus on spaces that retain the library function of maintaining a collection of information resources, made available to a defined community for reference or borrowing. A significant number of these spaces intentionally avoid calling themselves a library to downplay its connoted seriousness, instead preferring to use more familiar, convivial-sounding terms like *taman baca* (reading garden), *rumah baca* (reading house), *rumah pintar* (smart house), *rumah buku* (book house), *café buku* (book café), *komunitas literasi* (literacy community), *komunitas literer* (literary community), *angkringan buku* (book stall), *ruang baca* (reading room) or *warung buku* (book stall) (Muhammad & Yullaelawati, 2009: 12). In short, the spaces maintain the role and function as a library of information resources, if among others.

Indeed, there was a proliferation of these alternative libraries during the first decade of the 21st century, particularly in the city of Bandung and Yogyakarta, both renowned as educational hubs in Indonesia, where two of the oldest and most prominent universities in Indonesia, Bandung Institute of Technology and Gajah Mada University, are located. Both cities have also attempted to create maps of alternative libraries using a low-budget, zine-style production and distribution approach such as photocopy or blog

publishing on the internet. Local and national, as well as niche and mass media, particularly from 2003 to 2005, often reported enthusiastically about these alternative libraries and bookstores as a literacy movement (Håklev 2008, 27-28), while the people behind them were usually depicted in a heroic manner as *pejuang literasi* (literacy heroes) for working voluntarily or on a shoe-string budget.

Many believe that the news of these alternative libraries—usually embedded within other popular “third-place” (Oldenburg 1989) multi-functional locations such as cafés, community centers, concert venues, stores, exhibition-discussion-screening spaces—have provoked youths from other cities to form similar networks (see for example, Juliastuti 2008; Håklev 2008, 25). However, since many of them are short-lived, and initiated by middle class individuals, their impact has been questioned, sometimes dismissed as an egoistic display of class distinction and taste (Bourdieu 1984) paraded as cultural movements by educated middle class living in urban areas (Pendit 2008).

Yet, the emergence of these alternative libraries prompted the government to adopt the model in their *Taman Bacaan Masyarakat* (TBM)². In 2009, the Department of National Education released a practical guidebook for building a *Taman Bacaan Masyarakat Kreatif* (Creative Society Reading Garden) (Muhammad & Yullaelawati 2009), drawing significantly from case studies of autonomous alternative libraries, advocating community-based programming and incorporation of popular culture expressions, creativity, and lifestyles (for an overview, see Gong 2012; and Muhammad & Yullaelawati 2009).

In the same year, the government launched the heavily-publicized campaign called TBM@Mall to build 23 libraries inside various shopping malls across the archipelago (Gong & Irkham 2012: 257-263). Though many questioned the exorbitant budget for building such libraries, the rationale was that having a library inside a mall, conventionally regarded as a popular site and a consumption space, would psychologically encourage people to view reading as a part of popular culture, as pleasurable as shopping and other mall activities (Gong & Irkham 2012: 257-260). The project aimed to provide a popular alternative space for youth for learning, recreation, and self-actualization. Unfortunately, many of these libraries did not last long—when I visited these in Surabaya in early 2012, all of them had closed or moved out. I have heard of similar demise in Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Makassar.

This raises some questions: What matters in the adoption of popular culture and expressions into the library? Why do some libraries thrive while others fail? Often, attempts to answer these questions are simplistically reduced to heroic idealism and approaches. For example, Håklev (2008: 42-26) and Gong & Irkham (2012: 275-278) pointed out how government-supported TBMs, with their reliance on block grants, irregular opening hours, and lack of activities, display very different characteristics and approaches to literacy than the alternative libraries. This prevalent dichotomy of alternative/idealistic versus formal/compla-

cent libraries problematically reduces the diverse political traits and ideological orientations into a simplistic and deterministic formulation. (I have seen similar rhetoric being (re)produced even among alternative libraries themselves: with some trivialized as mere sites of leisure, consumption, and indulgent self-expression.) It also ignores the transient nature of many autonomous alternative libraries, many of which are short-lived, or have closed. Stories about the survival struggles, conflicts, and demise of alternative libraries also abound.

Indeed, as we proceed into the second decade of the 21st century, we are seeing less excitement and more guarded skepticism. In Bandung, the number of alternative libraries and bookstores has dramatically decreased from more than 40 to only eight, and even fewer still maintain any regular programs (Handayani 2007).

My research stems from my own long-standing interest in these issues, my personal engagement in running a small alternative library in Surabaya, and being involved, with various degrees of affinities, with many other alternative libraries and organizations. I ground my research on a comparative analysis of alternative libraries’ practices and networks, based on a study of eight alternative libraries in four cities in Indonesia—Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar. Since 2005, prior to formally launching my graduate studies in 2011, I visited several of these libraries, participating in both formal and casual events such as workshops, screening, and discussions with the founders and the regulars, jotting down my observations in my journal, and taking photographs and audio recordings.

Rebuilding Networked Subjectivities

Particularly in Indonesia, where information was suppressed heavily for more than three decades through a comprehensive policy of restrictive licensing, censorship, and propaganda, more and more individuals feel and act on the need to be actively involved in rebuilding cultural identities and knowledge

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production. The individuals running the libraries do not position themselves as passive archivists or librarians, patiently documenting phenomena around them, but actively participate and articulate their understanding of the local culture and the communities around them, challenging or contributing to circulating discourses.

Literacy enacted within these libraries becomes very much dependent on networks and practices. The individuals involved become agents as they expand their networks not only through other formal organizations they are involved with, but also through their family, friends, communities, and other jobs. They must be able to exploit everyday acts—hanging out, visiting an

exhibition, attending a workshop/discussion, desktop publishing, writing, and editing for other jobs—to create tactical ways to build up these libraries. Subjectivity and trust, therefore, play key roles in the development of this network.

Additionally, as network media becomes more prevalent in everyday life in Indonesia with the increased use of mobile internet and social media, we are also seeing the increased social practice of interaction and interlacing of people through discursive and decentralized modes of communication (Hill & Sen 2005, 7:147). Emails, mailing lists, social network sites, and micro-publications such as zines, flyers and brochures, become inter-referencing and inter-connecting sites. Without the internet, photocopy machine, and print-on-demand technology, they would not have been as influential.

However, due to the reliance on vigilance and trust, this sort of emergency activism flounders when long-term strategizing, clear procedures, and coordination are needed for formal co-operations or expansion. Regeneration also poses a challenge since many learn the process through practice and trust, which cannot be easily transferred. Some soon learn the value of moderating their participation, adjusting to their own life demands as well as giving chances for others to step in. Many have learned the danger of too much dependence on particular individuals (which often leads to the demise of the library when they leave for one reason or another), and the need to build trust and exercise teamwork by distributing roles, allowing others to build and exercise their own networks and practices.

From collecting to chronicling

The walls on the ground floor of Medayu Agung Library in Surabaya are lined with large frames containing old photos, many of which show Soekarno, the first president of Indonesia. The 75-year-old librarian, Oey Hiem Hwie formerly worked as a journalist for *Trompet Masyarakat*, a left-leaning, Soekarno-supporting newspaper, a job that had put him in prison with Pramoedy

One display case contains original type- and handwritten scripts by Pramoedy, entrusted to Oey by Pramoedy himself when Oey was released from Pulau Buru a year earlier.

Ananta Toer on Buru Island from 1970 to 1978. The library collection reflects his life history. Inside the glass display boxes, old yellowing scripts are neatly arranged, dotted with pouches of silica gels, peppercorns, or tobaccos to lessen the impact of Surabaya's humid climate. One display case contains original type- and handwritten scripts by Pramoedy, entrusted to Oey by Pramoedy himself when Oey was released from Pulau Buru a year earlier. Another box showcases an audio-cassette collection of speeches by Soekarno, while yet another contains periodicals on Chinese Indonesians, and books related to the history of Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan where he used to study in Malang.

The second-level is full of shelves filled with bundles of various clippings, periodicals and old books related to Pramoedy, Sukarno, and Chinese-Indonesians—collections that cannot be easily found in public libraries. He gained his knowledge of cata-

Old Chinese Indonesian books kept in Medayu Agung, Surabaya.

Inset: Pramoedy's original scripts, passed to Oey Hiem Hwie before he was released from prison, kept in the Medayu Agung Library, Surabaya.



loguing and information management working as a librarian in a Sari Agung library, a job offered to him when he could not find any after he was released from prison and branded as an *Eks-Tapol* (ex-political prisoner).

If we look at these libraries as manifestations of their (communities') own identity building, which may oscillate or overlap between resistance and project identities (Castells 2010b), we see throughout an attempt to produce a different set of histories that starts from a critical subject position, then grows to try to encompass common experiences (Chen 2010, 63). A significant portion of time and space are devoted to specific issues, usually deeply related to the subject positions of the founders, the regulars, or to their geographic space. For example, i:boekoe or Indonesia Buku, founded in 2003 in Yogyakarta by Taufik Rahzen, Galam Zulkifli, Dipo Andy Muttaqien, Eddy Susanto, and Muhidin M. Dahlan, worked for 2½ years with the local communities, particularly

The workshops yielded hundreds of oral history interview records with local residents, which further inspired the making of their internet radio...

youth, to write and publish an anthology *Ngeteh di Patehan* (Drinking Tea in Patehan) detailing customs and practices in *kampung* Patehan where the library is located. The library staff built rapport with the local community through their networks of early education teachers, Aisyah and Muhammadiyah women. One of these women also happened to work at i:boekoe. Children and youth from Patehan were then persuaded to visit the library, to discuss and identify what they were interested in learning to write. They held a *kenduri* feast inside the library and from these casual dinners and conversations, relationships were built. Youth were then given workshops in basic interview and journalistic writing. The workshops yielded hundreds of oral history interview records with local residents, which further inspired the making of their internet radio, r:boekoe or radio buku.

KUNCI Cultural Studies Center, also based in Yogyakarta, began as a newsletter focusing on cultural studies. The two co-founders, Nuraini Juliastuti and Antariksa, were both activists on student press in the early 1990s (Juliastuti 2006)—a period where the New Order was at its height, and where student press, particularly in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and Bandung, intensively honed intellectual development, the skills for political and organizational training, as well as participating in campaigns and networking with those outside their own campuses (Heryanto 2003, 47). They started building their library when they managed to find a space, a garage of a small publishing house, for which they had to pay by working and cataloguing books by the publisher, acquiring some copies along the way. They developed selected collections that reflect their home environment and their interests as an independent research organization focusing on cultural studies (Heryanto 2013). With a noted interest in local community and oral history, and understanding how ephemeral community archives are, they have collaborated with the people within their networks

(including their *kos-kosan* boarding housemates), and the regulars that frequent their space—artists, academics, students, and activists—to work with nearby *kampung* Juminahan residents to build community archives. Through an old photography competition, with the best captioned submission awarded a rooster, they compiled and digitally scanned old photographs, local maps, community history, and genealogy, which were then archived inside the *kampung* community center, and exhibited every once in a while during special events and festivals such as the Independence day.

“Middle-classes” Bias?

All of the founders of these alternative libraries do not have formal education background in library and information systems, but in one way or another, they are, or used to be, journalists, university students and lecturers, artists, and/or non-governmental organization (NGO) activists. In contemporary Indonesia, these are frequently identified under the problematic and sometimes interchangeable terms of “intellectuals” and “middle classes” (Heryanto 2003).

This has commonly raised two opposing but equally problematic views. At one extreme, they are viewed as heroic *pejuang literasi* (literacy warriors) working selflessly for justice to alleviate “the literacy problem”—a simplistic view that is commonly portrayed in media. At the other, they are criticized as shallow, opportunistic urbanites parading themselves as charitable or intellectual individuals.

For better or worse, in Indonesia, middle class “intellectuals”—usually involved in academia, religious leadership, journalism, and arts—used to be accorded considerable moral authority that depended on “some meaningful detachment from activities that appear to primarily generate material and non-material rewards” (Heryanto 2003, 30). Although they are not necessarily against self-interest and worldly material rewards, at least in public appearance, they must maintain the general claim that they commit themselves to truth, justice, and ethics.

Yet, with the freedom and political change after 1998, and increasingly easy access to the internet, middle class intellectuals find that they can no longer rely on the long established persona of intellectual selflessness, or the established institutions that supported it. A number have relied on international funding, but with the amount of international funding dwindling in Indonesia, they are inclined to find ways to sustain their work and interests through other means. Tarlen from Tobucil, Bandung, adamantly refuses donors, prompted by her experience working with donor institutions and the resulting dependency beyond their control, and the growing belief that independent thinking and aspiration must come from being able to earn and work within their own communities. Tobucil runs a bookstore and various classes for a fee to provide financial support for the communities to run their activities.

This does not mean that self-interest and rational and economic calculation of cost and benefit rule everything, but intellectuals no longer—if ever—position themselves as heroic saviors of literacy. They are working to find models of management that do not solely rely on funding or sponsorship, but are based also on

support, commitment, and contributions from their own community members. Although this needs further research, it seems here we are also seeing the potential growth of alternative economic practices that neither prioritize nor exclude for-profit motivation that Castells, et al. (2012) described as expanding throughout the world: co-operatives, self-management, providing help and services for free to others in the expectation that they will do the same.

Public Sphere

At one extreme, it is often assumed that the libraries provide the ideal public sphere (Habermas 1991) where individuals have the opportunity to engage in political participation through discussion, forming opinions and building consensus. At the other, it is dismissed as an exclusive space where middle classes parade themselves as charitable and intellectual individuals. There is, however, widespread acknowledgement that the Habermasian public sphere was never simply a place of free, unmediated interaction and inclusivity. Just as often, they are places of exclusion with contesting power and resistance. The geographic location, the programs organized, the rules, the gender and ethnicity of the staff, the regulars that frequent it, create certain barriers. It is continuously redefined in terms of what it is, where it is, who may use it, and how.

Yet, everyone feels the importance of a conducive space for community interaction and sociality. Meeting face to face in these sites is still indispensable, particularly when discussions mostly proceed tactically, constantly adjusting themselves to subtle nuances. The increasingly valuable strategic space is indeed essential, not only for networking, but also for knowledge production, management and storage, both online and offline. While almost all of them use the internet, including social media, strategic or deliberate design of technological adoption processes is still rare (see Lim and Nugroho 2011). Not to mention the unequal access to telecommunication and transportation infrastructure, and representation imbalance (for example, dominance of Java). A longer-term strategy to build an inter-referencing networking platform is needed, one that opens up a space to facilitate emergence of knowledge production in different localities.

Concluding Note

The understanding of literacy in Indonesia tends to be reduced to the ability to use written language actively and passively, or the process of gaining meaning from reading and writing texts. The low rate of *minat baca* (reading interest) is often simplistically blamed as the main factor of, or even confused with, the low literacy rate [see for example, Joewono (2011); Palupi Panca Astuti (Litbang Kompas) (2009)]. This tendency to limit literacy to books tends to confine the debates within the dismal condition of book publishing in Indonesia (Sugihartati 2010a: 5-6), or the distressing condition of most (school, public, university) libraries in Indonesia due to a number of common factors: lack of budget, lack of knowledgeable librarians [Salmubi (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia) 2008].

Building smaller libraries in Indonesia—either as *Taman Bacaan Masyarakat* or as alternative libraries—tends to be over-

whelmingly viewed within the framework of “basic literacy” and in child education, to stimulate a love of reading, creativity and expression (Håklev 2008, 62). Inherent to this is the assumption and expectation of sage-like librarians who dedicate themselves selflessly to *mencerdaskan bangsa* (making the nation smart), to develop *budaya baca* (reading culture) or *gemar membaca* (reading interest) (Håklev 2008, 52). While this is an important issue to address, it also contains a deep-rooted paternalistic approach and assumptions, and fails to pay attention to, or to work on other possible roles and service responses such as community activities centers, independent learning centers, as formal learning support, local history resources, or as research centers.

Although alternative libraries have garnered interest from the wider public and the government, and guidebooks like *Taman Bacaan Masyarakat Kreatif* have advocated literacy beyond books and the integration of popular culture and lifestyle expression, they tend to be equated uncritically to certain popular forms, individuals, and social groups, and fail to suit them to surrounding needs and contexts. I have described how different alternative libraries take place in various settings, and how they use diverse methods of engagement to collect materials and chronicle local events. I have argued that the people who run them, by focusing on specific topics deeply related to them, do not position themselves as passive archivists or librarians; instead they actively participate and articulate their understanding of the local culture and the communities around them. Whether they can lead to cultural, social, or political change remains to be seen, but their existence has lowered the access to produce the power that may challenge or contribute to circulating discourses.

We need to acknowledge the plurality of the people and the libraries: the very diverse backgrounds, and how their history, networks, and practices affect the way literacies are enacted within the libraries. They have the potential to be meeting nodes in distributed networks of knowledge in Indonesia, where nuanced and diverse collections of materials are produced and circulated. Since they tend to rely on tactical process, different languages, orientations, customs and habits, disconnects and differences exist, but there is much to learn from one another. Considering the unpredictable infrastructures and resources, knowledge, responsibilities, and power need to be shared and distributed to sustain these efforts over the long run, particularly since these tactical processes are mostly gained not through overt codified instruction, but acquired or “apprenticed” from exposure to practices and networks of interaction. Spaces—both offline and online—to connect, to create links between and across these libraries, need to be planned and designed to encourage dynamic dialogues, interactions, and collaboration.

Within this diversity, the inter-referencing process to build alternative horizons and richer perspectives needs to be generated through the understanding of diverse historical experiences and rich social practices. At the same time, it also underscores the need to maintain a critical distance, to see this phenomenon as a product of history, as well as an active participant in historical processes. ✿

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1 The term "alternative"—often aligned with "underground"—starts becoming commonly used in Indonesia in the mid-1990s, in relation to a medium, an object, or a space, that consciously displays oppositions and distinct attitudes to the "mainstream" and the "majority," particularly to that of the New Order regime (Juliastuti 2007; Juliastuti 2008).

2 *Taman Bacaan*, which literally means "reading garden," was initially an umbrella term used to describe the non-state-supported subscription or circulating libraries, which usually provide a space to read or rent out popular novels and comics for a small fee. The term was adopted and spread by the New Order government in the early 1990s as *Taman Bacaan Masyarakat (TBM)*. Under the New Order, *Taman Bacaan* comes to refer to a smaller-sized library focusing to early education and literacy, usually in rural areas. To a certain extent, the term *Taman Bacaan* is associated now more with these smaller libraries that receive government support, rather than with the non-state-supported circulated or subscription libraries. For the history of *Taman Bacaan*, see Håklev (2008; 2010a; 2010b).