

## Factors that Contributed to the Community Library Movement in Indonesia

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### Abstract

Independent community libraries have sprouted in Indonesian cities and villages since around 2001, with the Ministry of Education estimating that there are now at least 5,400 of them in operation. These libraries, called reading gardens (*Taman Bacaan*), offer books, magazines and, often, activities to promote reading and literacy. This paper discusses how such a large number of independent community libraries came into being, without much financial or organizational support from outside agencies. The methodology includes a survey of the historical literature on the development of libraries in Indonesia, archival searches of the most important newspapers to see articles they have written about community libraries since 2001, contacting a large number of academics and people involved with community libraries directly through e-mail, and also consulting blogs, mailing lists, and websites related to the Indonesian community libraries. The paper shows how the precursor for the modern reading gardens can be found in the early renting libraries set up by Chinese immigrants and the *Balai Pustaka* libraries set up by the Dutch colonial government, and traces the influence of these during the twentieth century, as the independent Indonesian government experiments with setting up village libraries. It then shows how a number of factors came together around 2001, shortly after the introduction of democracy in Indonesia, with the creative culture in Bandung, inspiring examples

of “library heroes,” and the influence of networks, Islam and patriotism, to create a truly independent, grass-roots community library movement.

### Introduction

During the National Book Day exhibition in May 2007, many different exhibitors were crowded into the Ministry of Education building in Jakarta. There was everything from secondhand bookstores and religious publishers to the Harry Potter Society of Indonesia, but there was also a large array of so-called “reading gardens” (*Taman Bacaan* in Indonesian). These are very simple independent community libraries that have sprouted in Indonesian cities and villages since around 2001. The Ministry of Education estimates that there are at least 5,400 of them in operation, and they offer books, magazines and, often, activities to promote reading and literacy (Bella 2007). Although there are many examples of independent community libraries in developing countries, see for example the reading tents and donkey libraries in Zimbabwe (Nilsson 2002; Mpofu & Carlsson 1995), the rural libraries in Uganda (Dent 2006; Stranger-Johannessen 2009) or indigenous libraries in Latin America (Civallero 2007), the Indonesian case is believed to be unique. Firstly, the sheer number of community libraries is many times what can be found in other countries (the number 5,400 stated above is probably a conservative estimate), and secondly, many of these receive no external funding, and have not been set up by international NGOs, but by local people on their own initiative.

There has been little written about the Indonesian case. Kamil (2004) and Priyanto (2006) introduced the phenomenon, and Septiana (2007) has provided a detailed case study of a few community libraries, but none of these has addressed how and why such a large-scale movement appeared in Indonesia at the time that it did. To research this question, the author surveyed the historical literature on the development of libraries in Indonesia, did archival searches of the most important newspapers to see articles they have

written about community libraries since 2001, contacted a large number of academics and people involved with community libraries directly through e-mail, and also consulted blogs, mailing lists, and websites related to the Indonesian community libraries.

This paper will show how the precursor for the modern reading gardens can be found in the early renting libraries set up by Chinese immigrants, and the *Balai Pustaka* libraries set up by the Dutch colonial government, and will trace the influence of these during the twentieth century, as the independent Indonesian government experiments with setting up village libraries. It will then show how a number of factors came together around 2001, shortly after the introduction of democracy in Indonesia, with the creative culture in Bandung, inspiring examples of “library heroes”, and the influence of networks, Islam and patriotism, to create a truly independent, grass-roots community library movement.

### Leading up to 2001

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Dutch government proclaimed an “ethical policy,” and began setting up public elementary schools in Indonesia (Tjoen 1966; Akira 1972). At this time, they also set up a Commission for Popular Literature, later to be renamed *Balai Pustaka*. This organization published and distributed books in local languages, and until 1923, had set up 2.700 public libraries, which consisted of a 3 x 3 metre cupboard which would be located for example in a classroom. Before this, the existing libraries had very rarely been open to non-Europeans, and had only provided material in Dutch (McGlynn 1998, 87).

*Balai Pustaka* also supported reading gardens that rented out books, and even introduced ambulant bookstalls – four motorvans, the sides of which could be turned into showcases, manned with “salesmen whose voluble tongues warranted them an attentive audience at every village market” (Drewes 1961, 433). These salesmen, who spoke local languages, would sometimes spend weeks on the road, and sometimes even knock on people’s doors and sing about the books they had in Javanese (Teeuw 1979, 123). However, the government’s role as book publisher and distributor was not uncontested. Already at the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese

immigrants to Java had set up a series of renting libraries, some of which were called reading gardens. These were also connected with a large-scale private translation, authoring and publishing industry (Salmon 1985, 15). According to McGlynn (1988, 87):

A truly indigenous library system had inconspicuously developed outside the *Volkslectuur* [*Balai Pustaka*]. Wandering booktraders or booklenders were spreading numerous non-*Balai Pustaka* publications, and tradesmen had successfully installed book-lending sections in the back of their shops where they lent out stories of romance and crime as well as political literature.

After World War II, Indonesia gained its independence, and the first President of independent Indonesia, Sukarno, began a program of constructing the new nation. There was a strong connection felt between literacy, anti-colonialism and nationalism, and anti-literacy campaigns were crucial (Hadi 1955). Hadi (1955) reported that by 1948, 16,000 people’s libraries had been opened under the assumption that “people can organize library service for themselves, if only the problem of library supply is solved at the national level”. Local committees were formed in villages, and hundreds of volunteer librarians served, with local committees providing adequate housing and volunteer labor. However, Tjoen (1966) explains that because of a shortage of funds, and the political situation in Sukarno’s government, these village libraries did not develop further, and many of them were closed down again (see also Anuar 1983).

In the early 1980s, a precursor of the reading garden model appeared, which was surprisingly similar to the model we know today. Inspired by idealism, and the insight that books and reading did not have to be “boring” or “stiff” like in formal libraries, non-commercial reading gardens began to appear, which provided toys and colored pencils in addition to books. However, it was hard to run on idealism alone, and most of them did not last long (*Menguji Idealisme* 2002; see also Septiana 2007, 4–5).

During this whole time, the renting libraries that began with the Chinese immigrants continued to exist. Natsume (2001) has interviewed several informants in Indonesia, and describes the distribution of Indonesian comic books, which strongly increased in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, and were distributed through a network connecting publish-

ers of rental books, wholesalers/bookstores in large towns, and reading gardens. They were commercial enterprises, and sometimes earned a bad reputation from also renting out pornography (*Menguji Idealisme* 2002). An informant from Jakarta confirms that the renting libraries were booming in the 1970s and 1980s, because the purchasing power of readers was very low (one book could cost as much as a pair of jeans) and because there was little alternative recreation (Informant R).

Beginning in 1992, there was a second wave of reading gardens, supported by the Department of Popular Education, which wanted to provide reading material for new literates to help them keep and improve their literacy, and avoid relapse (Department for Community Education 2007). With the government's support, the number of community reading gardens grew to a reported maximum of about 7,000, although this number seems suspiciously high (Bella 2007; *5.500 Taman Bacaan Masyarakat Terbengkalai* 2006). The government especially focused on starting community reading gardens in villages, where illiteracy was the most acute (Widjanarko 2001).

After the economic crisis in 1996 (*Krisis Moniter* or *krismon* in Indonesian), many government programs were scaled back, and the future of community reading gardens became very uncertain, with no more word from the government about their community reading garden strategy (*Menguji Idealisme* 2002). The result of all these upheavals was that from 1999, they were completely on their own, and eventually the system collapsed. Informant Y also notes that the government's community reading garden plan was designed as a short term project, and never designed to be a long-term sustainable program. The collections were mainly books about government doctrine and political propaganda, which made the community reading gardens uninteresting to the local community, and unlikely to receive support from them.

### The rise of independent reading gardens

The end of the 1990s was a time of large-scale change in Indonesia. After big protests, Suharto's regime fell, and with it the New Order regime that had lasted for more than 30 years. Several informants mention the excitement, and people's pent-up

desire to express themselves and change things, as an important factor in the growth of reading gardens soon afterwards. All kinds of organizations had been repressed and had their activities limited during the regime, including youth organizations, social organizations and even religious organizations. In addition to their newfound freedom, they were met by a society still slowly recovering from the devastating *krismon* in 1996, which had caused many children to drop out of school for failure to pay the school fees, with some even becoming street children. There was thus a strong drive from many different kinds of communities to come together and provide social services (Informant R). It is also not strange that one important focus of these social services would be to provide education and access to information, since one of the prime features of the *Orde Baru* regime was exactly to control all information and limit people's freedom to express themselves (Informant Y).

The fall of Suharto paved the way for a much more dynamic civil society in Indonesia, and it was a necessary, but certainly not a sufficient cause for the large growth ("*penjamuran*" – mushrooming) of independent reading gardens, which sprang up very rapidly, not just in big cities, but also in small villages beginning in 2001 (*Menguji Idealisme* 2002). The paper will show how the movement probably began its growth in Bandung, in a creative mix of punk do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, students and artists, and also describe how the phenomenon came about in Yogyakarta, another creative young Javanese city.

Informant R explained the phenomenal growth with the fact that many of these organizations are run by youth, who are prone to follow trends. If there are some highly publicized examples of a phenomenon, and it is 'heroicized,' then the youth are likely to want to copy that phenomenon (Informant R). As we shall see below, there were indeed powerful "examples" that were spread through mass media and other channels. This included, for example, the eighty-year-old man bicycling through the streets of Yogyakarta to deliver magazines and books, the handicapped author and adventurer who spent his royalty on building a reading garden in his backyard, and also the influence of both Islam and nationalism as powerful ideas. Networks and best cases contributed to the growth and increase in quality among reading gardens, with new reading gardens learning from old ones, and the sharing of information, experience and resources was also evident.

## Bandung, punk culture and the literary movement

There is evidence suggesting that the resurgence of the reading gardens originated in Bandung, an educational hub a few hours east of Jakarta on Java. Iskandar (2003) provides an interesting account of the unique features of the city that made it a fertile environment for a new breed of independent literacy movements. A much smaller city than for example Jakarta, it had become known for its many subcultures, ranging from owners of antique motorcycles and BMX bicycle groups, to a strong music community, that included hip-hop, electronic, break dance and hard core groups and fans, as well as a very strong punk community.

Soemardi and Radjawali (2004, 4) describe the relationship of Bandung to other big cities in Java in this way:

Compared to other cities in Indonesia, Bandung's cultural economy differs in the sense that it is closely related to human creativity. Whereas Yogyakarta is best known as the center of 'traditional' culture, Bali for 'religious' based culture and Jakarta for 'commercial' related culture, Bandung can be described as a city of 'creative culture'.

Through a combination of the historical openness of the city, the strong student presence, and the independent artist communities, an ethic of "individual awareness, openness, freedom of expression and tolerance among communities" began to emerge (Iskandar 2003, Section: City Biography). A dynamic urban culture led to a counter-culture model that popularized the do-it-yourself (DIY) message from punk, putting a lot of importance on individual initiative (Iskandar 2003).

Sinker (2001, 11) explains the DIY ethics in the US, and it was similar messages, spread through fanzines downloaded from the newly-sprung up Internet cafes, which inspired the punk community in Bandung:

The motivation behind punk is almost offhandedly referred to as "DIY" nowadays. That stands for "Do It Yourself". It's taken as a given in punk rock, but it's the foundation that the entire culture is built upon. Punk writers aren't sitting at home hoping that their piece gets published, they're pub-

lishing it themselves; fans aren't waiting around for someone to put out a record by their favorite band, they're releasing it themselves; we're not waiting for a club to open up that will book show that cater to the under-21 set, we're opening them ourselves. Punk has never waited for the OK from anyone to step out on its own. DIY is the answer to "Why?".

Small stores sprung up that would sell subculture cassettes, t-shirts and other merchandise, and trade underground records. Gradually these shops began selling clothing from the over hundred local labels that came into existence (Iskandar 2003; for examples see Bandung Creative Showcase 2007). These increased rapidly in numbers in 1996 when *krismon* sent the prices of imported clothes through the roof, and since the mid-1990s there has been a flourishing community of producers and consumers centered around small stores called *distros*, which sell things that do not exist in mainstream shops. In addition to producing music tapes and t-shirts, members of the community were also active in producing and distributing fanzines, both national and international. Pickles (2000) describes how the movement of publishing fanzines through alternative distribution systems spread over cities all over Indonesia, promoting ideas such as independent thinking and self-education.

## The literary communities in Bandung

In 2001, the potent mix of irreverent punks with their zine-culture and DIY approach, political activists, students, writers and artists created what became known as the "*komunitas literer*" (literary community) in Bandung. The focus was on enabling everyone to learn and develop themselves without any limitations. The literacy that they promoted went well beyond the mere interpretation of letters and words that the New Order regime had promoted, to also include understanding of what one read, as well as what was going on in society.

One of the first "new reading garden" founded was *tobucil*, short for *toko buku kecil* (small bookstore), owned by Tarlen Handayani and Rani E. Ambyo, a book store that used its income to fund a free reading garden. More than just giving access to books, they wanted a meeting place for activities, and en-

gaging with the community (Wulandari 2003). As Handayani, who used to ride around the block on a bicycle and rent books to her friends while in secondary school, explained:

It's not just about reading literature but also reading about the phenomena that occur around us. Many people read but they don't put it into practice or relate it to real life, [...] What one has read must be shared with and be beneficial for others. (Wulandari 2003)

The store launched a variety of activities to support reading, such as a Sunday afternoon reading club, story telling for children, a writing class and a film club. During storytelling, the *tobucil* volunteers try to enliven books for children with music and instruments, and sometimes bring animals or even a band to accompany the session (Wulandari 2003). They have now opened independent branches in Bali and Balikpapan as well (Febriane 2004).

According to Tarlen Handayani (2007), national and local media talked excitedly about the independent book stores in Bandung as a literacy movement in 2003–2005, and made it an inspiration for a new approach to literacy in many cities in Indonesia (see also Le Sourd 2005). *The Literary Community Map*, which she helped create, lists 40 communities and alternative bookstores in the city. The dissemination of these examples has been helped by the fact that in 2003–2005 the phenomenon of *distros* and independent music in Bandung gathered national attention, with MTV Indonesia playing music from local Bandung groups, and the hosts even wearing clothes from Bandung labels. This caused Bandung to be seen as hip, and a trend-setter, with thousands of cars from Jakarta clogging the thoroughfares every weekend (Iskandar 2003). Perhaps the example of *tobucil* and other reading gardens have also been seen as something “hip and cool”, which has inspired young people in other cities to start similar projects.

### The process in Yogyakarta

In Yogyakarta, after Suharto, NGOs appeared to champion human rights, democracy, culture and arts. They promoted the idea of access to libraries and information as an essential government service. This made the community more and more convinced

about the importance of reading, access to information and availability of information for the community (Informant Y). Priyanto (2006) notes that alternative libraries began opening in 2003, after young people had met and discussed the importance of literacy and reading habits.

In 2005, the organization *Yayasan Seni Cemeti* (Cemeti Art Foundation) took the initiative to organize a forum between alternative libraries in Yogyakarta. They found that almost half of all university graduates in library sciences worked for non-profits, many for reading garden or community libraries, and they could not join the Union of Indonesian Librarians (IPI – Ikatan Pustakawan Indonesia), which is reserved for government employees (Merdikaningtyas 2007a). Standing outside of IPI, they felt isolated, and did not have access to the events and trainings that they needed for professional development. In the forum, librarians in NGOs, community libraries, reading gardens for children, and even coffee shops that promoted books participated with great enthusiasm. Some of the topics discussed were identifying needs and management systems for libraries, managing money and funding, developing library programs and increasing reading interest among the population (Merdikaningtyas 2007a).

There was especial interest in the management of libraries, since they felt that existing training material was not appropriate for the unique circumstances of alternative libraries. They solved this by having “best case” libraries present their systems. How to find money was a common preoccupation, since most of the libraries did not have a stable source of income. Some had tried to solve it by working together with other organizations, start businesses on the side, or “sell” their concept to a donor (Merdikaningtyas 2007a). To document the alternative libraries, *Yayasan Seni Cemeti* also produced the *Directory of Alternative Libraries in Yogyakarta* in 2004 (Merdikaningtyas 2007b).

### Inspiring people: Dauzan Farook/Mabulir

There appear to have been a number of enabling factors supporting the emergence of independent *Taman Bacans* in Bandung and Yogyakarta described above. Amongst these were two famous and much chronicled champions of reading and community libraries, beginning with Dauzan Farook and his *Mag-*

*azines and Books that Circulate (Mabulir)*, which was mentioned by several of my informants. Farook's father was the head librarian for Muhammadiyah, a large Islamic social and welfare organization, and Farook fought the Dutch in the war of independence after the Japanese were defeated in 1945. He then worked in the batik industry, and went on to sell gold, and distribute books. When Farook retired in 1993, he decided to dedicate all his savings, and his monthly pension of 500,000 rupiah, to spread the love of reading (*Dauzan, mengabdikan total untuk Islam* 2005). He began by collecting magazines and books, putting small religious messages in the magazines and cutting out pictures that were "uneducational." He then walked around in Yogyakarta offering them to people he met, from school children to businessmen (Ardiansyah 1997).

To manage the operations more efficiently he set up "reading groups" of 4–20 members where someone would take responsibility for everyone in the reading group returning the publications on time (Arif 2004; Sugarman 2005). By 1997, he already had 150 reading groups established, and by 2005 he had set up "subsidiaries" in Jakarta, Solo, Purworejo dan Magelang, mostly run by previous subscribers (Ardiansyah 1997; Dauzan, mengabdikan total untuk Islam 2005). By the time he passed away in 2007, he was 83 years old and had amassed more than 10,000 books and 4,000 magazines in his apartment consisting of a 3x6 meter living room, and 3x4 meter bedroom. He was spending 1,5 million rupiah each month (mostly taken from his savings) on running the library, including the wages for three employees (Sugarman 2005; Santoso 2007).

Dauzan received numerous awards, including *Nugra Jasadarma Pustakaloka* [1] from the National Library in 2005, Paramadina Award in 2005 and the Lifetime Achievement Award from Sabre Foundation in Massachusetts, USA, but as Budhi Santoso, a library blogger from Yogyakarta puts it: "Grandfather Dauzan who became an inspiration to the national literary world still lived in simplicity" (Santoso 2007).

### Rumah Dunia/Gola Gong

The other person is Gola Gong, the pen name of Heri Hendrayana Haris, an author and journalist who grew up in Banten. He was handicapped at an early

age, losing one of his arms in an accident, but did not let that stop him. He spent time during his youth traveling all of Indonesia, financing his travels by playing badminton at each location. He believes the fact that his *ari-ari* (placenta) was not buried under a coconut tree, as is the Javanese custom, but thrown in the river, is the reason for his Wanderlust (Gong 2006).

In his autobiography *Menggenggam Dunia* (Grasping the world), Heri states that one of his important motivations was that he himself had partly overcome his physical handicap through the knowledge and wider perspectives that he had gained through reading – learning, for example, about all the handicapped people around the world, who had succeeded and become role models. He hopes that his books will be read by parents and inspire them to start home libraries and in turn inspire their own children (Gong 2006).

With his background in journalism, he wanted to counter a lack of support for investigative journalism, and he and his friends traveled around in schools, starting school newspapers and wallpapers, and giving trainings. They also started a newspaper called *Banten Pos*, but they were shut down by the *Orde Baru* government for publishing without a license (Gong 2006). A book partly based on his travels in Indonesia, *Roy's Ballade*, was published in two volumes and sold over 100,000 copies. He used all the money he got from his five novels to buy a 1,000m<sup>2</sup> large field behind his house, where he built the *Rumah Dunia* (The World House) as a place for children and students to study literature, art, journalism and theatre (Gong 2006).

*Rumah Dunia's* motto is *My home is the House of the World, I build it with Words*, and it features a packed program seven days a week (Gong 2006). It begins with storytelling on Mondays. Outdoor drawing classes (called tours to appeal to children) on Tuesdays is one of the most popular activities, attracting about 50–60 children each time. Wednesdays and Thursdays are for composing stories or poems about parents, home, school or other things that interest the children (*Children's library abuzz with activity* 2006).

Currently, over 400 children come almost every day after school to participate in these activities from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. These children also include a number of street children (Hadi 2004). On Fridays, the children and visitors explore the theatre on the 7x5 meter

stage, and on Saturdays they are invited to express themselves through words or dance. On Sunday, students are the focus of writing workshops that teach journalistic writing, fiction writing and writing for television – and this is an activity that has produced several published authors (Minat Baca Kurang? 2003; *Children's library abuzz with activity* 2006). The Rumah Dunia mailing list is also an important network for budding writers, publishers and journalists. Many beginning authors now post drafts of their manuscripts on the mailing list, and several books have been published as a result of this (Gong 2006).

### Networks: 1001 Buku

In addition to the inspiring examples of individuals, networks have played an important role in connecting people and enabling them to share both material contributions, and experiences. The most important such network is *1001 Buku* (1001 Books), a network that collects children's books and distributes them to reading garden. Their profile explains their purpose thus:

People say, people's interest in reading in Indonesia is very low. Is that true? Maybe not. Maybe the answer to the question is the difficulty to access books and magazines that are expensive. Well, to give access to books for the wide community, and especially for the children, this is the reason for 1001 Buku's existence. (1001 Buku 2003a).

1001 Buku is to a large extent based on, and enabled by, Internet technology. It all began when a Harvard graduate of the Development Sociology program, Upik Djalins (with co-founders Ida Sitompul and Santi Soekanto), started a mailing list on Yahoo Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/1001buku/>). Most of the coordination and recruitment of new members are still done through Internet mailing lists, blogs and websites (Haryanto 2002; Zidni 2007). Part of the reason for their rapid growth can also be attributed to good coverage in mass media. From the founding until February 2004, featured stories about the organization appeared in various Indonesian newspapers and magazines a total of 61 times, including most national and several regional news-

papers, MTV, TransTV, a magazine for children and women, and a Muslim magazine (1001Buku 2004).

The members have also been able to gain the support of donors and companies, including the World Bank, the British Council, the Coca Cola Foundation, *Dewan Kesenian Jakarta* (The Cultural Council of Jakarta), McDonalds, Gedung28, *Aliansi Jurnalis Indonesia* (Alliance of Journalists in Indonesia), Forum Lingkar Pena (an association that promotes creative writing) and RPX (a logistics company that offered the organization 500 kg of free book freight within Indonesia each month) (1001Buku 2004).

1001 Buku runs four main kinds of activities: picking up book donations at people's homes, collecting books in residential areas, collecting books in public places, like shopping malls, and placing "book-drop" boxes in strategic locations, like super markets, which makes it easy to contribute (1001 Buku 2003a). The volunteers then meet the last Sunday of the month to register the books, and choose the ones suitable for children (other books are traded or sold to get more children's books). The books are then distributed to the reading gardens that are in the 1001 Books Network, some of them donated, and some of them lent out for a certain period, after which they are circulated to other libraries (Informant P).

The organization distributes books, but also acts as an important network tying together independent reading gardens and providing a forum for exchanging information and experience. On the mailing list, not only volunteers, but many managers of reading gardens are active, and sometimes people who want to donate books are connected directly to needy reading gardens, without going through 1001 Buku formally. It is probable that they have not just contributed to improving the management of existing reading gardens, but also to lowering the perceived bar to participation for people who are considering starting their own reading garden. To further this goal, they have also published a manual "*How to start and manage a reading garden for children*" (1001 Buku 2003b), which is distributed through their website.

In 2006, 1001 Buku also began arranging a yearly reading garden Olympics, where children and reading garden managers from the 1001 Buku network in the greater Jakarta area meet and spend a day together. The day is filled with creative activities and competitions centered around skills the children have

developed as part of the reading garden programs, and are designed to foster competitiveness, team work and a good sports spirit (Zidni 2007). Some of the activities for the children include:

Marathon creativity competition, creative wall newspaper competition, group imagination competition, imaginative pictures and coloring competition, cheap children's book fair, exhibition of profile of 1001 Books and exemplary reading gardens, story telling, and workshop on the 1001 Books booklet about how to start and manage an independent reading garden. (Zidni 2007)

The Olympics events perform several functions. First, they create excitement around reading gardens for both the children and the managers. Secondly, they function as publicity for 1001 Buku. Thirdly, they are also explicitly designed to be places for reading garden managers to meet and network: "Through this activity, we hope that the managers and a part of the reading garden community can get together, get to know each other, and share their experiences in using or managing reading gardens" (Olimpiade reading garden 2006). This aspect is also clear from the workshop on how to start community gardens, and the exhibition of "exemplary" reading gardens.

### Other networks, and best cases

Starting and running an independent reading garden is a difficult task, and the people who do it are inspired by their love of reading and their desire to give children and adults the opportunity to learn. They usually do not have special training in librarianship, financial management, or management of an organization. Many reading gardens do not last long, but for the ones that do, it is very important to have networks to exchange information and experience, connect with like-minded people, and share resources. One of the unique features of the independent reading gardens in Indonesia seems to be the large variety of types, yet they still work together and help each other. Informant A told how his library now had enough books, and sent books they collected on to new reading gardens just starting up. He also traveled to other reading gardens to share his experience, and frequently hosted visitors at his own, locally well-known reading garden.

Both in Bandung and Yogyakarta, directories of reading gardens have been compiled and distributed (Merdikaningtyas 2007b; Wulandari 2003). Also, fora have been held for managers of reading gardens to meet and discuss their challenges, and the forums mentioned in Yogyakarta are good examples (Merdikaningtyas 2007a). Large-scale events function both to promote the idea of reading and reading gardens, and also provide an opportunity for managers to meet and exchange information. One example is the reading garden Olympics (mentioned above) held by 1001 Buku; another is the World Book Day arranged by the Department of Education, held annually as a collaboration effort between authors, publishers, distributors, book-related organizations and reading communities. In 2006, the World Book Day was supported by over 100 organizations, and included activities such as a cheap book fair, reading garden fair, seminars and workshops around literacy, films about literacy, writing competitions and more (Assidiq 2006).

There are also many smaller events, such as the Indonesia Literacy Festival, which in 2007 had workshops on topics ranging from repairing broken books, how start a student newspaper, how to run a community library, how to integrate community libraries with literacy programs, how to publish your own books, books for women, books for minorities, to visits to local reading gardens (Subhan 2007). It is instructive to see how these festivals market themselves to a broad audience, here an example from a literacy festival at a university:

For those who admit that they are bookaholics and shopaholics / for comics lovers / for information workers / for those who love Harry Potter / for those who are crazy about Lord of the Rings / for those who are nostalgic about Karl May's work / for those who love story telling / for those who love literature, theatre and film / for everyone who believes that books are part of a lifestyle / especially for everyone who are interested in the amazing thing called / books.... (Fajry 2007)

In addition to physical get-togethers, the Internet has played an important role in the movement. As mentioned earlier, 1001 Buku is mostly a "virtual" organization, organized around a very active mailing list, where volunteers coordinate, exchange information, and find people to cooperate with. There is a



number of other very active mailing lists, both directly related to reading gardens, and others more generally related to books and reading, which also feature discussions of reading gardens. In addition, many of the people active in the movement maintain individual blogs, where they also post clips from articles published about reading gardens.

### The influence of Islam

Indonesia is a unique in that it is the country with the largest population of Muslims in the world, and yet not an Islamic country. It has six official religions, however about 85% of the population is Muslim, and it is arguable that this has been an important underlying influence. Islam and Christianity are both “religions of the book,” and both put a large emphasis on the ability to read. Indeed, during the colonial times, before the Dutch government ever put much emphasis on literacy, a large amount of the population would have learnt to read both Arabic and a local language (probably often written with in the Arabic script) through religious instruction, to enable them to read both the Koran and other religious texts. According to Professor of Islamic History Azyumardia Azra, there is a history of Islamic book collections in Indonesia, starting from the personal collections of Islamic scholars, to libraries in mosques and religious schools. These collections included both religious texts and general educational material, which were mostly available to anyone who wanted to read (Azra, personal e-mail, 21 February 2008).

Not only the history of Muslim religious instruction, but also the contents of the religious text itself, has had an impact. The very first Surah revealed to the prophet Muhammed began with the word “Iqra!” which both means read and proclaim, and which has widely been understood as a call to knowledge in the Muslim world, with a large number of learning institutions, publishing houses and universities adapting this name. Tarlen Handayani, one of the pioneers of the literary movement in Bandung, made reference to Iqra in a newspaper interview:

After we moved, the motto of Tobucil became “Literacy in Your Everyday Life”, because we believe that change begins with small things. I understand it as Iqra, not just reading texts, but also

reading and understanding what happens around us. (Wulandari 2003)

As we saw above, Dauzan Farook from Mabulir was clearly inspired by Islam in his sacrifices to spread literacy and reading. Gola Gong from Rumah Dunia also makes extensive references to Islam and its commandments when explaining his inspirations in his autobiography (Gong 2006). The author’s informants did not bring this aspect up by themselves, but when it was suggested there might be a link to Islam, several agreed:

[The researcher]’s idea is correct, maybe without being aware of it the factor of Islam which teaches about literacy and reading without being aware of it became the basic/original idea of thought. (Informant R).

It’s possible, because in my own religion Islam teaches ... to read ... There is an Ayat which compels us to read ... (Informant M).

Dr. Azra (personal e-mail, 21 February 2008) concurs: “To a certain extent the doctrine of Islam – especially the first Ayat of the Qur’an, which is ‘Iqra’, read! – has influenced literacy endeavours. Because of this, the order to read, and to demand knowledge became a religious obligation.”

With economic growth in Indonesia from the 1980s, there has been a growth in literacy and library movements among the Islamic community in Indonesia. Libraries were built in mosques and religious schools, and a number of different groups promoted the construction of reading gardens. The artist Yessy Gusman is well known for her work in spreading reading gardens for children, having started over 40 in different cities, and she has worked together with the *Badan Amil Zakat Nasional* which collects tithes that Muslims are obliged to pay (Baznas Gagasan Taman Bacaan Az Zahra 2004). There are also religious programs to collect books directly, known as *wakaf buku*.

### Nationalism and reading

The concept of a lack of reading interest in Indonesia, and an opinion that Indonesian education is very poor compared to other Asian countries, is common

in news reporting and personal blogs. Two surveys that are quoted in many newspaper articles (for example Baderi 2005) are the International Association for Evaluation of Education in 1992, which found that of the 30 countries in which they measured reading skills of elementary school students, Indonesia was the 29th. The other is the World Bank report “*Education in Indonesia from Crisis to Recovery*” from 1998, which shows that reading skills for elementary school students in Indonesia was the lowest among the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. There are also very frequent references to the perceived low reading interest, and that reading is necessary to advancement, for example reading for making the nation smart (*mencerdaskan bangsa*), and to get away from stupidity and backwardness.

There are two interesting references to the founders of the nation, one by Dauzan Farook: “Books are a richness that can brighten people up. The founders of our nation were people who were very strong in reading, so that their enthusiasm and insight in the nation was very strong” (Arif 2004). Another example is this:

Books are an inseparable part of life, for thinkers, books are like their second wife. This was also done by the founders of the country Indonesia, Muhammad Hatta and Tan Malaka, anywhere they went they always brought crates of books with them. For them, life felt dead if there were no books nearby. (Mardana 2004)

Informant F connects criticism towards the current administration of the country, with a love for the nation: “I myself see this phenomenon as at the same time ‘resistance’ and our ‘feeling of love’ towards Indonesia which is overcome by many problems, starting from corruption and other things that are very scary.” In this way, supporting literacy and libraries can be seen as a patriotic act.

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to show how a number of factors have contributed to the uniqueness of the current Indonesian community library movement. It would be natural to think that the community libraries had grown out of the Indonesian public libraries, but this

turns out not to be true. During the colonial period, Indonesians were not allowed to enter libraries, and even after liberation, many Indonesians believed that you needed to have a high school degree to be allowed to use the library. The renting libraries however, were always close to where people live, very accessible, and demand-oriented. They, together with the various government attempts at setting up large-scale rural libraries, provided the seed, but a large number of factors needed to coalesce at a certain point in history to turn this seed into a national movement of free lending-libraries, run by the community, located in the community, and accessible to all.

The specific geographies of Bandung and Jogjakarta offered fertile grounds for this movement; with inspiration by heroic activists like Dauzan Farook and Gola Gong, from Islam and patriotism, and support offered through a variety of networks. As stated in the introduction, much more research would be needed in order to ascertain the exact interactions between these different factors, and it would be very valuable to capture the history of this movement before the people who were involved at the beginning leave. To what extent could the Indonesian case be transferred to other countries? The situation was indeed extremely specific to Indonesia, but that does not mean that literacy and community library movements in other countries cannot learn from, and be inspired by, these examples.

## Note

1. The *Nugra Jasadarma Pustakaloka* is a national award given by the National Library of Indonesia to leaders and communities that contribute to the development of library and reading.

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