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INVITED ARTICLE



Smart kampung: doing cultural studies in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

As megacities are rising in developing countries, Indonesia in the 2010s shifts attention toward marginalized urban and rural villages. This paper observes cultural movements arising from kampung as locus of critical engagement with the complexities of the Global South in the twenty-first century. Examining three kampungs in Java, I reveal how the community-driven act of cultural commoning reactivates local practices to correct unwanted effects of neoliberal urbanism. I argue that through the double strategy of containing and working within neoliberal capitalism, kampung communities create culturally sustainable environment as an alternative model for the Global South.

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In the 2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects, the United Nations estimates that the world's urban population will increase from 55 percent to 68 percent by 2050, and that 90 percent of the growth will occur in the Asian African region as the region with the highest number of megacities.¹ Indonesia is among the fastest urbanizing countries in Asia with more than half of its population residing in urban areas.² In November 2018, the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology launched the 100 smart cities program that aimed at equipping over 500 regencies with advanced forms of information communication technologies to boost public service and the quality of urban life.³

In the midst of an orientation toward futuristic megatrends, movements to invigorate marginalized communities were developed in rural and urban areas in Indonesia in mid 2010s.⁴ The State and local governments invested in “thematic kampung” projects in urban slums which were replicated in rural villages, turning kampungs into tourist attractions. Concurrently kampung-based activism emerged across the nation to counter the effects of urbanized lifestyles both in rural villages and urban fringes.⁵ Kampung projects designed by the State and the ones initiated by the kampung communities can be complementary or conflicting.

The word kampung, which originally in Malay means rural village, has evolved in line with the pace of urbanization and acquired the additional meaning of an urban unplanned settlement with marginalized and impoverished connotations.⁶ Urban dwellers use the terms *pulang* or *balik kampung* with a tinge of nostalgic nuance to mean the act of returning to their home village, suggesting both the history of urban migration and ties to the

rural village. The layered meanings of *kampung* speak of urban–rural linkages that characterize the stage of urban transformation occurring in Asian developing countries. The urban–rural interactions are constituted by the demographic mobility between rural and urban *kampungs*, the urban transformation of rural villages, and the residual rural tradition in urban *kampungs*. The term *kampung* thus blurs the urban–rural divide and more often refers to a sense of community rather than an administrative unit.⁷ In the thematic *kampung* project, rural and urban villages rename their village with the term *kampung*. This can be read as a means to evoke a sense of community and belonging which might be eroded in the process of urban transformation. The main question to answer is, why the *kampung* turn took place in the midst of a fast-paced orientation toward futuristic mega cities? Next to answer is, the relevance of this *kampung* turn to the issues of the Global South.

Both the rapid urbanization of cities and the movements of the urban fringes and urbanized villages encapsulate the complex issues of the Global South. Critical discussions of the Global South point to the unequal redistribution and access of power and capital in the hegemony of global capitalism as well as efforts to resist the existing global capitalist system.⁸ The Global South functions as “the resistant imaginary of transnational political subject that results from a shared experience of subjugation under contemporary global capitalism.”⁹ In an effort to counter subjugation, an economic trajectory taken by the Global South is to allow for the emergence of new power centers, mega cities, and economies in peripheral areas.¹⁰ Changing the configuration of the capitalist power, however, according to the proponents of the counterhegemonic globalization movement, does not alter existing forms of injustice and inequality.¹¹ Another viable trajectory is for the South–South cooperation to propose alternatives that could address a whole array of inequality and instability problems.

Kampung, as a marginalized settlement within a larger fast-paced urban transformation process, is a strategic site to capture the contradictions, contestations, and local-global cultural dynamics occurring in the Global South.¹² In this essay I examine the urgency behind the *kampung* awakening in the context of today’s globalization to show how rural and urban *kampungs* simultaneously resist and appropriate capitalist forces. By focusing on a number of *kampung*-based initiatives, I highlight the cultural politics of urban transformation in Indonesia that is often overlooked in the discussion of the smart city concept.¹³ The term “smart *kampung*” does not refer to IT-based governance but rather the double strategies of marginalized communities in dealing with social inequities by co-opting state and capitalist forces for the common good amidst the fast pace of globalized urbanism. The discussion will showcase how three rural and urban *kampungs* strategically respond to urbanity expansion by forging community solidarity through acts of festive cultural commoning. The three *kampungs* discussed here are among 50 other villages, rural and urban, that are connected through an informal network called the Jaringan Kampung Nusantara (Nusantara Kampung Network), abbreviated as Japung. The network was formed in January 2016 as a WhatsApp group (a cross-platform messaging and voice call service for smartphones) by a musician named RedyEko Prastyo from an urban *kampung* called Kampung Cempluk in Malang, East Java.¹⁴ Among those who are connected in this social media group are musicians, traditional arts performers, administrators, cultural activists, and informal leaders who reside in various villages, and cultural activists and intellectuals who are keen in village revitalization. Through

the WhatsApp group the members discuss kampung issues, share upcoming kampung events, such as festivals, rituals, and workshops and plan programs to support one another.¹⁵

The Japung network provides material for a research I conducted from 2016 to 2018, as I joined the group in September 2016, participated in two of their annual meetings, formed a research team to do fieldwork in five villages, conducted interviews with members, and in 2018, edited a book containing articles cowritten by kampung activists and my research team, reflecting on kampong issues and strategies, and case studies of community initiatives in kampung revitalization.¹⁶ The details of the three kampungs in this article are taken from the published materials, and also from fieldwork notes as well as interviews with informal leaders and Japung key activist. For this paper, I purposively select three kampungs that best illustrate the local, community-based initiatives to counter global capitalism through reactivation of common cultural resources.

In the ensuing discussion, I will show how kampung activists establish alliances with the State and the market in order to protect their kampung from being consumed by city lifestyle. Kampung informal leaders also make use of social media to form an inter-kampung network as a forum to discuss ways of correcting “urban” symptoms, from rent-seeking mentality to urban consumer culture. Based on materials gathered from community-based participation research in a kampung network, I will explore what doing cultural studies means in the context of kampung activism and how it is relevant to the Global South.

Kampung commoning and realities of the Global South

This section relates to the discussion of practices of “commoning” now gaining currency in cultural studies scholarship, especially as it relates to the Global South or the Asian context.¹⁷ The verb “commoning” derives from the noun “commons,” which is a pool of resources to be shared freely as opposed to a privately owned property.¹⁸ *Commoning* as a verb then suggests an act of creating or reproducing the free access of resources, an act of refusing commodification or enclosure either by the State or the market. Heightened interest in both the commons and the act of commoning within scholarly publications and public advocacy is a response to the advancement of global capitalism in all aspects of life, including knowledge, information and media.¹⁹ The emergence of digital and creative commons is, thus, an example of such resistance.

The earliest form of resource claimed as private property since the beginning of industrialization in England is agricultural land. The progressive enclosure of common pastures by private owners led to the dispossession of small farmers’ land, turning them into paid farm laborers, indentured servants, factory workers, and urban migrants.²⁰ The problem of land grabbing continues today with large-scale occurrences in various regions seeking to catch up with the hypermodernizing trend of mega cities. What is lost is not only land, but also the cultural practice of resource sharing for the common good which is superseded by capitalist greed. Similar concerns about dispossessed people in urban and rural areas are given as follows:

The issue for those being dispossessed is one of survival. The impoverished peoples living in the cities of the North, the slums of the urban South, and the rural regions of the South have not accepted their relegation to the status of living dead with equanimity or passivity. Instead,

throughout the Global South and in the cities of the Global North, large numbers of people have formed movements to defend the commons in all their variety.²¹

Unlike in Europe and the United States of America, the dispossession of the commons in Indonesia and most Southeast Asian countries began with the history of European colonial expansion.²² The ensuing discussion will highlight how the modern state continued both the process and the perspective of colonial modernity in considering *kampung*—both the rural villages and the urban slums—in a condescending way and with a backward connotation according to the modern standard. To upgrade *kampungs* means to gentrify and urbanize them which could lead to evicting the *kampung* dwellers and turning the sites into a middle-class area. Similar to the hierarchy between developed and developing countries, as well as first world and third world, the impoverished *kampungs* are to emulate the standards set by the futuristic megacities. However, emulating urbanism means adopting the capitalist transactional approach which comes at the cost of the *kampung* land and the cultural practice of commoning in day-to-day social relations.

Urban and rural *kampungs* in various places in Indonesia base their *kampung* movement to reclaim the dispossession of the practices of sharing, locally called as the spirit of *gotong royong*. Together the *kampungs* rediscovered and relearned their traditional arts and rituals and shared them for the common benefit of all. Through this act of cultural commoning, the *kampung* residents created social bonding and turned their neighborhood into a participatory community. I use the verb “commoning” and not the noun “commons,” precisely because cultural practices are neither given nor found but rediscovered and readjusted in a fluid and open manner. Through cultural commoning *kampung* activists reverse the modernist gaze of the city by providing *kampung* with remedies of the urban ills; an act of postcolonial “talking back.”

Kampung postcolonial modernity: from problem to commodity

There is a continuity between how the *kampung* was perceived in the past and the current urbanizing trend in the Global South. The term *kampung*, the Malay word for village, is familiar in a number of Southeast Asian countries, namely Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar.²³ Based on different stages of urban development, the term in the region could refer to rural hamlets promoted as tourist resorts; unplanned settlements in urban fringes in the process of urban development; or, in a Southeast Asian metropolis like Singapore, a gentrified area with a name reminiscent of its past.²⁴ This range of usage reflects the history of *kampung* erasure in the long process of urban transition, which in most Southeast Asian countries can be traced to their colonial pasts.

In precolonial Indonesia, the term *kampung* referred to settlements in coastal as well as rural areas in the hinterland. As colonial cities encroached and developed into what became the Dutch East Indies, the surrounding pockets of settlements adjacent to the cities were known as urban *kampongs*.²⁵ During the colonial years, the cities for the European settlers pushed *kampungs* into scattered enclaves outside the city walls. The *kampungs* encircling the colonial cities also served as dwelling places for manual workers recruited from adjacent rural areas to support the colonial city and its urban lifestyle. In contrast to the modern European brick houses, the *kampung* with wooden and bamboo houses, where the lower classes lived in an impoverished manner was considered

unhygienic and a source of health hazards.²⁶ Kampung also acquired pejorative connotations as a backward and poor area where the marginalized others lived.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Dutch city planners and administrators initiated kampung improvement projects to provide water supplies, garbage disposals, and sanitation.²⁷ The project of modernizing the kampung area was picked up again only two decades after Indonesia's independence, in 1945, by the New Order Government in the late 1960s.²⁸ These projects were mostly focused on physical improvement and operated in a top-down manner by the Department of Public Works and municipalities with loans from international financial institutions.²⁹

Another extreme measure of modernization is the eviction of urban kampungs in the process of gentrification. Several justifications for the eviction of urban kampungs include illegal status, the moral hazard discourse against red districts or areas considered to be of high criminal rate, and environmental issues, such as unplanned settlements in river banks.³⁰ Kampung eviction has become an issue for mobilizing resistance by human rights activists and kampung dwellers.³¹ In continuity with the Dutch colonial discourse, the contemporary stereotype of kampung as a problem remains. The process of modernization and hyperurbanization inadvertently constructs the urban kampung as the unseemly Other in the city space to be cleaned, tamed, or, if the space can be utilized for better (read: commercial) purposes, erased.

A different approach toward kampung development, albeit still in the neoliberal framework, is the State's project to turn kampung into a tourist attraction. By framing the kampung and villages as commodities for tourism, the government has shifted its focus from improvement to gentrified packaging. In 2010s, the State initiated kampung improvement by packaging them as a commodity for tourism, starting with 100 villages and increasing the number to 960 in 2012 and later to 2000 in 2014. The state aimed at promoting the villages and "including the selling platform [of the villages] into digital market place."³²

The foregoing historical framework suggests that by taming, improving, or erasing kampung and then packaging it into commodity, the State's policy toward kampung has seamlessly progressed from postcolonial modernity to neoliberal capitalism. Amidst the global race in major global economies, countries like China and Indonesia are making huge investments in the infrastructure development of marginalized areas in urban and rural contexts.³³ While the urban development is deemed necessary to reduce the social gaps, the top-down approach needs to be balanced by the perspective from below which is exemplified by the following three kampung communities.

Reversing the neoliberal perspective: kampung as an antidote of urban ills

The following three kampungs are situated in different moments of urban transition, yet all three are at disadvantaged ends of the urban-rural and local-global traffic. This section will examine how each kampung with its different initiatives reverse the modernist gaze of the city, an act of "talking back" to the power centers.

The first, Kampung Cempluk, is an urbanized village encircled by real estates and, to date, is under threat of being swallowed by the expansion of cities. Prior to 1990, Kampung Cempluk was an underdeveloped area located in the subvillage of Sumberejo, in the Northwest border between the city of Malang, East Java and the larger Malang

regency.³⁴ The kampung's name originates from the use of kerosene lamp (locally called *cempluk*), as electricity came very late to the area. The area was separated from the developed part of the city by a river. Initially, it was a rural area with families living on subsistence secondary crop farming, until the city expanded. Malang, a city surrounded by mountains with many resorts, up to the present is known as a student city, with a mushrooming higher education that attracts incoming students from other regions. As the city's population continues to grow, development expanded to the outskirts, turning farm lands into real estates. The need for manual labor for development turned subsistence farmers into bricklayers, carpenters, and construction workers, who commuted to the city. The village used to be known as an unsafe zone with a high crime rate. In the 1990s, real estate developers built a bridge to turn the area into a gated middle-class residential area. In 2007, a prestigious private university was established in the area, and by then Kampung Cempluk, that used to be a section of the rural subvillage, had by default turned into an urban kampung, surrounded by real estates.³⁵

The second kampung, Ledokombo, is a migrant-sending village for Asian cosmopolitan cities and a market for urban consumption, short changed in the exchange, depleted of its most significant human resource: parents. The village is located in the northern area of Jember regency, 30.4 kms from the city of Jember, East Java. It is populated by 64,841 people, mostly of Javanese and Madurese ethnic groups, working mostly as small farmers or farm laborers.³⁶ Since there is also traffic of goods and service between the village and the adjacent city, some villagers also commute or work in the city as unskilled labor and peddlers. The village is known to provide unskilled migrant workers, mostly female, to be recruited to other cities and islands in Indonesia as well as East Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.³⁷ One social issue caused by work migration is the rising number of left-behind children of migrant parents who are put under the care of aging grandparents.

The third kampung is a subvillage with aging population, besieged by poverty, and of the rural-urban transition. Karanggeneng subvillage is located 38 kms from the city of Magelang, Central Java.³⁸ This subvillage consists of 63 households; 40 percent of which are middle-aged widows, whose source of living is selling nut-crackers made by crushing *melinjo* nuts with a daily income of 13,000 rupiah (around US\$1).³⁹ Most of the young people have migrated to work in neighboring cities. A small number of vegetable crop vendors, navigating between the city and the village, are quite well off, thus widening the social gap.

Each of the three kampungs experience the impacts of urbanization, albeit differently. Located within the expanding city of Malang, the first village, Kampung Cempluk, reaped most benefits from the urban development. Due to the process of gentrification in the area, inhabitants had opportunities to set up food stalls for students. With increasing job opportunities as manual workers in the gentrified area the villagers secure better income, and they manage to upgrade their houses to provide room accommodation for students. The semipermanent kampung houses are now transformed into decent modern brick houses. These benefits, however, come with a pending threat: kampung dwellers have been tempted by lucrative land deals.⁴⁰ If the kampung is engulfed by real estate, the inhabitants will receive compensation which would enable them to buy land located further away but not to stay. For the second village of Ledokombo, I observe that urban expansion came in the forms of an internalized urban lifestyle and consumption practices

as part of the lure of migration. Village children are addicted to gadgets and unhealthy processed snacks, and, when asked, none of them aspire to work as farmers.⁴¹ In 2010, when the migration business was at its peak, the large trees near the rice fields were covered with advertisement planks for motor cycles, easy credit facilities from money lenders, and migrant worker recruitment agencies.⁴² By then, the wooden houses in Ledokombo had been replaced by brick houses marked with emblems of cosmopolitan cities, where members of the families or both have migrated for work.⁴³ The worst impact of urban and transnational migration is experienced by the left-behind children who, under the care of aging grandparents, are vulnerable to drugs and alcohol consumption, petty theft, teenage pregnancy, bullying, and a high dropout rate.⁴⁴ Karanggeneng, the third kampung, was the most depleted kampung not only in terms of sufficient economic source of living, but also in terms of social life due to outflows of young people of productive age to work in the cities. Supriyadi, a village dweller, whom I interviewed as key informant, observed that, “when a monthly gathering was initiated and members were requested to contribute less than US\$1, many villagers still failed to do so.” In such impoverished conditions, “there was not much social interaction, as each household was busy making ends meet.”⁴⁵

Community of place

Prior to the initiation of kampung activism, the three villages discussed above were geospatial administrative units inhabited by households with long histories of residence. However, in the case of Karanggeneng, the villagers lost a sense of community due to the invasion of urban individualistic, rent-seeking mentality.⁴⁶ Kampung, as a spatially bounded neighborhood community which falls within state governmentality, has been the subject of various disciplines with their differing paradigms, such as sociology, anthropology, and “implementation sciences,” such as public health, developmental and policy studies.⁴⁷ At the heart of the discussion is the much-debated concept of community, whether this is a “rooted settlements” with “lived, worked, placeable social identities” with cultural and social bonding, or a heterogeneous social space, constructed socially and inherently transient and unstable.⁴⁸ The initiatives and experiments of the three kampungs discussed here suggest that the sense of place-based community is a process of becoming that requires effort and work, not a given entity.

During critical moments—in the face of eviction and crisis of human resources—the three kampungs started to build their “communities of place.” Most of the inhabitants of Kampung Cempluk have resided there since they were born, and they have enjoyed the fruits of gentrification brought by a sprouting real estate industry.⁴⁹ At the same time, there have been concerns about the lifeline of their kampung. Families that have established close relations in the kampung felt that they needed to strengthen community ties to fight the transactional mindset, which is the way developers persuade inhabitants to sell their land, that will tear them apart.⁵⁰ For that purpose, inhabitants initiated a regular culinary bazaar which was called the *Tempo Doeloe Bazaar* (Old Time Bazaar), open both in the afternoon and evening. In the evening, only kerosene lamps were used to light up the street to remind the villagers of their history and the meaning of their kampung’s name. The villagers set up stalls in front of their houses along the kampung’s streets selling homemade traditional snacks and food. The decorations were made by the

carpenters out of used materials.⁵¹ In August 2009, with the help of Redy Eko Prastyo, a musician and a programmer working for a local university television (UBTV) who had settled down in the *kampung*, the community turned this annual community gathering into a multiday festival, featuring local martial arts, traditional dances, folklore, and music that they relearned.⁵² Each year the festival grew, and participations were enlarged to include families from adjacent *kampung* neighborhood. By 2018, the festival had achieved a more public and, even, international flavor, with both local and guest musicians from several countries playing on the main stage, food stalls being rented out to nonresidents, and visitors having to pay parking tickets.⁵³ For Redy Eko Prastyo and the community, the festival is a way to create a cultural branding for the otherwise ordinary *kampung* area, which is under threat of being swallowed by expanding development projects. The Javanese slogan “*kampungku uripku*” (my *kampung*, my life) was reiterated by Redy Eko Prastyo as a means to underline the commitment and determination to retain their *kampung*.

In the second village of Ledokombo, I observe that the cultural commoning takes the form of efforts to regain pride and confidence in the local language, traditional games, and cultural identity. Farha Ciciek, a Jakarta feminist activist who returned to her husband’s home village to care for her ailing mother-in-law, turned their modest living room into a community center and library called *Tanoker*, a Madurese word which means cocoon. They revived a forgotten traditional Indonesian game known as *egrang* which utilizes bamboo stilts and reintroduced it to the children.⁵⁴ Working with the larger community, Ciciek organized village parades for the children and their families to partake in the local culinary bazaar and handicrafts. In 2010, *Tanoker* held the first *egrang* competition and festival, with two Australian women guests as the team of judges.

The children were not proud to be villagers and were ashamed to speak in their mother tongue. We specifically used a Madurese term and help them revive local traditional games to show that they have a wonderful cultural heritage. When they perform in public, in front of both local and international guests, they are very happy and proud, and their families and the community realize that they have something within their community that they can rely on.⁵⁵

Inspired by a Swedish model, Ciciek also established a school for mothers, fathers and grandparents, and designed the concept of collaborative parenting (*pengasuhan gotong royong*) to create a child-friendly *kampung*.⁵⁶ The curriculum in the school she designed for mothers includes gender awareness, the importance of religious tolerance and cultural diversity, nondiscriminatory norms for child-rearing, and healthy nutrition. The mothers, including returning migrant workers, work together to produce local snacks and gifts that are marketed not only to local festivals, but also to neighboring cities. The community building process, which started from the creation of space for left-behind children to nurture their heritage, has enlarged into circles of parents, grandparents, and the local government. This way, Ciciek aims not only to call migrant workers home to be with their children and families, but also to develop a healthy and culturally resilient *kampung* space.

The transformation in the third village came from Supriyadi, a marketing consultant who married a woman from a neighboring subvillage and settled down in Krangganeng.⁵⁷ Supriyadi was concerned about the level of poverty and lifestyle in his village. He was later inspired by a reality television show entitled “If I were,” featuring city dwellers who spent a

few days experiencing “authentic” moments in other people’s shoes. Yet, his village only has rice fields, like other villages, with no special natural features. There are also no distinct traditional housings and only a number of simple village brick houses or semipermanent houses. In fact, the village is located on the farthest end of the village, making it the most isolated and unnoticed village compared with the neighboring ones. Based on this local reality, Supriyadi then designed a program to offer city children an experience of intimate social relations, which he later termed as *gotong royong*; a collaborative spirit that was ironically absent when he first settled down in the area.

It took Supriyadi six months to convince the community about his “crazy” plan. He befriended six villagers who ardently supported his efforts to introduce the plan to the rest of the *kampung* dwellers. Similar to the practices in Ledokombo, Supriyadi and his neighbors revived traditional children games and started practicing them in the open areas in the village thus buoying up children and families to join. They rented half of a set of *gamelan* (a Javanese traditional musical ensemble consisting of percussive instruments) to be placed in a hut and invited an instructor to train the children and the youth of the village to play the *gamelan* and perform traditional dances. When the first bus filled with Jakarta schoolchildren came in 2013, they were divided in such a way so that each of the 50 households, including the poorest and oldest widow in the *dusun*, could accommodate a number of children. The children stayed with their village parents and experienced daily life, sharing the work, be it grinding the melinjo nut, working in the rice fields, and playing traditional games and *gamelan* with the village children. Jakarta International School and a Christian school from Jakarta were among the schools that participated in the live-in program. The first experiment was a success, as both the village parents and their city children bonded and found it hard to part. The village economy and social relations were also transformed. The villagers continued their daily work with additional income from the visits, which was around Rp. 200.000 per visit for around 15 times a year. Aside from the money, they felt excited and eager with their common venture. The common “profit” they received from the visits was then used for maintaining public facilities, paving the road, building a wooden storage space, and setting up a bamboo and wooden stage for *gamelan* performance as well as a dancing area for children.⁵⁸ There were a lot of organizing and discussing new ideas together that led to more social cohesion. Supriyadi observed that “before, if villagers wanted to borrow a car from their neighbor, they had to pay rent. Even the more well-off neighbors were focused on their own household economy. But now people share what they have and help each other.”⁵⁹

These three cases show how the community of place in *kampung* is not a given, but a process of becoming constructed through a process of socialization and sustained by rooting it to local cultural resources, which are relearned and reshaped according to the needs of the present. The *kampungs* cannot but escape the neoliberal thrust of urban expansion, which is geared toward gentrification and commodification. At the same time, the *kampungs* use the very same system to halt the flow of capitalist urban expansion and create social equity. Locally grounded between the rural and the urban, yet at the same time wired into transnational networks, these *kampung* serve as small marginalized but strategic nodules of critical intervention into the march of global capitalism.

The three informal village leaders who settled down in the villages made use of their national-international networks to strengthen the bargaining power of their communities.

Serving as facilitators, these cultural activists encourage village residents to rediscover traditional and local cultural resources, such as children games and culinary recipes, and reintroduced them to the community. Creatively, the kampung activists also copied and adapted urban popular culture to reinvent local entertainment in order to create social space solidarity and also festivity. By putting a spotlight on their kampung, these informal leaders brought capital to the community, connected and introduced the locals to diverse national and global subjects and, at the same time contained urban encroachment. These actors can, thus, be perceived as “embedded intermediaries” who are mobile, connected, and resourceful in tapping and mobilizing support from various sources, local or transnational.⁶⁰

Compared with the NGO activists who worked against the State’s eviction of kampungs in various villages in the past and present, these intermediaries (the village leaders) do not position themselves in direct opposition against the hegemonic capitalist-cum-State urbanizing force. At the same time, they reverse the perspective of the postcolonial modernity, by framing the community building in the kampung as an antidote of urban ills: transactional mentality, unhealthy lifestyle and urban consumption, and erasure of local and rural cultural memories.

Festive gotong royong

The strategy used in all three kampungs to intervene with the urbanizing tendency is to rebuild a collective spirit that has been emaciated by the capitalistic transactional mentality. The kampung activists all refer to the Indonesian term *gotong royong*, which literally means carrying a burden together, an idiom that bespeaks various rural praxis and tradition of gathering collective support. The term was popularized by the first Indonesian President, Soekarno.⁶¹

Tracing the use of the term *gotong royong* by Soekarno and other national elites in the postindependence era and up to the New Order era, the term was appropriated by the State for different political purposes.⁶² Soekarno extracted the essence of this originally agrarian term to carve a national character which was distinguishable from what he called Western “free fight individualism”⁶³

In the decade following the cold war, President Soeharto “reworked” it into “a cultural-ideological instrument for the mobilization of village labor” to build agrarian infrastructure.⁶⁴ The call to *gotong royong* in kampung activism in the twenty-first century recaptures Soekarno’s usage in a different context and trajectory. Today, the term is no longer a statement of difference vis-à-vis the West but a response to the unstoppable onset of a hyper-modern urban lifestyle. *Gotong royong* is utilized as a term to bring back what is missing in the present globally capitalized world, which is the commons. Scholars have stated that “many current campaigns to resist incorporation into the widening circuits of capitalism are grounded in a shared commitment to keeping alive ‘the commons’ and the collective practices around them that create and sustain community and its ecological bases.”⁶⁵ In the kampungs, people make use of an idle property land based on oral permission and not based on a legal contract, or clean a garbage dump area to be made into a children’s playground.⁶⁶ On another level, Ciciek in Ledokombo reclaimed parenting, which had been lost to global migration, as a space for the collective commons. Supriyadi marketed his village in order to bring the spirit of *gotong royong* back to the community. These are various acts of “commoning.”⁶⁷

The term *gotong royong*, with history of use and abuse during the Soekarno and Soeharto discussed above, runs the risk of becoming a mere catchword. Scholars have asserted that “*Gotong Royong* can be a dangerous term if it is used as the title of a proposal for individual or group interest for material gains.”⁶⁸ Trie Utami, a rock singer and a critical member of the Japung network, reminded kampung activists to differentiate “what is done professionally and what is done in the spirit of *gotong royong* as a kampung activist.” She underlines that “the individual must ... not be tempted to make use of the community as a stage for self promotion.”⁶⁹

This reminder speaks of the difficulty in carving clear-cut boundaries of ethical and sound acts of commoning, within a capitalistic world, where initiatives for common good can be seen as marketing. In order to underline an ethical guideline for individual activists, Trie Utami coined the term Personal Social Responsibility (PSR) which is a parodic wordplay of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).⁷⁰ Scholars have argued that CSR subscribes to a reformed capitalist ideology.⁷¹ The coined term PSR is both a reference of the era of global corporatism in the 2010s and at the same time inadvertently a critique of the practice of CSR as a disguised corporate promotion. This term does not refer to an individualized (nonstate) obligation, but a warning against the orientation of self-benefit perceived by scholars as the main cause for the failure of the commons.⁷² In his classic essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Hardin observed that the way in which individuals tried to reap benefits of the commons for themselves eventually depleted the common resources.⁷³ The term PSR is to alert against such free riders. By playing the similar-but-different game, Utami situates kampung activism in this tricky positioning by being both inside and outside capital. The necessity to coin the term PSR also suggests that kampung commoning is not without problems, internally between community members and externally in dealing with the State and the market.

In order to deal with various kampung issues, in 2016 kampung activists set up a social media network called Japung (Nusantara Kampung Network) to link more than 50 kampungs across Java, Kalimantan, and Eastern Indonesian islands with similar interests in cultural commoning.⁷⁴ Initiating various cultural activities that necessitate and recreate the lost *gotong royong* spirit as well as reinvent local traditions, kampung communities seek to correct individualistic and rent-seeking attitudes characteristic of the modern urban living. Kampung activists work to correct urban predicaments by reversing the post-colonial, modernist gaze of the city which frames kampung as backward and problem-ridden. The revitalization of the local is not a nostalgic or romantic return but a formation of a jovial and friendly heterogeneous cultural space to contain the rise of religious fundamentalism and social segregation of cities.

Being both inside and outside the system, the actors—embedded informal kampung leaders who make alliances with the State—remain critical of the State’s top-down policy and reshape it to create a community-friendly bottom-up process. They make use of digital technologies and social media to expand the act of commoning into a larger network of nonmonetary sharing of resources and ideas. This festive spirit of *gotong royong* through digital as well as community-based commoning, which is produced concurrently within and by circumventing the system if necessary, is one way for doing cultural studies in an age when globalization has penetrated all aspects of life.

Conclusion

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, with the advent of information technology in a global context, an increasingly urbanized population, and global capitalism securely anchored, a more humane vision of global development has been sought to make the world more ecology-friendly, democratic, gender-friendly, with higher quality living. Without altering the basic neoliberal tenets of competitiveness, productivity and growth, the smart city concept forges an ideal template for various aspects of urban life, smart people, smart economy, smart mobility and smart governance.⁷⁵

The title *smart kampung* in this paper aims to deflect this trajectory in order to see the messy and diverse realities in the Global South, as communities in urban transition strategize to position themselves within and vis-à-vis the city expansion. The kampung initiatives are smart in using the very stamps of what is presumed as their “backwardness” to be the icons of their community of place. The smartness also lies in the way kampung communities strategically tease out the existing neoliberal framework around them, making use of the network technology and transnational connection. kampung communities engage in strategic “branding” to capitalize their kampung while, at the same time, correcting corporate tactics to ground their work ethics. The kampungs are smart in investing on joyful festivity as the nature of their cultural commons.

As invasive urbanizing is accelerating in the Global South, it is critical to learn from moments and areas of urban transition, which has not, like what is assumed in the Global North, been completed. The neoliberal thrust that has characterized urban development has led to the loss of a place-based community due to a transactional mentality. The ways kampungs in the outskirts of globalization rectify urban problems through cultural commons of collective sharing is a critical contribution of cultural studies. Without exteriorizing the city and the global, the smart kampung unsettles power relations by reversing the city’s modernist gaze and offering local antidote. This doubling strategy is relevant for doing cultural studies in the Global South.

Since the Birmingham inception, the cultural studies critique of ideology and praxis in everyday life, with its focus in the urban context and subculture, has been localized in different cultural geographies with different emphases, such as the British working class subcultures, North American popular culture and cultural politics, and the postcolonial feminist intervention in voicing the subalterns in South Asia. In the context of the rising Global South, discovering diverse practices of Asian commons within the enclosure of neoliberal capitalism is a crucial project. For such an inter-Asian project

the task is to build a theory of the commons which does not recycle the idea of the commons as a theory in search of geographic examples, but as a theory that is built from the memory and lived practices of the people living in the region called Asia.⁷⁶

To answer this very need for building and sharing knowledge from Asian realities, inter-Asia cultural studies, of which this essay is a part, has answered the call. Without necessarily exteriorizing the West, the goal of inter-Asia cultural studies scholarship is to unsettle the postcolonial knowledge formation by putting into dialogue whatever is usable from transnational critical theories with the local realities, and inter-referencing it with other Asian concepts. Finding resonance with other similar experiments is an urgent cause

for the Global South in order to foster collaborative intervention before globalization has exhausted its course.

Notes

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