

THEORISING 'PLACE' IN AN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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Abstrak

Bagi sebagian besar penduduk Indonesia, mudik menjadi suatu kegiatan yang dilakukan ketika mereka sudah meninggalkan tempat kelahiran mereka. Setiap ada kesempatan, terutama saat Lebaran dan/atau Natal, banyak orang mudik ke kampung halamannya. Ternyata mudik tidak selalu hanya pulang ke rumah orang tua, menengok keluarga, tetapi juga tentang kembali ke 'tempat' yang mempunyai kenangan untuk tiap individu. Dalam tulisan ini juga diulas tentang kaum homoseksual yang memilih keluar dari desa menuju kota, tetapi pada saat-saat tertentu mereka tetap mengunjungi desanya itu. Konsep mudik juga bukan hanya milik orang Indonesia karena di Barat pun ada konsep yang sama tentang kembali ke tempat yang mempunyai kenangan tersendiri bagi orang tersebut.

Kata kunci: mudik, tempat asal, kaum homoseksual

Introduction

This paper attempts two things. It will explore some of the theoretical aspects underpinning a conceptualization of place. Because the focus is on *mudik* and the journey people make from urban places where they live to the non-urban villages they continue to call home, this paper will also concentrate a theoretical consideration of rural place. The second aspect of the paper will move to a more specific consideration of how Indonesian men who have left rural places for reasons of sexuality and the hope of greater sexual freedom conceptualise *mudik* and those rural places they left.

Mudik

The term *mudik* in Indonesian means "to go home". This is the literal meaning and it is used when a son or daughter goes home to visit their parents. For many Indonesians, this is not as often as they would like. Work, distance, and children of their own prevent many from visiting parents on a frequent basis. For those not so well off, lack of a car or the cost of public transport are additional reasons for not going home so often.

But *mudik* also takes on a wider meaning, especially when a son or daughter goes home at *Lebaran* or at Christmas. This is the time at which adult children make an extraordinary

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effort to go home. This is the going home for which some will save for months so as to be able to do so. This is the *mudik* that they will make despite great difficulties and inconvenience. *Mudik* also refers to that one visit of the year that parents wait all year for as this is the time that all of their children come together with their wives, husbands and children. *Mudik* is going home to parents. It is the young going visiting the old. It is a time and opportunity to renew ties with siblings, to ask forgiveness, to give gifts and cash (or *uang gembira*, literally 'happy money') and to relax and enjoy the company of family. It is a time of celebration. As Aedi (2003) notes,

For Indonesians, to *mudik* at Idul Fitri is an annual passion. For Indonesian's Muslim majority, it is natural that this should take place at Idul Fitri. This is a time of family celebrations, of reuniting with loved ones, and especially for the ritual of mutual forgiveness among relatives, friends and neighbors. One has to be there in person.

But *mudik* is also a journey which can also be seen as the city dweller going home to the village in which they were born, spent one's youth and grew up. It is a nostalgic trip back to one's origins. Therefore, *mudik* is also a going home to a place almost as much as it is a going home to people. But little has been written regarding this aspect of *mudik*.

***Mudik* as Moral Journey**

Going home takes on a moral component. As can be seen from Aedi's article, the journey is one of 'passion' and 'ritual'. It is an obligation that one goes home not only to enjoy the camaraderie of family, but to pay respect to

parents as well. Vickers (2003) puts it another way and suggests that "movements that Indonesians undergo are movements between moral worlds".

The iconisation of the countryside is not a recent phenomenon. Literature, art, music, film and culture of many societies bears out the regard in which the rural landscape is valued (Lawrence, 2003). In Indonesia, this is represented perhaps more so by negative representations of the city. For example, the 1924 short story by the radical activist journalist, Marco Kartodikromo (1981), entitled *Images of Extravagance* depicts the city as a place of rampant hedonism, immorality and (ultimately) degradation. Similarly, in the paintings of Dede Eri Supriya,

the city is an alienating world of the poor, a place of enclosure and capture. His images of the city are dominated by grid lines, made up of girders or laneways that hedge in people, where horizons have disappeared and isolated figures wander aimlessly (Vickers, 2003: 12).

Unlike much of the Western world, in Indonesia the moral superiority of the rural way of life remains entrenched in the national psyche. This is not to say that all Indonesian literature and painting takes a depressingly dim view of the city, but it is hard to find works in which the city emerges as a place of light and hope (Vickers, 2003). The corollary is that it is the village and the rural landscape where there is connection and belonging and permanence. The simplicity of living, the sense of community, the more relaxed pace of life, the honesty and decency of people are all traits associated with rural life. While rural Australians may have

tended to become 'the forgotten', and they have tended to be dismissed with a strange amalgam of economic and social irrelevance, cultural simpleness, and 'nostalgic sentimentality' (Sher, 1994: 33), Indonesians have not come to see the village and village life as a place of social irrelevance. Village life is seen as especially relevant to the social and cultural life of most Indonesians and it remains honorable and desirable precisely because it is not like the city.

Yet the city still remains the only economic opportunity for many Indonesians and hence the need for *mudik*, to go home and reconnect with family and the landscape and to restore a sense of moral balance to their lives. While it might be a place of employment opportunities, of educational opportunities, bright lights and buzz, the city remains for most Indonesians a necessary place of residence rather than the place where they would prefer to be. For most Indonesians, the city is too large to be a community. It is a place of acquaintances rather than friends and family. It is a place of provisional living – provisional in the sense that it provides the physical and economic necessities of life, but also provisional in that one must leave it and *mudik* to avail oneself of those moral provisions that sustain the soul.

This depiction of rural life, however, is largely that of those who left the village. The idealization of the village, the journey and rituals of *mudik* are the acts of exile. Tuan (1976) makes the point that attachment to a rural sentimentality or place is perhaps better portrayed by those who have experienced the juxtaposition of a rootedness to place with a sense of exile or displacement. Paradoxically,

the depiction of village life in Indonesia finds its finest expression in the efforts of those not living a village life.

Theorising Place

Casey (1993: xv) writes that place has the power to '... tell us who we are and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as *where we are not*'). When people are asked where they come from, the answer is usually in terms of place – in terms of a person's 'hometown'. One's hometown is important. It gives a person a sense of origin and, as such, partly determines, or at least gives shape and substance, to his identity and who he is. The origin of the word 'hometown' is unclear, but it has connotations of birthright and reference to the place where one was brought up. But truly it means more than that.

Home and hometown signify belonging as well as providing a connection between place and identity. 'Place' is a term that has a variety of meanings in a dictionary sense, but is principally used as a noun to denote location. Sociologically, places are localities that people given meaning to by the experiences they have in them. 'Sense of place' refers to both a set of meanings given to a person's experience in a place and attachments to places by individuals as a result of those experiences. This paper adopts a phenomenological concept of place in that place is about human experience in a place and about a person's experience of that place.

The seminal works in this area are Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and *Getting Back into Place* by Edward Casey (1993). Relph (1976: 141) describes place as

the 'fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world'. For Relph, one could experience place in degrees of intensity, the most intimate experience of place being one that he termed 'existential insidedness'. For Relph (1976: 55), if a person feels 'inside' a place, he has a feeling of attachment and belonging to it. Casey (1993: 313) essentialises this by simply saying that 'there is no being except in place'. Given that this paper adopts a phenomenological concept of place, the phrase that place is 'location experienced' may well be a useful one. Therefore, places are localities that people give meaning to by the experiences they have in them. 'Sense of place' refers to both a set of meanings a person gives to their experience in a place and the emotional attachments to places by individuals as a result of those experiences.

Place has physical, social and imaginary dimensions. In suggesting this, there is agreement with phenomenological and existential approaches that see place in both material and more abstract ways (Knopp, 2004). On the one hand, place is real and has the power to cause effect in peoples lives. On the other, place becomes a site of wishful thinking, imagination and escape.

Leaving the Village – the Forgotten Migrants

As has already been mentioned, Tuan (1976: 11-39) makes the point that attachment to a rural sentimentality or place is perhaps better portrayed by those who have experienced the juxtaposition of a rootedness to place with a sense of exile or displacement. Paradoxically, the depiction of village life in

Indonesia finds its finest expression in the efforts of those not living a village life.

Indonesian academic literature is replete with research concerning transmigration, the movement of people nationally and internationally to find work as well as a range of other issues that concern the dislocation of people from the village in which they were born and to which they have affinity. However, there is one group of people who move from their village of origin who have not received the attention they deserve. This group is gay men who were born and grew up in villages, but decided that in order to live the life they wanted to lead. They decided to leave family and the village and go to the city to be themselves, and be with others like themselves and like all other people to leave rural places to go to the city, this decision to leave brought the associated opportunities for work, education and career.

The prevailing academic construction of the sociology of homosexuality would

... view cities as centrifugal forces, magnets that pull isolated individuals from the hinterlands into large urban centers, where they could recognise their sexualities, find one another and become a community (Howard, 1997: 221).

There is evidence of the apparently well-trodden path from rural places to the cities that many gay men felt they had to take in order to make a life for themselves. Numerous studies have reported on the huge migration in the 1970s and the 1980s that gay men took from the prairies and the plains in the USA (Weston, 1995: 253-277). Browning speaks of the traumas of small town life that had '...driven legions of seventies gays to flee hometowns in

Michigan or Kentucky or Kansas' (Browning, 1993: 40). A special report in *The Advocate* on gay life outside the cities in the USA was prefaced by the statement that 'Untold numbers of us [who] have fled to the big cities to find ourselves, bring with us stories of the toll a repressive environment can take' (Bull, et.al., 2000: 1).

For gay men, the hinterland was depicted as a place of never-ending emotional (and sexual) drought. Preston (1991: xvi) suggests that gay men living in rural towns in the United States usually thought they had only two choices, '... they could either sublimate their erotic identities and remain in their hometown' or '... they could move to a larger centre of population and lose themselves in its anonymity'. Gay men in Australia also raised clouds of dust as they left the bush and headed for the cities (Wotherspoon, 1991: 15), because '... that's what gay boys from the country did then' (Horin, 1994). They came to the cities not only to 'lose themselves' (preston, 1991), but to 'find themselves' (Horin, 1994) in the obscurity and 'incognitiveness' of the metropolis.

This is not only a Western phenomenon. In his recent doctoral study of Indonesian gay men, Richard Howard (1996: 354) noted

that young men recognizing a same sex desire have moved from smaller villages to the city to explore their homosexuality and to avoid the pressure to marry".

Despite their apparent plight, it may not have always been with enthusiasm that gay men living in rural areas left these places that they knew as home. Casey (1993: 35) cites a report from the USA that makes the observation that 'the results of over 25 studies around the

world indicate, with no exceptions, that the execution of compulsory relocation among rural populations with strong ties to their land and their homes is a traumatic experience for the majority of relocatees'. Perhaps those gay men who decided to leave the rural places they grew up in were as much 'relocatees' as the Navajo Indians and others to which that study referred. The nostalgia of leaving is not only about times past, but also about place lost.

For Indonesian gay men who left their villages to live lives of their own choosing, the nostalgia of leaving is as present in their lives as the all other Indonesian who *mudik* every year. In fact, gay men also *mudik* and return to family and village. In a small study on Balinese gay men who grew up in villages, it was noted that

the affection in which these gay men were held by their families and the eagerness with which they returned to their villages at every opportunity indicated that they were well liked and regarded, their 'difference from other boys' notwithstanding (Green, 2006: 111-136).

This sense of belonging to the village came about, for these men, intensified because they left when perhaps they may have actually preferred to stay. The village was the place in which they had lived the formative years of their life. It was the place that held much of their life's memories and histories. The village was where these men's experience of life occurred and was therefore the site that gave worth and emotional significance to their lives. For these men, just as the village was place located, then too place was experience located. The village was where family still resided and it was the

place to which they had significant emotional, familial and social connection. It follows that it was there that their life had enhanced meaning. The way these men revealed their attachment to the village aligns well with Relph's concept of 'existential insidedness' by which a person relates to a place as though he feels he is inside it, belongs to it and it is part of him and he part of it (Relph, 1976: 55).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to take a theoretical look at the conceptualization of place and contextualize it through the practice of *mudik* in Indonesia. It makes the point that while *mudik* is about city-based people 'going home' to family, it is also about returning to their village. *Mudik* is also about going home to place.

The paper has also suggested that of the millions of Indonesians who leave their villages, a significant but largely forgotten number includes gay men who seek a life of their own making away from family and village. But like all other Indonesians who leave they also have a fondness for home and *mudik* and go home at auspicious times. Gay men have always existed in Indonesia and, as Professor Dede Oetomo has noted, homosexual practice is institutionalized in a number of ethnic groups and traditional customs. Another report makes the point that gay men in Indonesia "do not sit as a culture *apart*, but a culture intrinsically embedded in Indonesian social and sexual life" (Dowsett, Grierson and McNally, 2006: 83). Therefore, if gay men are embedded in Indonesian social life, it is unsurprising that their social practices, such as *mudik*, also follow traditional social patterns and mores.

Additional research around the movement of gay men in Indonesian society is required and this needs to be underpinned by theoretical considerations of place. This paper is an attempt to conceptualise place and explore how place and social practice are interrelated through *mudik*. It goes on to suggest that while gay men are an overlooked and forgotten segment of society, their participation in intrinsic social practices (such as *mudik*) may indicate that they are not as apart from Indonesian society as many believe.

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