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Thinking With A *Kampung*

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This ethnographically inspired essay is a preliminary rehearsal of how a *kampung* thinks. I consider *kampung* as a form of vernacular ecology that abounds in, but is not limited to, Southeast Asia, with which one can approach climate in a more lateral manner. The exercise is to rethink resilience with a *kampung* in Jakarta and the accomplishment is to re-specify the concept as one of the most ordinary things that occurs in everyday life.

KEY WORDS: *kampung*; urban climate change; floods; climate resilience; knowledge production

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Introduction

Kampung is one word and concept that can be found in different languages in Southeast Asia¹. It can be *kampung* (Malay), *kampung* (Minang), *gampong* (Acehnese), *kompong* (Khmer), and so on. Various cognates of the word are related to the largely oral tradition of Austronesian language families, which are standardized and learned through literacy movement and development of printing and information technology for the last century. *Kampung* has been existing and always already existed; it is precolonial. The entity has a longer history before the creation of modern nation-state, a concept which emerged relatively recently and stabilized after the period of post-1945 decolonization in the region. Should we consider 'state' as the macro-structure, the largest unit that contains the smaller units of the whole political architecture, then it is likely that *kampung* is the self-organizing smallest unit, an ontological unit of politics.

I then consider *kampung* as a *form* of vernacular² ecology, a site for crafting new words and concepts, with or without state interventions. A *kampung* is a sea of words, ocean of concepts. It is replete with names, practices, and objects, which are often unregistered in the formal lexicon or reworked into something else. There are then plenty of words and concepts awaiting to be interpreted, translated, and re-specified from and in *kampung*. However, as a form, it is stable but fragile (Kohn, 2013:186). It is constantly threatened by modernization and urbanization. One such threat is eviction. Eviction, in this context, is an effort to build a set of new, if not modern concepts. The eviction of *kampung* is one way to stabilize the urban and to develop the state. In such logic, the older political architecture must be disassembled and reassembled, through knowledge production exclusive to certain experts.

¹ As recorded in Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'kampong' from Malay inspires the word 'compound'. It can mean village, settlement, or enclosure. It can be insalubrious and become slum, but not always. The concept of *kampung* rather implies a sense of belonging and origin.

² By vernacular, I refer to a hybrid of different cultures and languages, of the colonizer and the colonized. Today's use of the word is a generalization from *verna*, "a slave born in master's household" (Dewey, 1997: 183).



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Against exclusive knowledge production, the notion of a lateral approach can be read as a decentering gesture in which scientists and informants are “fellow travelers along the routes of social abstraction and analysis” (Maurer, 2005: xv; Gad & Jensen, 2015). Reflecting from the context of study of indigenous peoples, research was rather “believed to mean, quite literally the continued construction of indigenous peoples as *the problem*” (Smith, 1999: 92). As a response to such a problematic relation between research and indigenous peoples, lateral approach as a mode of engagement implies a conversation between the observer and the observed where one’s life is mutually entangled with another (Helmreich, 2009:22; Ratner, 2012:88). It is to a certain extent sympathetic with the political project of technical democracy which “attempts to democratize expertise and to foster dialogue and collaboration among experts and laypeople in processes of technology design, knowledge production and attendant world-making” (Farías & Blok, 2016:539). In other words, it is to decenter relations between researchers and informants in a symmetrical and inclusive manner for a co-production of the empirical and the conceptual (Gad & Jensen, 2016).

The title of this essay, *Thinking With A Kampung*, is an attempt to approach climate in a more lateral manner. It resonates with Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (2013), which refigures tropical forest as an ecology of selves with living thoughts and a figure to think with. A *kampung* thinks, too. It is through this essay that I attempt to sketch and identify ways of thinking with a *kampung*. The aspiration is to rehearse the possibility of approaching climate laterally, just like the modest *kampung* which has been existing and always already existed albeit enveloped by a larger entity, such as city, state, and climate. The exercise is to rethink the concept of resilience through a mundane activity in a *kampung*, i.e., cleaning-up after regular flooding. But before that, a brief description of the *kampung* and the city, the natural and the cultural. For the sake of storytelling and respect to the *kampung* inhabitants, all names are pseudonyms.

A Brief Story

We should begin with an ontology of a dirty, messy, polluted, and untidy city where the inhabitants are disposing their wastes (from motor vehicles’ emission to their own faeces) back in to their environment (see Wachsmuth, 2012 for comparison). Dirt surrounds us, therefore, it is difficult to establish a claim of universal cleanliness in such a city. Matter out of place seems to be the rule (contra Douglas, 2003). The flood inundates us together, washed away our order, our dirt, into near nothingness. We even built the city upon the dirt, the heterogeneous materials that transform water into land.



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From hundreds of ponds, there are only dozens that remain. The rivers are narrowed and shallowed due to settlements of humans, muds, bamboos, concrete, trash, microorganisms, and other materials. In short, the city is built upon “the insensible and the unknown” (Clark & Hird, 2014). Such that we are thinking out loud: “Where do we stand?”

During the rainy season, floods occur more frequently and with increased severity³. Indeed, the city has undergone continuous environmental engineering (such as sluice gates, channels, and dredging) that aim to regulate upstream flows from the hinterland lying beyond the jurisdiction of the Jakarta government. However, the engineering has never been able to keep up with the strangely familiar transformation of water into land and accumulation of untreated waste, hence the sustained precarity of living in a polluted and vulnerable environment, particularly in an overcrowded *kampung* like Siti Andhap.



Figure 1. A raft with toilet destroyed by flood

³ This is relative to increased size of Jakarta and its population.



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I was welcomed by a thigh-deep flood the first time I went to Siti Andhap. The *kampung* is the lowest land in the neighbourhood where a toilet-raft was located on the bank of Ciliwung, the river that cut through the heart of Jakarta. The next week was the largest flood since 2013 and I had to evacuate to the house of the toilet-raft designer, Cahya, which had a second story, unlike the house where I stayed in the same *kampung*. There we started to make our relationship more intimate. As it rained fiercely in the background, we lay on a mattress and the designer recalled a story. The 60 year-old man had filled the riverbank and built a dwelling upon it by incrementally planting bamboo poles, sacks of rubble and other wastes, and sheets of supports such as woven bamboo and tarpaulin, that behaved like geotextiles and could trap upstream sediment brought by the river. By doing this, he was able to consolidate the new land. However, his new land and the new house were washed away by the flood in 2007, together with the second story of his house as well. “*Namanya alam, gak ada yang bisa lawan*” (It is nature, nothing can win against it), argued Cahya. Things come and go, lost and found.

Cahya considered himself a *Betawi*, or a native of Jakarta. Today, a *Betawi* is considered “a specific creole culture and identity” that “derives its integrative potential from being both an ethnic and a transethnic category of identification” (Knörr, 2014:198). What is exciting and may become confusing about *Betawi* is its highly diverse, heterogeneous, and hybrid culture and identity. *Betawi* is an assemblage of local ethnic groups (Sundanese, Javanese, Malay), Asians (Chinese, Indian, Arab), and Europeans (Portuguese, Dutch, English).

Such is the biography of Cahya, a *Betawi* person born from a Javanese father who worked as a tempeh artisan. His mother was an adopted daughter of Ji’ih, one of the elders who opened up the settlement in Siti Andhap, a neighbourhood at the bottom of a flood plain with seasonal flooding at the lowest areas. Upon marriage in the 1950s, as an adopted daughter of an elder, Cahya’s mother was given the option of where to live. She could have decided to settle in higher areas but she rather lived as close as possible to the river, the most accessible sanitation facility for bathing, washing, and defecating. After Ji’ih passed away, Cahya continued to live in the same house with his wife and children and bought the land in the 1970s, at the time when the house was next to the river, or rather the river was still directly in front of his house. For most of his life, he admitted that he had been familiar with the fluctuation of the river’s water level which manifested into flooding at its high points.

The brief history of the city suggests that it is built upon geological stratification. Nevertheless, whereas the previous layers had largely been settlements of upstream sediment, in less than a century there is another layer, anthropogenic and partly built



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upon waste. To what extent that the layer is cultural just as much as geological remains to be seen.

After The Flood Has Gone

Scene 1: I hung out in front of the alley, as usual, listening to the chatter of males (yes, *nongkrong*, or 'hanging out' was still a male dominated practice with topics such as football and body-building). A guy turned on his bluetooth speaker and played a list of Iwan Fals's songs. We talked, talked, and talked, until Adul, Cahya's grandson came wearing his gumboots. He then signalled to Iyan, a neighbour at his age, that the overflow in Cahya's house was already receding. "It's time to clean up," Adul made his gesture. Three girls who played in the water the stopped their game, making a space for the cleaning operation.

What to do after the flood is gone? Of course, the 'left over' cannot clean itself. Murky water, mud, and whatever else found there (Cahya found a *sapu-sapu* fish) need to be washed away from the house on to the streets, in to micro-drainages, or simply directly in to the river.

There is a logic in the environmental practices of riverbank inhabitants: cleaning activities need to be done by 'taking turns' (*tunggu giliran*). Those who live further from the river are on a higher ground and they get the earlier turn to clean their house and flush unwanted things to the alley. A sign of receding water would be given by neighbours, sometime in form of facial or other bodily gestures and often with very little words. The cleaning up activities are about how people do things with subtlety and few words to coordinate among themselves.

Scene 2: For the next two hours, I joined the cleaning activities in Cahya's house. It began from pushing mud and clearing trash with rubber mops. Cahya directed the coordination and lead the cleaning process. He gave his brief instruction, "*Tarik, Wan!*". Cahya told me to move the water passed from one corner to the door and then he pushed them out to the alley. He sparsely instructed Adul, to do one thing or another, but the boy seemed to be bored and indifferent. Coordination is a situated activity and it is learned from repetition without necessarily having a written standardised manual for reference. Coordination is still possible with minimum and without direct instruction, which can be substituted with signals or codes. Instead of being directly instructive, people were building *the atmosphere* for such manual labour. Almost each house played loud music (mostly Indonesian



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Top 40s, such as Isyana Sarasvati or Anji Drive) and we sang together while cleaning. Akin to how a guy played Iwan Fals' songs a couple of hours ago, the music built *the ambience*, a clean-up soundtrack, and it signalled that there were ongoing social activities. The 'adults', older people were those who were assumed to held more knowledge and spent more energy and caring for cleaning the intimate objects, such as how Cahya and Minah washed the walls.

Instead of 'automated', the coordination of multiple practices is gendered and involving figures of 'adult' (*orang tua*) and 'children' (*anak-anak*), and shaped by their interaction order. "For most of my life, I love to play with children, rather than adults," said a 50-years old guy who I often saw playing with girls and boys. A grandmother would order her daughter and grandson—both were considered children by the grandmother—to push the mud, waste, and whatever blocked the flow. She gave instruction in short sentences, less than five words per sentence, often with emotive particle such as "*dong*" and "*lah*".

There is a spectrum of coordination, from silence to loud, from humans to nonhumans. They are sonic and atmospheric, involving layers of sound from people talking, music recording music, to water splashing. Often adults took charge of ordering, sometime with high tone, or even loudly screaming, especially women, older women. The children were allowed, though, to not follow the adult's order, or even talk back to them. Even worse, some children would rudely scream back, curse, and call the adult by their first name.

Scene 3: The cleaning activity was fading away when Cahya did the dirtiest job, submerging more than half of his body into a gutter behind his house, reaching the drainage and unplugging muds, trashes, shits, and other things that blocked the flow of the toilet (yes, the builder-designer of toilet-raft has a toilet inside his house!). Adul and the other boys already left the house. Cahya soon did go out too and pushed the mud toward the river. If there is a rule, then it is "things must be flushed as soon as possible, otherwise they will be rotten inside the house". The music was turned down and the mood is shifting toward the end of the day; Maghrib praying call was in the air. The males were cleaning their bodies and preparing for the prayer. Minah walked while carrying bags of rice, food, and oil. She then distributed the bags to her neighbours.



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Figure 2. Post-flood cleaning-up activity

Such practices are regular self-maintenance activities of those who live on the riverbank and regularly flooded during the rainy season—although the flood can spill over to neighbourhoods further from the river, down to the main road. In the house, nearly everyone

is busy doing different things (wiping the walls with wet clothes, pushing water and mud with rubber mop, etc) and what is amazing is the ways those multiple practices are coordinated; people are familiar with what to do without necessarily having a (formalised) meeting or discussion beforehand. Apparently, there are different forms of coordination that shape the life on the riverbank. The coordination has its own logics and languages. Indeed, it may not be the most efficient way to coordinate; there is no written standard operating procedure. It is as if things and practices are makeshift and improvisatory, if not non-standardized. On the other hand, one could say that they are customary, conventional, parts of a traditional life world that does not need to be made explicit, a kind of a familiar mode of engagement (Thévenot, 2001). Resilience thus can be seen as a kind of regularised and thus institutionalised practices—the opposite of inventive and experimental—that almost seem automated from the outset, at a glance.



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Such an attempt to search for alternative understandings of resilience intersects with the problems of communicating the complex concept of urban climate change. The concerns rest on the assumption that a better understanding of the concept will increase awareness and engagement. But as suggested, the concepts have been co-existing and always co-existed and been practiced, albeit not in a standardized form and in the same name. The inhabitants have been practicing a form of coordination with its own logic and language, whereas government and other organizations have their own logic and language as well. Therefore, in the context of communication and mediation, the search for alternative understandings of resilience is about translation, to find a shared language that can be fine-tuned or re-specified after recursive interaction.

Rethinking Climate Resilience: Translation From Above and Below

There are two words and two problems in conceptualising and translating the concepts of 'climate' and 'resilience', not to mention when they are paired. Thinking with a *kampung* is a kind of problem identification and a caution not to rush to the already-made conceptualization and recursive critique as a favored way of thinking.

First, the problem with translation of the concepts is ontological. It is about making sense of environmental practices, such as post-flooding cleaning up, against the spatiality and temporality of objects and their becoming. Akin to characterizations of infrastructure (Star, 1999: 382, see also Larkin, 2013), climate is 'more visible upon breakdown' and gains more attention when it manifests in form of disasters such as flooding, typhoon, and tsunami. The agencies of climate might suggest that its instantiations embody radical asymmetry: they seem to be indifferent to the lives of humans and other non-humans alike thanks to its relative autonomy by which they can exist with or without human existence, exercising freedom independent of human interventions (Clark, 2011; Morton, 2013; Tsing, 2014). Climate is considered to be a thing "with vast temporal and spatial reach"; a hyperobject that is durable "beyond our use and persist beyond the grave"; and thus an extremely large field that can be about many things and approached in different ways (Howe, 2016). Such multiple readings of climate implies a set of "differently distributed and connected-up events" which are often laden with uncertainty, indeterminacy, and instability which are relevant to the resilience of matters (Gabrys, 2016: 113). But what does resilience even mean when climate is a hyper-object and its relation with human is radically asymmetrical? Global warming, whose effects remain for the next hundred thousand years, is one glaring example of hyper-objects: "real objects that are massively distributed in time and space" and "massively outsize us and outlast us" (Morton, 2011: 80-83). In a radical asymmetry, the disasters are rather approached



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as multiplicities of "elements, things, and forces" that violently surpass human power and forcefully shape human life in cities (Tironi & Farías, 2015).

There is a story⁴ which is assembled from different stories scattered along Ciliwung river, from upstream to downstream, which shares a similar notion of radical asymmetry, but with a twist. In the story, the hyper-object, climate as a being, was dismembered by humans whose weapon is destroyed and did not stop the power of the being whose body parts were scattered along the river. Such is the story of the inhabitation of the flood plain area. The inhabitants of Siti Andhap have been learning how to be resilient, that is, through a kind of institutionalized practices which attempt to forge a coexistence with the earthly force, even when the attempts are laboured and do not necessarily diminish risks.

The second problem is ontological just as much as it is political, linguistic and anthropological, as recorded in psychosocial memories embedded in the language. The word 'resilience' in Indonesian has been translated into *ketahanan* (defence) and *ketangguhan* (toughness). Although those words could connect with the concept of resilience, the connections and the chains of translation have been primarily state-led and expert-based. Such are *translations from above*. Before the word '*ketahanan*' is formally paired with 'climate', it has a longer history of being paired with 'national', which is laden with ideological doctrines. The word thus may be (mis)understood and (mis)used as a generic term for practices, objects, and other things related to defence and security. The notion of 'climate resilience' is then becoming unclear (*samar*), imprecise, and most importantly, distanced (*berjarak*).

The exercise of translating a concept such as resilience into different words in other languages teases out one problematic issue with the concept, namely about "when words do (not move) things" which has been enigmatic in philosophy of language. At best, these different understandings are not errors; they are an equivocation, forms of misunderstanding or confusion that can be productive. In the words of Andean anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2015; 27), translation is an equivocation where "it matters what concepts we use to think other concepts".

⁴ This refers to the myth of Pak Buang. It is scattered along Ciliwung river. It was said that Pak Buang is a magical giant that flooded the river with his fluid each time he peed. Then there was a hero who challenged the giant. The giant then was lost in the battle and his body parts were dismembered, scattered in different places along the river. The first was Cadas Putih (White Stone) which was part of his head and the white parts were his spilled brain pieces. The second part was Batu Biji Pelir (Penis Seed Stone), which was the remaining of the giant's scrotum. The third part was Kedung Jiwo (Soul Trough) which was in form of whirlpool, a vortex that could draw nearby objects. The fourth part was Gagang Golok (Blade Handle), the hilt of the weapon which was broken after the giant was defeated. There are other parts such as Kedung Bau (Smelly Stone) and Bokor Emas (Golden Grail).



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The inhabitants of Siti Andhap demonstrate that the concept and the practice of resilience have been existing and always already existed in different forms and names, with or without state intervention, just like the *kampung*. The inhabitants consider one instantiation of climate as a being, the river, that at certain times manifest into undefeated violent force — although this does not stop them to inhabit the plane for generations and develop forms of resilience, such as regular post-flood cleaning-up, to sustain their inhabitation⁵.

To live with the potentially violent earthly forces then is to inhabit a life full of risk, uncertainty and instability: at one time in melancholy, other times in playfulness, rarely in total silence; there are various modes of living with those earthly beings. Things come and go, lost and found, often beyond human control. This does not mean that climate change is something to be taken lightly. Rather, in the time of Anthropocene, when the figure of human ‘the Anthropos’ seems to be singularized and undifferentiated, the *kampung* opens up the possibility to search for alternative ways to approach climate in a more lateral and symmetrical manner. For studies of climate policy, this is an opening for *translation from below*, from the everyday practices of those who are familiar and have been living with floods for the most of their life. There has been existing and always already existed forms of resilience that maintain the living *kampung*. The task therefore is to develop a middle ground on which concepts from above and below can be moderated and discussed, although this admittedly can be a risky endeavor laden with friction and productive misunderstanding. For those who are searching for ways to approach climate in a more lateral manner, the accomplishment is to re-specify the concept as one of the most ordinary things that occurs in everyday life. Thinking with a *kampung* then invite us to engage with the ordinary, embrace the mundane, and inhabit the immanence.

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⁵ On the other hand, there have been inventive and experimental forms of inhabitation as well. Houses along the riverbank are usually built by informal builders, who are living in the *kampung* and have been experimenting with ways to minimize the flood risk through specific designs of foundation and housing construction.



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