

Chapter 10

Satukangeun Lalangsé: Sundanese Sexuality From Behind the Curtain



C. W. Watson

Abstract The weekly popular tabloid newspaper *Galura* is published in Sundanese in Bandung and has a circulation of 9,000. It is part of the *Pikiran Rakyat*, the daily Bandung Indonesian language newspaper group. It contains news items and features about West Javanese society past and present and is clearly designed to stimulate a sense of local pride in Sundanese achievements and Sundanese cultural artefacts and performances. One regular feature of the newspaper since 2008 is a page entitled *Satukangeun Lalangsé* (Behind the Curtain). This page relates what are said to be true stories about the trials and tribulations of married couples and families, always described from a first-person perspective. The aim of this contribution is twofold. First, it aims at shedding light on how the stories endorse the opinion that Sundanese women are often deceived in their hopes of what marriage will bring and that their hopes are frustrated by the hand of fate, the arbitrariness of their husband's behaviour, or the ingratitude of their children. Second, it adds to our understanding of how the description of polygamy, adultery, and unexpected family misfortunes correspond to what people would understand to be plausible and possible within the institutions of the family and marriage.

Keywords Divorce · Marriage · Polygamy · Sexuality · Sundanese women

10.1 The *Satukangeun Lalangsé* Rubric and the Role of Aam Amilia

One regular feature of the newspaper since 2008 is a page entitled *Satukangeun Lalangsé* (Behind the Curtain or Indonesian *Di Balik Tirai*). This page relates what are said to be true stories about the trials and tribulations of married couples and families, always described from a first-person perspective. The stories employ pseudonyms for the individuals described and for the town where the story is located, Kota S.

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or Kota B., for example, which can be taken to represent Sukabumi and Bandung. Apparently, *Satukangeun Lalangsé* grew out of a similar feature in the Sunday edition of *Pikiran Rakyat*, in foot which a column entitled *Sekelumit Romantika Kehidupan* (A Bit of Life's Romance) is included.¹

This column is written by Aam Amilia, a very well-known and prolific Sundanese writer who has written numerous novels and short stories over the last forty years² and was, until recently, a full-time journalist with a strong following among women readers in West Java who often seek her advice. Every week *Sekelumit Romantika* tells the story, this time in the third person of individuals who have suffered a setback. In addition to the main story, there are one or two other brief descriptions of people who have fallen in hard times. The column appeals to interested readers touched by these accounts to make a small contribution to the individual's welfare.

In her introduction to an anthology collecting some of these stories (Amilia 1998), Aam Amilia outlines the genesis of the column in 1984 when a decision was made to bring out a Sunday edition of *Pikiran Rakyat*:

It was hoped that this column would be able to meet the needs of ordinary readers in relation to problems they faced so that their worries could be given expression. I suggested the column be called 'Sekelumit Romantika Kehidupan'. The contents would be about everyday household problems and would be personal subjective accounts. The identities of the 'guest' personalities of the column would be kept secret (1998, p. v).

She goes on to narrate how she wrote fictional stories for the first two columns but then moved on to collecting material directly from the religious courts, where the backgrounds of divorce proceedings provided ample material. Subsequently, in the second year of the column's appearance, she decided to rely entirely on written submissions that were sent to her.³ She describes (1998, p. vi) briefly how the "guests" were initially largely women between the ages of 35–60, but by the end of the fifth year number of men and women were the same. She provides the following figures relating to the content of the accounts: 10% were about teenage romance ("including problems relating to the loss of virginity" (*kehilangan kegadisan*); 30% family problems: arguments between husband and wife, step-children, parents-in-law and children-in-law; marriages which endured despite arguments, and divorce; 40% financial problems: "debts, being ensnared by money-lenders, being defrauded, unemployment, children's education expenses;" 5% legal matters: fraud, encroachments on property; 10% psychological problems: 2% sexual deviation, homosexuality, lesbianism, mental depression;" 5% religious problems: "converting to another religion, inter-religious marriage."

The list gives a good picture of the stories appearing in the column that are still going strong today. A 1,000-word story published in 2016, for example, entitled *Duka yang Beruntun* (*A Succession of Misfortunes*), describes in the first person how a young girl lost her virginity and became pregnant before marriage and then her boyfriend deserted her. She then met a good man who married her, but they went through hard times financially. Just as they were recovering, they were cheated out of their funds and had to sell their sewing machine, the use of which provided their

livelihood. The final paragraph, which has now become a feature of the column, is a direct appeal by Aam for funds to help the unfortunate woman buy a new sewing machine.

Before going on to discuss the contents of these stories and various linguistic and stylistic features which are common to them, we need to note the way in which the stories are shaped before publication so that we can see them in context.⁴ Originally, there had been an attempt to simply reproduce the written text which had been sent to *Galura*. However, readers complained that the level of competence in the use of Sundanese in these original versions was very low and that they should be rewritten to conform to higher linguistic standards, which Aam, with her experience, was very able to do. In the second place, in terms of the contents of the narratives, Aam deliberately played down and softened the elements which she found too *kasar* (crude) and offensive to public taste. My impression was that such phrasings were related to descriptions of domestic violence. The one example Aam provided, twice, referred to a mother who had apparently been expelled from her child's house, which Aam and she thought her readers would find too uncomfortable if it was mentioned in the published story.

The weekly *Galura* mailbox usually comprises letters from readers that contain autobiographical accounts which they hope will merit publication and I was shown manuscript letters of several pages of neat handwriting containing these stories. All stories which are to be considered for publication are followed up, usually by telephone calls and sometimes by direct interviews, apart from anything else, to check their authenticity. Because many of the stories concern sensitive issues, care is taken to disguise the identity of the individual writer, by, for example, changing the number of children the 'I' figure is alleged to have. There is always a risk that writers will be seriously threatened by those who recognise themselves in the stories –the Sundanese expression is *diarah*, i.e., threaten someone's life– and so this disguising is essential.

There is little financial reward for the publication of stories and clearly, this is not what motivates individuals to write. Aam believed that writing the story and seeing it eventually in print brought cathartic satisfaction to individuals who had had to suppress their feelings about their marriage and its outcomes for so long. Sometimes, she said, the story was an instrument of revenge. Once or twice, she had the impression that the individuals she interviewed were temporarily venting their anger by talking to her. She had thought that, on reflection, these individuals would regret it if their stories were published. She usually waited a week or two before going ahead with the publication of a story to allow a cooling down period. She recalled a recent experience in which she had received a phone call a day or two after the initial interviews in which the individual concerned asked her specifically not to proceed with publication. What had apparently prompted Aam to think that the individual would regret her action was the fact that she mentioned that she was jealous, *cemburu*, an emotion which she could only feel if she still felt attached to her husband.

In their way, Aam said, all these stories were peculiar, unusual–she used the word *aneh*–in terms of the events described the behaviour of individuals. The events were

aneh simply because they involved unexpected circumstances, such as the sudden appearance of women claiming to be the second wives of the husband of the writer, or the discovery that an individual was not the child of the couple whom she or he had grown up calling mother and father, but was adopted. Behaviour that was deemed strange was something like the discovery after years of marriage that one's partner was gay, as described below. But, Aam insisted, in terms of general human they were no more peculiar or deviant than what occurred in all societies within the institution of the family. She gave as an example of peculiarity, a feature of one story which I had questioned her about, published in *Galura*, fourth Wednesday of November 2011. In this story, two former friends, both of whom had lost their spouses—one, the woman, the *kuring* ('I') of the story, through the death of her husband, the other, the man, through divorce—met again in later life and agreed to get married. One line of the story struck me. It described how the man, before proposing, had asked permission to do so from his former wife—*Malah geus meunang idin ti popotongan rek mileuleuheungkeun kuring* (In fact, he obtained the permission of his ex-wife before proposing to me). I had thought this odd and asked whether it was a customary practice. Aam, too, said she found it odd, but understood the action as an excess of polite behaviour designed to pre-empt any ill feeling or nastiness which might arise. She argued that acting to mitigate potential unpleasantness was a typical Sundanese trait.

Another story that was topical during the week of the interview was about a widowed mother who decides she no longer wants to live with her married children, who beg her to stay with them, but who then becomes like Lear and makes her uncomfortable. In discussing this story, I noted that the events described, e.g., the mother being criticised for spoiling her grandchild, seemed very familiar to the British, whereupon Aam readily acknowledged the universality of such scenarios.

At the same time, however, she said that the argument originally put forward by the children that the mother should stay in the family home in the Sumatra area where the family lived at the time and not move back to West Java, namely that moving back and leaving behind the grave of her husband, her father, was a betrayal, was exaggerated but understandable given the influence that adult children have on widowed parents.

A further example of a "typical" peculiarity was a story about a husband's bisexuality which came to light when the wife discovered that her husband was having a sexual relationship with a young man who was staying with the couple and who had been introduced to the wife as a distant relative of the husband who wanted to pursue his education in the big city. I remarked that I found the story almost too much like what I might read in an American short story collection—I was thinking of Raymond Carver and T. C. Boyle—but Aam assured me that the story was genuine; that in fact the woman had come to see her accompanied by a man and had told her story. When Aam had asked her where her husband was now, she had pointed to the man beside her, much to Aam's embarrassment. His response was to admit the truth of what had been said but added that he thought his attraction to men was an illness he wanted to cure, hence the visit to her.

10.2 The Structure and Plots of the Stories

The stories all have a human edge where unusual circumstances and quirks of personality lead to unexpected outcomes. Many of the stories have very similar themes, even though they deal with the specifics of individual cases. Without doing a count, my impression from reading these stories over the last few years is that the most common themes relate to polygamy—caused often by the infertility of the first wife, often the ‘*kuring*’ of the story—adultery, taking up again with old flames, the consequences of marrying for love or based on appearances, the desertion of parents by children, the decline from riches to poverty, sudden unexpected deaths and the regret which comes through experience. Some stories, however, fall outside this range and bring up fewer common issues. The story about the bisexual husband is one such example. Incidentally, I suspect this storyline has been used more than once. I found it in a story entitled *Boro Jongjon Mikaheman* (II March 2009; So much for love and tenderness), in which the wife catches her husband in flagrante with a male friend in a scene that she describes as like something out of a Tom Hanks film (*Breh wae salahsahiji film Tom Hank dina wangwangan*, i.e., “Suddenly it seemed to me like a scene in a Tom Hanks film”). This expression added to my suspicion that this story line owes something to American influence.⁵ Another early story *Panto Hidayah Dibukakeun Deui* (the Door of God’s Grace is Opened Once More) of the first week of September 2008, describes the consequence of what turns out to be a mixed religious marriage—when the husband who converts from Christianity to Islam converts back again to Christianity—which is resolved happily in the end. All the stories plot the progress from high expectations of marriage to disillusionment and then some resolution. Some end on a tragic note, some end happily and most end with quiet resignation. The *kuring* in about three-quarters of the stories are women; of these, almost all are middle-aged, between 35 and 55.

To give a flavour of the linguistic style and thematic direction of the stories, let me summarise one at length. The story *Nu Rek Males Nyeri* (Wanting to Return Pain) of the second week of October 2011 begins as usual with a saying. This one is *Paingan ceuk kolot, dunya téh anu lalaki* (It’s true what old people say: the world belongs to men). And it adds *Kabuktian dina hirup kumbuh, carang naker aya lalaki dudaan lila. Sanajan kakumaha kakalotanana sok terus karawin deui, lamun ditinggalkeun maot ku pamajikanana téh. Sabalikna tara loba kabéjakeun awéwé nu karawin deui saditinggalkeun ku salakina.... Kitu deui salingkuh. Lalaki salingkuh henteu ieu jadi bukur catur salembur. Sabalikna mun awéwé nu ku peta, éar sajawagat kabasanakanana gé.* (The proof of this is in everyday life: it’s rare that a man is widowed for long. However old they may be, they go ahead and get married again if their wife has died. It’s the opposite for women, it’s seldom heard that a woman remarries if she has been widowed. ... It’s the same with adultery. If a man has an affair, it is hardly mentioned by people but on the other hand, if it’s a woman, who does it then the whole world talks about it.)

The story describes how the *kuring* of the story—identified at the end of the piece as Ny. Bandy, 35 years old, (pseudonym) from the city of S.—found after visits to

several doctors that she was unable to bear children (*gabug*). She accepts that as fate. Her husband, and this is a common theme in several stories, asks her permission to take a second wife so that he can have heirs. After thinking about it, she decides that she can accept this since, as she puts it, the proverb says *kalah bisa karena biasa* (you can put up with it because you become used to it)—“like poison taken over a long period” (*racun gé lila-lila mah teu méntal ari ku remen mah*). But she then describes her feelings on the evening of her husband’s wedding with the second wife: *Enyaan basa peuting munggaran mah, kuring adug lajer luar biasa* (That first night I writhed in extraordinary pain). And then later, when her husband does not return for 24 h, she goes wild with anger and smashes up her room and their wedding photograph. Her husband, though, still shows affection towards her.

A turning point comes when she attends the wedding reception of the child of an old school boyfriend who has just been widowed. They fall in love again, and she visits him secretly, but they decide that things cannot go on in this way and that she must ask her husband for a divorce. Her husband, not knowing about the affair but seeing her changed attitude towards him—they have separate rooms now—asks her what he can do to win back her affection and even goes as far as to say that he will divorce his second wife but will not abandon his child. She thinks about this and discusses the matter with her lover, and eventually decides that she will be faithful to her husband, who does divorce his second wife. The lover, in his turn, marries another woman. *Kuring* finds it difficult to face her husband as before since she still thinks of her lover, but the latter counsels her to be faithful and says that their union was “not meant to be” (*lain jodo*). He, in turn, marries again, and she, when she hears of this, “seethes with anger” (*haté mani nyongkab, panas*).

On impulse, she goes to see the house of her husband’s second wife and, to her surprise, sees her husband’s car outside. At first, she thinks that he has come to visit the child she is unperturbed, but then she hears from the nursemaid looking after the child when she knocks on the door that her husband is in the bedroom with the second wife; she bangs her way into the room and indeed finds them together in bed. She is furious, and when her husband returns to their house, she flies into a rage, throws things at him, and asks for a divorce. *Kuring* was angry, she puts it, not because he had returned to his second wife, but because he had lied to her. If she had known his true feelings, she would have gone along with her request to ask for a divorce and then married her lover. In tears, she rings her lover, but he says he can do nothing. If she got divorced now, all he could do was to “marry her as a secret, unofficial wife” (*...ngan paling gé kudu siap jadi pamjikan siri*). And the story ends “*Kadongdora ceuk haté. Kuring neruskeun rumahtangga jeung nu ayeuna, ngan saendeng-endeng pista. Ayeuna geus rék lima tahun misah sagala-galana* (“Wonderful, I don’t think, I said to myself. I continued to live with the husband I had, but from then on, I avoided sex with him. Now it has been five years that I have broken entirely with him”).

This story is very similar to many others, turning as it does on issues such as a husband’s desire to take a second wife because of a wish for an heir while still allegedly being fond of the first wife; deception practiced by the man, and the truth eventually coming out and the wife having to decide whether to forgive the husband or not.

One point to note here incidentally is how easy it is for a woman to initiate divorce in Sundanese society, which may surprise those familiar with the practice of Islamic law in other Muslim communities, including other Muslim ethnic groups in Indonesia. Among the Sundanese, the woman asks to be returned to her family (*diserahkeun*.) However, one slightly unusual feature of this story is the wife's violent response. In most of the other stories, the wife, although not happy with what she must put up with, accepts it or reacts non-violently. In this story, however, we get a graphic description of the wife's jealousy and the violent anger it leads to.

Here, then, every week on page 5 of *Galura*, readers will find an entertaining true life story wrapped in a proverb or saying which, like Aesop's fable tries to draw a simple moral and instruct and entertain the reader. As examples of stories that form part of contemporary Sundanese popular culture, they provide an insight into what some people in West Java find enjoyable light reading and an academic study of this literature would undoubtedly show, in the same way as other excellent studies of Sundanese popular forms of Islamic practice (Millie 2009) and of popular songs and television (Jurriens 2004) have done, the significance of story-telling genres in the lives of readers of the paper and their immediate families. However, we can, I think, push further than this and argue that a closer analysis of the stories, looking less at the explicit content and more at the language. The framing of narratives helps us to identify specific critically significant ways in which contemporary Sundanese, even those who may not necessarily be readers of *Galura*, regard their society and take up positions for rapid changes in the shaping of society which they witness in their everyday lives.

This means we should consider the stories as something other than directly reflecting what is happening in Sundanese society, a sort of ethnographic record. More than one critic has argued how dangerous it is to see literature, even documentary literature intended to be a historical record, such as the novels of Zola or Upton Sinclair, as a transparent mirror of society. I would accept those arguments.⁶ At the same time, I argue that there is a peripheral place for such literature as repositories of historical evidence which need to be checked against other sources we have. So, in the case of *Satukangeun Lalangsé*, we cannot say, although it is tempting to do so, that there is evidence of high divorce rates as well as high rates of polygamy in contemporary society. We would have to conduct proper sociological and statistical studies before reliably reaching such a conclusion. Nonetheless, it would be perverse to say that what we find in the stories bears no relation to what is currently happening in Sundanese society: the letters alone on which the stories are based would refute that. There is a relationship, then, but we need to be careful in identifying what it is precisely.

10.3 Fiction and Reality

The problem of whether we can read the fiction as a reflection of reality can perhaps best be approached by looking at another popular genre of Sundanese feature fiction, namely ghost stories relating to *hantu*, *siluman*, and *jurit* (see the entry in *Ensiklopedia Sunda* for the latter word), of which a well-known exponent was Umbara (1986). These are a regular feature of journals and newspapers that carry Sundanese fiction, such as *Manglé* and the daily *Tribun Jabar* (West Java Tribune), which runs a short story in Sundanese over three pages mid-week. Do these stories indicate the widespread occurrence of preternatural phenomena in Sundanese society? Most people would say not. On the other hand, do they show a fondness for such stories of the supernatural and horror? Most people would, I think, agree that they did, though the fondness is not confined to the Sundanese, as the current popularity of Indonesian horror films would attest. Do the stories also reveal a widespread belief in supernatural forces among Sundanese readers? Here the answer is not so simple. We know that readers can enjoy ghost stories without necessarily believing in ghosts and superstitions, and may it not be the case that this is true in Sundanese society too? Anecdotal evidence and the stories that one hears in passing about supernatural phenomena would, however, appear to suggest that the stories are consistent with a widespread belief in the supernatural. Still, this casual evidence is unreliable, and we would have to do more systematic research to reach any conclusive judgments.

However, analysing the structure and elements of the supernatural stories would reveal the specific particulars of beliefs underpinning many of the stories. These particulars make the narrative at least fictionally plausible in their terms to Sundanese readers in a way that might, in some cases, be alien or strange or inherently implausible for readers outside a Sundanese universe of discourse. An analysis, then, of these ghost stories would then try to identify the logic of the narratives and compare them to the general phenomena of stories of the supernatural or, say, to examples of beliefs derived from other sources such as ritual practices which are also underpinned by a similar rationality. One way of proceeding has already been ably demonstrated by Endicott (1970) in his book *The Analysis of Malay Magic*. The structuralist model he employs is simply one way of going about the task, other ways might be to look at keywords in the repertory of the supernatural and show their significance and relationship and changing meanings over time, and another might be to link the themes of the story to the metaphorical structures of the narratives in so far as the stories are never just about the supernatural but are often intended as prompts for reflection on the natural world.

The same assumptions of the relationship between fiction and reality should inform our analysis of the stories in *Satukangeun Lalangsé*. We cannot assume that their descriptions of polygamy, adultery, and unexpected family misfortunes represent the frequency of the events in actual Sundanese society. However, what we can say is that in their logic—the assumptions of rationality in cause and effect of the plotting of the stories, the descriptions of states of mind, and the appeals to religious ideals—they correspond to what people would understand to be plausible and

possible within the institutions of the family and marriage. And this holds, even if we acknowledge the large part played by Aam Amilia in representing these accounts in a language, form, style, and structure which she knows to appeal to her readers at the risk of slightly distorting the story. The argument is not that these stories are true to life and are autobiographical accounts but that their framing and their purport reflect ways of looking at the world, which is common in contemporary Sundanese society. With this stricture in mind, it is not the apparent events in the plot that we are attending to but the common structuring of the stories, the recurrence of thematic imperatives, and the phrasing of the descriptions of emotions and attitudes; what might we conclude? To begin with, very much in line with the summarised story above, we can see that we are frequently, though not exclusively since there are male-centred stories, presented with a woman's perspective on contemporary family mores. This may be a direct consequence of the fact that Aam Amilia is responsible for the rubric and is shaping it to give expression to her perceptions of the position of women in Sundanese society and to champion their desire for greater equality, something which she hinted was her intention in much of her writing, or on the other hand, it may simply be a function of the more significant number of women who send in their letters to *Galura*. Whatever the case, what we find in the stories is time and again an endorsement of the opinion that Sundanese women are often deceived in their hopes of what marriage will bring and that the frustration of their hopes is caused, as they see it, by the hand of fate or the arbitrariness of their husband's behaviour or the ingratitude of children. What their hopes are is beautifully captured by the expression *hayang awet nepi ka pakotrek iteuk, rumahtangga akur sauyunan pinuh ku kabagjaan* (to want the marriage to last until old age when our walking sticks will knock together, and our household will be a harmonious one full of happiness; *Galura* V (fifth week) September 2011), that is, they hope that they will grow old together in harmony with their spouses, to whom in the course of their married life they will become increasingly attached in mutual affection. The fact that this does not happen in the stories, for whatever reason, is what constitutes the frame of the narrative and is always a source of regret. In this respect, although there is frequent discussion of the difference between arranged marriage (*diréré mohkeun*) and romantic marriage, it is not that one or the other is preferred, since both can end unfortunately. The misfortunes are caused by the waywardness of husbands, or sometimes through material greed, and occasionally by the unreasonableness of the ambition of women themselves (see *Adean ku Kuda Beureum* or Bragging about One's Family in *Galura* III October 2011).

However, very often the misfortune is a result of accident, often an unexpected sudden death. The response to many of the events, particularly unexpected deaths, is a resignation to fate and the frequent reiteration in a number of stories that there are four things that are beyond the control of humans and lie in the power of God: happiness (*bagja*) and tragedy (*kasangsaraan*), marriage with the one for whom one is intended (*jodoh*) and death (*pati*). This reference comes up time and time again. We can of course attribute it to Aam's desire to offer readers an accepted religious platitude, but there is more to it than that. The platitude would not be acceptable unless it found some resonance in the way in which Sundanese men

and women today tried to make sense of the world today and the misfortunes they encounter there. One can see the point if one contrasts these stories with the same type of popular literature in most Anglophone societies today. The expression of that sentiment, a willing submission of oneself to the will of God, would simply not be acceptable to readers because they do not share that vision of the world which ascribes so much importance to the intervention or action of a deity. One might argue that in the eighteenth century in England there was such a devotional literature which in its autobiographical foundation and its frequent reference to God's judgment and mercy and grace, one finds, if not an exact counterpart of, at least some similarity with, the Sundanese example.

10.4 The Role of a Wife and the Institution of Polygamy

At the same time, in those stories where the element of fate, what is "written" (*disurat*), is not stressed, what we encounter, in addition to the negative portrayals of the behaviour of men, which is admitted frequently by men themselves in the stories in which they are the *kuring* figure, is the strength and assertiveness of the women. In one conventional Sundanese proverbial reference to wives, they are referred to as the *Dulang Tinandé*, i.e., the serving dish, meaning that the role is that of being the servant of the husband and family, doing all that is requested of them to the best of their ability, submissive and never complaining, the ideal woman: an excellent example, if ever there was one, of false consciousness resulting from a male-imposed ideology of marriage. The expression is frequently discussed in *Satukangeun Lalangé* and the Sundanese media. However, I have yet to see it referred to positively in contemporary debates. It is almost always introduced as a term from the past, which if ever it was acceptable as a model for female behaviour is now entirely inappropriate for current circumstances. In that respect, the stories completely concur: wives and women, in general, are not the passive help-mates of, and subservient to, men. On the contrary, they are actively engaged in entrepreneurial activities outside the household, which in several stories are seen as the mainstay of the household economy. In addition, they guide, encourage, and provide for the children's education. (But see for comparison an exception, the story *Teu Sanggup Hirup Nyorangan* (Not Willing to Live Alone), *Galura* I May 2010 which begins: *Sanajan cenah jaman awéwé dulang tinandé téh geus ditinggalkeun, tapi dina kanyataan loba kénéh kaum Hawa nu gejed heureut léngkah pondok panenjo*. (Although they say that the days of women being the *dulang tinandé* are long past, many of Eve's kind are still confined in their habits, with their movements restricted and their vision limited.)

There is, however, one institution that continues to hamper their efforts to achieve the status they desire for themselves, and that is the continuing prevalence of polygamy which does not so much threaten the financial stability of the household—because the women can often earn sufficient themselves—but undermines women psychologically as well as being seen to affect the welfare of children. The frequency with which this theme recurs in the stories reflects at least the concern

and anxiety of women about polygamy, even though we cannot draw any conclusions about whether it has been statistically increasing in frequency or not in the last decade. From casual observation, there has been an increase in the institution, most easily visible the institution of illegal marriage, *nikah siri*, a term hardly used ten years ago. I have written elsewhere (Watson 2005) about literary representations of polygamy and tried to set them against the evidence of social science research and current feminist discourse in Indonesia. Indeed, the stories confirm what I wrote there, that polygamy continues to be regarded as a significant threat to the welfare and stability of households, which women are constantly and uneasily aware of.

10.5 Conclusion

There is much more to be said about what we can derive from these stories. Apart from anything else, the conspicuous absence of some elements allows us to take a very different perspective on Indonesian society from that which can be gathered from other examples of popular women's fiction written in Indonesian. Here in the Sundanese stories, there is no reference to the extravagant lifestyles which are so prominent in the Indonesian stories of the urban elite, as found in written texts and ubiquitous TV soaps. The two are worlds away from each other. The *Satukangeun Lalangsé* stories rarely discuss or describe affluent lifestyles, the houses, the cars, and the trips abroad, so common in the other. And yet the same people who read the stories watch with interest the television serials. The lack of reference to affluence in the stories is in some measure attributable to the fact that the protagonists are drawn mainly from the lower middle class, for whom a luxurious lifestyle is not something they aspire. And in this respect, because the stories are drawn from this group's daily lives—and not fantasies—it would be unrealistic to portray them as hankering after luxury when what they aspire to is modest stability. But more needs to be said about this contrast between how they live and the entertainment they consume and how their experience of each affects their perception of the other. This is not, however, the place to develop that discussion.

Another apparent omission from the universe of these stories is any significant reference to Islam. Anyone familiar with contemporary Indonesian fiction, especially popular fiction, is very well aware of how large a part is played by characters who are described as having received a strongly religion-oriented educational background and whose actions in the course of romantic attachments are guided by reflections on proper conduct as instructed by religious teachers. Such fiction is now usually labelled *Islami* and has received some good critical attention, for example, Hellwig (2011). As a surprise, it might come to see how small a role Islam plays in Sundanese fiction, given that West Java has a reputation for being a particularly “religious” province. Some Sundanese stories take religious institutions as their background—for example, the novel of Romli (2007) and short stories of RAF (1998)—but they are few and far between. Contemporary Sundanese fiction, novels, and short stories, or faction as

found in the *Galura* stories, is not concerned with religious issues. Islam is a taken-for-granted aspect of the social background with occasional explicit reference to the observance of Islamic ritual practice, mosques and *tajug* (small prayer houses), and the call to prayer featuring as descriptive elements in a narrative. Still, religion is rarely central to the theme of a story. The accounts in *Galura* are no exception.

This should perhaps give us pause for thought, a matter of “the dog that did not bark in the night,” as described in the famous Sherlock Homes story, *Silver Blaze*. What does the omission signify? This is not the place for an extensive analysis. Still, one could perhaps speculate that the universe of discourse found in these accounts in *Galura* and contemporary Sundanese fiction offers us a perception, different from what comes across from the social science literature, of how the Sundanese respond to the everyday events in their lives, a response in which religious prescriptions are not so definitive in determining the conduct of their behaviour as the pragmatic measures needed to cope with life’s struggles in a Sundanese context. This may come as a surprise to political scientists who sometimes, at least in the context of Indonesia, seem to over-emphasise the control Islam exerts over the imagination and everyday conduct of individuals.

A reading of the stories of *Satukangeun Lalangsé*, which looks behind the “curtain” of the plots to catch something of how Sundanese try to position themselves in a changing world, as a strategy for understanding the nature of contemporary Sundanese society, may not, at first sight, seem very promising. The closer one peers, however, the more that is revealed about what, borrowing from Raymond Williams, we might call a Sundanese “structure of feeling.” The stories convey a way of thinking about the world, one which is not confined to an individual writer or even to a coterie of readers. Still, one which ranges more extensively into the fears, hopes, and values of a whole society, their construction of the world, to which, through the mediation of the stories, the privileged reader is offered unique access.

Notes

1. An earlier unpublished version of this paper was presented at the *Second International Conference on Sundanese Culture*, 19-22 December 2011, Bandung. The examples of stories discussed were all written for the weekly paper *Galura* before that date but having continued to read all the stories published since then I see no reason to change any of my arguments.
2. Her most recent novel which appeared earlier in serial form in the long-established Sundanese weekly *Manglé* is entitled *Kembang-Kembang Anten* and came out in (2014), and is centred on what is a frequently rehearsed topic in contemporary Sundanese literature, namely the meeting of former lovers after a long separation and the attraction they still feel for each other. Another novel in serial form written in Sundanese *Kalangkang Japati* has just been completed. It appeared in *Pikiran Rakyat* towards the end of 2015 and also deals partly with ongoing relationships between formerly engaged couples.

3. This tradition of asking readers to submit true-life stories seems quite common. In my recent reading, for example, I came across a feature of the weekly magazine *Manglé* in the 1990s entitled *Tragedi*. Readers' submissions were invited as follows: "Have you ever had a tragedy in your life? Tell us about in this *Tragedi* feature. Whoever wants can send in their experience of a real personal tragedy...Published writing will receive a small monetary compensation." The story I read (*Manglé* No. 1257, 19–25 July 1990, pp. 32–34, 41) describes the experience of a man who caught his wife *in flagrante* with a lover and killed the couple and was sentenced to 16 years of imprisonment. When he came out, he was harried by the relatives of the murdered pair.
4. The following description is based on a long interview with Aam which took place in the *Galura* office on Thursday 1 December 2011.
5. Subsequently I have discovered that this theme of disguised homosexuality –among both men and women– is relatively common in contemporary Sundanese literature. See, for example, the story by Héna Sumarni found in Watson (2014) translated as *Decided by a Stroke of Fate* in Watson (2015).
6. For further comment on this issue of the reliability of fiction as historical evidence readers may care to look at two essays of mine, "Anthropology and Literature" (Watson 2012) and "Novels as ethnographies: the challenge for the anthropologist as reader" (Watson 2021).

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