



# Lontar Newsletter

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## Greetings

In an increasingly globalized and high-tech environment, a command of the universal English language is non-negotiable for the success of any form of interaction or transaction. Yet few Indonesians can claim to speak and understand English well compared to other world citizens. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF-EPI) Report, Indonesia's proficiency in 2025 ranked 80th out of 123 countries surveyed. The findings are based on 2.2 million test-takers worldwide, assessing their speaking skills. In Asia, Indonesia ranks 12th out of 25 countries, behind Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and former British territories such as Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

Why are Indonesians so poor at speaking and writing in English? Is it linguistic nationalism that has deterred the development of English for everyday use? English has long been taught informally or as an additional subject in many public schools, treated as a mandatory subject only from junior high school onward. Today, thanks to private English language academies and scholarships to study overseas, more and more people are speaking English fluently and are able to take part in competitive workplaces.

The government is now belatedly introducing a policy, as part of its National Education Roadmap, that requires English to be taught as a compulsory subject starting in the third grade, beginning with the 2027 academic year. To this end, the Primary and Secondary Education Ministry is currently

## Ruminations

### Tety Takes the Ball

In days past, when swapping name cards was more common than exchanging WhatsApp numbers, Indonesians often affixed abbreviations of their academic degrees to the ends of their names. Thus, in 1992, at my first meeting with "Pudentia MPSS," a lecturer at the University of Indonesia, when we traded name cards, I was perplexed as to what her degrees might be.

This month, when Pudentia (or "Tety" as most friends call her) celebrated her 70th birthday, I recalled that first meeting and the reason for it: Tety had been invited to serve on the steering committee for "Lisan," the first national festival of Indonesian oral performance traditions, which Lontar was organizing and which was scheduled to be held at Taman Ismail Marzuki in December 1993. But before proceeding further with this story, I need to go back in time to provide additional background....

In 1987, four Indonesian authors and I established Lontar for the purpose of promoting Indonesia through literary translations from the Indonesian. Generally speaking, the term "Indonesian" is interpreted as texts written in the country's official language. However, Article 3 of Lontar's bylaws states that "Indonesian literature shall be understood to include literary works both in the Indonesian language and other forms of the Malay language as well as in other regional languages of the Indonesian archipelago." Further, Article 5 states that realization of the foundation's objectives shall include "the rendering of oral literary traditions into written form" and "the recording and preservation of oral histories."

Many readers of this column will know that Indonesia is home to more than 700 living languages, approximately 10% of the world's total, making it the second most linguistically diverse nation after Papua New Guinea. As discussed in *Illuminations: The Writing Traditions of Indonesia*, a Lontar publication, the country also has an abundance of literary traditions, including Malay, Javanese, Balinese, and Batak. Thus, with Lontar's foremost objective being the translation of literary texts, there was no shortage of written material from which to choose. But in the years after Lontar was founded, a question I often asked was, "What about all those other languages whose literary traditions are not written?" Don't

preparing various measures to ensure the new policy can be implemented nationwide, such as establishing large-scale English language training programs for teachers in all 170,000 elementary schools around the country. It will be a challenging undertaking, given that more than 90,000 schools have no teachers with an English language background. Not to be left behind, the Ministry of Religious Affairs also plans to initiate programs to enhance the competency of English teachers in madrasahs (Islamic schools) in partnership with the British Council. Indonesia currently lists 41,833 madrasah teachers throughout the country.

Needless to say, we at Lontar are thrilled at the prospect of students being able to read our works—Indonesian literature in English translation—and promote them worldwide.

Yuli Smartono ([yismartono@lontar.org](mailto:yismartono@lontar.org))

PS: May 17 was National Book Day in Indonesia. That date is past but Lontar encourages readers to celebrate by purchasing a book or visiting a library. This annual occasion highlights the importance of reading and cultural preservation, and we hope it inspires more Indonesians to engage with literature in both Indonesian and English. By supporting books and libraries, readers help strengthen the nation's intellectual and creative life.

they, too, deserve greater national and international recognition?

In the years since the birth of the Republic in 1945, Indonesians have witnessed incredible change in their education system and communications network. Even prior to independence, nationalists had embraced the concept of a single national language and expanded educational opportunities in Indonesian. Thus, the medium and the message of Indonesian education became overwhelmingly weighted in favor of a centrally defined awareness expressed in the national language, while literacy and education in the country's myriad local mother tongues were sidelined. Textbooks and curricula largely ignored traditions of knowledge that existed long before the arrival of print technology and modern education. In the process, the localized transmission of knowledge through traditional media was severely diminished.

In this archipelago, a welter of peoples, languages, and styles of expression have blended. History and experience have long been fashioned into recorded texts and oral performances, giving shape to local wisdom and passing knowledge from one generation to the next. The cultural identity of Indonesian societies—their values, social order, and relations with the natural world—are evoked by oral texts as diverse as Sundanese pantun, Javanese *kenrung*, and the oral performances of Kalimantan Dayaks. Carrying forward the knowledge embodied in such texts had become a challenge to the country's evolving culture.

Since oral performance involves unique and evanescent expression, its continuity can only be assured through living practitioners. Yet decades of rapid social change since independence often led to the uprooting of ethnic groups and their oral traditions. The ritual and social grounding of performance traditions had weakened and, as performers of epic and ritual song became fewer, local knowledge was disappearing without a trace.

This was the *raison d'être* behind *Lisan*. Steering committee members, Tety especially, saw that the future of many oral traditions was threatened. Their "unwritten" nature, the very thing that made them unique, also marked them for near-certain extinction. Committee members agreed that a concerted effort was needed to document traditions and promote their continued existence.

Through *Lisan*, Lontar and its many cooperating institutions, including the University of Indonesia where Tety taught, hoped to slow the demise of oral traditions.



Banner outside of Taman Ismail Marzuki

## IN MEMORIAM



Barbara Harvey in 2019

Barbara Sillars Harvey, a long-time supporter of the Lontar Foundation, died on April 23, 2026, at the age of 92. Born to Scottish parents in Glasgow, Scotland, she grew up in northeastern Pennsylvania before moving to Washington, DC, to attend The George Washington University in 1952.

Barbara was a career Foreign Service officer and sometime academic. She began her career with the US Information Agency while still an undergraduate and later earned an MA from Radcliffe College in 1959. She then joined the USIA officer corps, serving twice in Seoul and once in Surabaya.

In 1968, she resigned from the USIA to pursue a PhD at Cornell University. Her dissertation, later published by Cambridge University Press as *Tradition, Islam and Rebellion: South Sulawesi 1950–1965*, became an important contribution to Indonesian studies.

Barbara later taught politics at Monash University before rejoining the Department of State in 1974. Her subsequent postings included Singapore, Surabaya, and Jakarta, where she served as Deputy Chief of Mission from 1993–1997. A trailblazer for women in the Foreign Service, Barbara also loved the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, knitting, puzzles, travel, NPR, and keeping close ties with her Scottish relatives and many friends around the world.

Rest in peace, dear Barbara.



Wardiman Djojonegoro (far left), Minister of Education and Culture, opened the Lisan seminar. With him are JHM, Tety, Roger Tol, and Toenggoel Siagian.

At the first *Lisan* festival and seminar, held in December 1993, eleven oral performance traditions were featured, ranging geographically from Aceh to Papua. Judging from the thousands of spectators who attended the three-day festival and the extensive media coverage it generated, *Lisan* was a huge success. However, none of this would have been possible without funding from external donors, including a grant of close to \$80,000 from AT&T, which also promised funding for the next *Lisan* festival two years later.

This is where Tety stepped into the spotlight. At *Lisan 1*, she announced the establishment of Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan (ATL), the Oral Traditions Association, which would work with Lontar on planning *Lisan 2*. In the months ahead, things were going well. ATL established branches in different provinces that could source oral performers for *Lisan 2* and generate regional support. But then Lontar received news from AT&T that the company would not, after all, be able to provide funding for *Lisan 2*.

We at Lontar were disheartened and, with other pressing financial needs, ready to throw in the towel. And now, mixing metaphors, this is where Tety took the ball. Not only did she, almost singlehandedly, raise the funds for *Lisan 2* (held at the University of Indonesia in 1996), but in the years ahead, as director of ATL, she expanded the organization to include the 32 branches it has today. She initiated an oral literatures publications program and worked tirelessly to get Indonesian oral traditions included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register and on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, thereby helping to safeguard their future.

Now, thirty-four years since Tety and I first met, I think again of our name cards. And just as I could never have guessed that "MPSS" did not signify Tety's academic credentials but rather her baptismal name, "Maria Parenti Sri Sunarti," I could never have imagined her many achievements in the years ahead.

John H. McGlynn ([john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org))



Mona Sylviana was born in 1972 and resides in Bandung, West Java, where she graduated from the Faculty of Communications at Padjadjaran University. Both during her student years and after graduation, she was very active in the university's Arts, Literature, Theater, and Film Forum.

Mona began writing in the early 1990s, primarily short fiction, and a number of her stories have been translated and published in English, German, and French.

Mona's stories possess distinctive features, including many scenes that are unapologetically beyond the pale. Dirt, ugliness, and darkness—both physical and psychological—appear without any sugarcoating. In her stories, the world is not a safe place for women, yet her female characters do not always respond as passive objects or victims; they often wage confrontations against what is regarded as the accepted order.

She has participated in several literary festivals—the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival, the Flores Writers Festival, and Jakarta Content Week, to name a few—and was selected for a literary residency in France.

Beyond the field of writing, she is a cofounder of the Nalar Institute, a not-for-profit organization active in the field of inclusive education. She is also a researcher at the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDGov).

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### ONG

Bung,

Kali ini terambil olehku buku *Runtuhnya Hindia Belanda* karya Onghokham (1987). Ini adalah buku sejarah tentang tamatnya kekuasaan Belanda atas Hindia Belanda ketika Jepang menduduki Indonesia pada Maret 1942. Buku ini semula adalah skripsi Ong untuk mendapatkan gelar sarjana di Jurusan Sejarah Universitas Indonesia pada 1967.

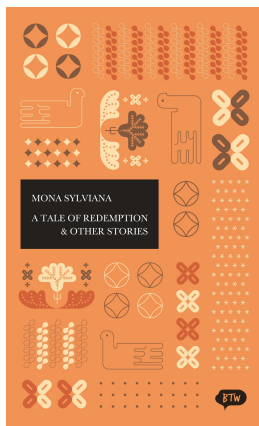
Terlepas dari pendekatan penulisannya yang diakui Ong sebagai “Nederlandocentris”, buku ini, bagiku, adalah buku sejarah yang ditulis dengan “narrative” yang sangat baik. Kepada pembaca, Ong seperti tengah bercerita secara lisan saja. Kelancaran cerita—yang dalam hal ini berbanding lurus dengan kelancaran tulisan—membuat sebuah buku sejarah tidak ubahnya buku cerita.

Bukan berarti ia telah tergelincir menjadi cerita fiktif, tetapi karena cara si sejarawan menceritakan fakta-fakta sejarah di dalamnya begitu menarik. Ia tidak terpaku melulu kepada peristiwa sejarah dan kapan terjadinya dan siapa tokoh-tokohnya yang terpenting, tetapi ia juga menceritakan bagaimana peristiwa itu bergerak, beserta tanggapan dari pihak lain yang berseberangan, serta nasib manusia di dalamnya.

Dalam buku ini Ong tidak hanya menceritakan bagaimana Belanda diduduki Jerman dan nasib jajahannya yang nun jauh di sana: Hindia Belanda, dan ancaman Jepang yang sudah di depan mata. Ong juga menceritakan bagaimana dinamikan pergerakan nasional berlangsung dan nasib para eksponen gerakan itu. Dengan begitu, sebenarnya, tidak sepenuhnya benar jika dikatakan bahwa pendekatan bukunya ini “Nederlandocentris”.

Ong menyandarkan penulisan sejarahnya itu bukan melulu pada bukti-bukti tertulis—yang umumnya membuat sebuah buku sejarah terasa menjadi kering karena hanya berisi fakta-fakta historis belaka—tetapi juga ia menggali sejarah sosial dengan kesaksian orang per orang. Ketika pada 1930-an pergerakan nasional di Hindia Belanda mengalami gencetan, misalnya, Ong memanfaatkan pengalaman pribadi H.B. Jassin, yang kelak menjadi kritikus sastra, saat menjadi siswa HBS di Medan, tentang larangan menggunakan sebutan “Indonesia” di sekolah Belanda. Atau, ia juga menggunakan roman *Buiten het Gareel* karya Suwarsih Djojopuspito—kelak diterjemahkan menjadi *Manusia Bebas*—sebagai bagian dari sejarah kaum pergerakan nasional waktu itu.

Sejarah pada akhirnya adalah bukan melulu soal peristiwa dan tokoh-tokohnya, tetapi juga bagaimana ia sampai kepada kita sebagai pengetahuan sekaligus kenikmatan. Di tangan seorang sejarawan yang mahir bercerita, maka peristiwa sejarah tidak berhenti pada sajian fakta-fakta keras, tetapi juga menyangkut pergerakan peristiwa dan perubahan manusia di dalamnya. Jika kita membaca fiksi, kita berharap menemukan



The stories in Mona Sylviana’s *A Tale of Redemption and Other Stories* present life’s tragedies as they are revealed little by little. These tragedies may stem from opposing political choices—say, a character who is a communist—or from the simple fact that a character is Chinese-Indonesian. In other words, Mona presents a series of tragedies that haunt minority communities. Those who are minorities, those who are different from the majority, are suspected of being threats and must be crushed in the name of maintaining public order.

The story of a fugitive member of the Indonesian Communist Party or of a Peranakan Chinese woman raped during the May 1998 Riots reflects social problems that Mona brings into literature. As a fiction writer, she carefully filters the social issues she chooses to explore, and her focus appears to center on oppressed minority groups. Equally important is the fact that the oppressed are also women.

Although she draws on social issues as the material for her stories, Mona does not simply transfer them directly onto the page. She possesses a strong command of prose through which she creates suspense. Or rather, she builds tension between the desire to forget past trauma and present-day realities that do nothing to help the sufferer reconcile with the past. The darker side of humanity, long concealed, suddenly emerges and intensifies the conflicts in Mona’s stories.

“drama” dalam cerita, itulah juga yang muncul dalam sejarah yang ditulis Ong.

Sebagai bandingan, kisah-kisah di seputar Proklamasi 17 Agustus 1945 di Jakarta mungkin dari sudut tertentu hanyalah berisi rapat-rapat persiapan kemerdekaan di rumah Laksamana Maeda. Tetapi apa yang disampaikan dalam memoar Mohammad Hatta, juga Moehammad Roem, tentang momen bersejarah itu juga memuat pengalaman penculikan para pemuda terhadap Soekarno-Hatta ke Rengasdengklok akibat dari kaum muda kota yang gelisah dan mendesak kaum tua untuk segera memproklamasikan kemerdekaan Indonesia.

Dengan masuknya unsur drama ke dalam peristiwa sejarah, kita berhadapan dengan kitab sejarah yang hidup. Bukan lagi oleh peristiwa-peristiwa yang kelak dihafal di dalam kelas, tetapi oleh pergulatan nasib manusia di dalamnya, yang kelak akan dihayati sebagai kekayaan pengalaman yang penting dari masa lalu. Dengan “drama” kita mendapatkan tokoh-tokoh sejarah itu sebagai manusia biasa, yang punya kecemasan dan amarah menghadapi keadaan yang tidak menentu.

Kendati demikian, peristiwa sejarah yang mengandung drama, tidak akan tergelincir menjadi karya fiksi—sejauh sumber-sumber sejarah yang digunakan tidak “salah ingat” atau “merekayasa peristiwa”. Ong berhasil mengisahkan peristiwa sejarah yang seperti itu. Ia bukan hanya mahir bercerita, tetapi juga menyelipkan beberapa “sejarah kecil” dalam “sejarah besar” yang tengah berlangsung.

Kukira, Bung, sudah waktunya kau menghimpun pengalaman-pengalaman kecilmu tentang Indonesia yang pernah kau alami. Masa 1960-an dan ketika kau terbuang di negeri asing pastilah menarik. Di YouTube sudah banyak kulihat kau bicara kepada anak-anak yang, maaf-maaf, sebenarnya tidak mengerti benar konteks sejarah yang kau alami. Tidak apa. Itu kan untuk orang awam.

Untuk yang lebih khusus, tulislah pelan-pelan pengalaman pribadimu itu. Kepingin pula aku membacanya nanti. Salam. **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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