Stories from the Graves in the Yard

JJ Rizal

April 2014 was nearing its end. A crisis in Jakarta became manifest in two reports in the daily newspapers, as well as some readers' letters in response.

Kompas, the biggest daily in Indonesia, published a letter on the 28th, titled, "Pemakaman di Pekarangan" (Graves in the Yard). Puji Lestari, its author, a resident of Kembangan, situated in the western part of the Capital, Jakarta, complained about her neighbor, a Betawi family, an ethnic group native to Jakarta. The Betawi still practice the now increasingly abandoned tradition of burying dead relatives in their yards. Puji's neighbors live in a house built on inherited land that has been in their family for generations and already has a number of graves. In her letter, Puji requested that the city government enforce its regulation on burials, which she considered her neighbors to have violated.

The newspaper also published a response from Iman Firdaus[1], a Bandung-born worker who resides in Jakarta. His letter more or less echoed the same sentiment as Puji's, but was written in a harsher and more salty tone. Burying dead relatives in the land surrounding the family house is a silly tradition, according to him, and he related his experience when he studied at Bina Nusantara University and lived in a rented room in Kemanggisan, West Jakarta, an area predominated by Betawis. It was not Firdaus' first encounter with this practice, as he saw the same when he lived in Lenteng Agung, South Jakarta. Based on all his experiences, Firdaus asserted that "the local government really needs to enforce the regulation by taking action and prohibiting burial in the yard".



Family graveyard in Betawi's family house. Photo by JJ Rizal

Still on the same day, and also in Kembangan, word-on-the-street attributed the vandalism and arson of a house of one community organization, Pemuda Pancasila (PP), to another community organization, Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR)[2]. PP was conceived in the aftermath of the bloody coup that toppled President Soekarno at the end of September 1965. The organization grew as President Soekarno ceded power and President Soeharto established control. Meanwhile, FBR came up in the

1
Iman Firdaus, "Pemakaman di Pekarangan", Kompasiana, accessed on 15 October 2020 at www.kompasiana.com

2
Bima Setiyadi, "Pos PP diduga dirusak puluhan anggota FBR", Koran Sindo, 28 April 2012, accessed on 15 October 2020 at metro.sindonews.com

era of President Soeharto's diminishing authority, and the weakening of centralized government, both of which shaped social-political tensions and the characteristics of Jakarta street politics. On one hand, FBR claims to facilitate the voice of historically marginalized socio-economic communities in Jakarta, communities which need an organization to help them handle the conditions of material deprivation, poverty, and exclusion. Instead of adopting a nationalism-based perspective, FBR responded to the decentralization of power with ethnic-based sentiments. FBR has been able to utilize the general perception that their roots are in the urban kampongs of Jakarta, including when making assertions to represent the impoverished Betawis in their own claims of control of city spaces that are really part of their ancestral land[3].

Less in a week prior to this, on April 22, 2014, Jakarta—along with other big cities in the world such as San Francisco, Beijing, Brussel, Moscow, Marrakesh—celebrated Earth Day. Jakartans, like many other residents of those other big cities, planted trees and a variety of other activities signalling care for the environment. Like in previous years, Earth Day 2014 had a focus on urbanization, and spoke of the urgency to build more ecological city areas, in contrast to the status quo of chaotic urban development that undermined the possibility of greener living. A celebration video that was globally distributed concluded with an invitation: "Join us. It's time to green our cities".

The juxtaposition between the Earth Day celebrations and the violence between the grassroot community organizations truly encapsulates the conditions of crisis in Jakarta, a capital city that not only experiences environmental challenges, but also the issues of human vulnerability in the face of acute social conflict caused from inequalities in society. But what about the readers' letters about the graves in the yard? How is that related to the crisis?

The Origins of Crisis

An expert of urban culture, Melani Budianta, described the origins of Jakarta's ecological disasters and social crisis as rooted in the embarassment of the upper echelons of Jakarta society that their city was considered merely a big village[4]. This mockery began during Soekarno's era, and was a byproduct of cold war politics. Soekarno himself was apparently personally affected by this stigmatization. As a consequence, during his reign he initiated a number of experiments in political space architecture to change Jakarta from the colonial capital Batavia into the capital city of the Republic of Indonesia, as well as serving as a beacon for the axis of the New Emerging Forces (NEFO), a group of nations that were recently decolonized.

When he appointed Ali Sadikin to become the governor in 28 April 1966, Soekarno said, "Jakarta must have a waardig physical face". In other words, to have a "modern international face", which he often repeated in his speeches. The statement for the capital city to have a dignified appearance was translated by Ali Sadikin as a task to transform the "big village" or big *kampong* of Jakarta into a "world class" metropolis. This mission found new momentum during the swift and dramatic political transition from one leader to another. Under Soeharto, the mission to modernise of Jakarta was also a signal of welcoming the return of glo-

3
Lebih jauh lihat Ian D. Wilson, Politik Jatah Preman: Ormas dan Kuasa Jalanan di Indonesia Pasca Orde Baru, Marjin Kiri, Jakarta, 2019.

4
Melani Budianta, "Pidato Budaya: Lumbung Budaya di Sepanjang Gang", Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (DKJ), Jakarta, 2020.

bal capital, which had been previously chased away and told to "go to hell" by Soekarno. Global capital together with the ruling armed forces reconstructed all manifestations of nationalism, including urbanism.

The effect of the oil boom and the flood of foreign investment further asserted that the city is no longer just a space of mass mobilization, as it was under Soekarno, it became a space of capital mobilization. This paradigm of development was one of "instant" development, where the building of infrastructure was glorified. Economic expansion was followed by population growth. Between 1966 and 1976, Jakarta's population increased from 3.6 million to over 5.7 million. Ali Sadikin worked with this spirit of accelerated development, and population growth continued at a rate of 4.5 percent each year. From Gambir—both the central part of city area as well as the center of Soekarno's failed political space architecture experiment, which was left as the ruins of a grandiose dream, a series of unfinished truncated skeletons towering over slums and decaying trash—Ali Sadikin built a plan for organizing the big *kampong* into an international metropolis. Ali Sadikin began to pave his way for his plan from the graveyards.

In 1966, public cemeteries in Jakarta were in a bad condition. Cemeteries were scattered throughout the city. Jakarta was actually exempted from the horrific events of the mass murders of the post-G30S 1965 coup which happened in many other cities, because the army successfully deflected the anti-communist mob to vent their anger and violence through vandalism and the plunder of property. Nevertheless, dead bodies were still a serious problem that needed a solution in the city. The city government anticipated the daily mortality rate of 160 per day, or 60,000 per year. An effort to regulate and facilitate as well as to spur the transformation of cemeteries had been prepared in the 1965-1985 Jakarta Master Plan. From that point on, a series of regulations determined and enforced the boundaries of the use of land and areas for burials.



Family graveyard in Betawi's family house at Lubang Buaya, East Jakarta. Photo by Abdul Latif

By 1975, Ali Sadikin had exhumed and relocated 41,530 remains from 26 public or family cemetery locations, covering a total of 167,813 hectares. To accommodate communities in transporting the remains of their families, 18 hearses were provided[5]. All remains had to be reinterred in new cemeteries as appointed by the government, each one around 30 hectares in area; these included Tanah Kusir, Jeruk Purut, Tegal Alur, Pasar Minggu, Cipinang Besar, Menteng Dalam, Tanjung Barat, Meteng Pulo, and Grogol Petamburan. In accordance with regulations, old public and family cemeteries were vacated.

In conjunction with Ali Sadikin's action on the graves, he pursued a policy of gentrification and aimed to transform the slums into elite neighborhoods. It is arguable that the Ali Sadikin initiative, the M.H. Thamrin *Kampong* Improvement Project, did improve the lives of its residents. However, in her deep analysis, urban historian Susan Blackburn argues in Jakarta: A History that the Project *"seems similar to the city government of the Dutch colonial era, Jakarta government also choose the easier way by helping the impoverished, to keep them from distracting concentration of building parts of the city that look more worthy as a modern international capital city."*[6] The allocated funds for the Project were smaller compared to other budgets for Jakarta. This was not a characteristic specific to the Ali Sadikin era, it's a general characteristic of the New Order regime, which is Jakarta-centric and views space as a commodity. As a result, urban development rapidly invaded the Betawi kampongs and transformed them into new modern settlements. In an instant, the kampongs became closed in by various infrastructures. The standard urban facilities appeared: from paved roads to cinemas, supermarkets, banks, restaurants, and private schools.7

There was a famous saying in Jakarta during that time: "masup mubil" (car can enter)—signifying that a location was no longer a *kampong* with its typically narrow and muddy streets. This saying describes how the Betawis perceived gentrification as something not negative, but as an upgrade of the *kampong*'s physical qualities. This positive image grew stronger with the increasing number of sayings in the tone of "masup mubil", such as "ade bioskop" (cinema available), or "deket supermarket" (near supermarket). All of these sayings would in turn become signifiers for consumerism in the Betawi community. The penetration of consumerism can be tracked by the emergence of common phrases used to describe the desires to live a lifestyle of the "haves", as opposed to the "have-nots", such as as "orang gedongan" (people of the brick building), or "merabot" and "majang"—"merabot" means buying a lot of expensive and branded house furnitures, while "majang" is the activity of displaying and showing off such valuables.

While the Betawi community improved its access to modernity, at the same time, the price of land increased due to gentrification, and that caused a lot more offers for the purchase of land. Here was when the Betawi *kampong* communities picked up the wind to achieve their drive for consumerism because they now had the resources to attain it. Gentrification also provided opportunities for them to fulfil a religious desire, one that has been instilled since childhood. During bed time, every mother in the Betawi *kampong* would lovingly sing a lullaby to their children, *"Ya Allah ya Rabbi, minta rezeki biar lebi, biar bisa pergi haji, ziarah ke kuburan Nabi."* (Oh Lord Almighty, please give a bit

5
Gita Jaya, pages 214-215.

6
Susan Blackburn, 400 Tahun Sejarah Jakarta, translation from Jakarta: a History Gatot Triwira, Komunitas Bambu, Depok, page. 307.

7
Susan Blackburn, 400 Tahun Sejarah Jakarta, translation from Jakarta: a History Gatot Triwira, Komunitas Bambu, Depok, page. 307.

more, so we could go on the pilgrimage, to visit the Prophet's grave.) It is as if the parents were reminding their children about their obligations towards the fifth pillar of Islam in the future. Alwi Shahab, a Jakarta chronicler, described in 1970s how a lot of Betawis went on the hajj pilgrimage after they sold their land, or after their property was evicted due to a development project. This gave way to another common saying, *"haji gusuran"* or eviction hajj[8].

In the urban restructuration, the Betawis lost to the temptation of easy money. Although, it's important to emphasize, that not all of these transfers of land ownership were properly compensated. At stake here was the power of exclusion or elimination. The exclusion began with the implementation of a series of regulations that defined the boundaries of the land and affected who could access it and how the land would be utilized. The key actor with the regulatory power is the government, through the processes of certification, allocation, formalization, and land conservation.

For example, in the implementation of Jakarta Master Plan 1965-1985, its details were made inaccessible with the specific intention to thwart land speculators, but eventually, this lack of access harmed the Betawis, and actually delivered the land into the speculators' grasp. There were times the Betawis voluntarily gave up their lands out of respect to the authority of the government, when, for example, they wished to build a road across their jurisdiction, but often the Betawi would not know the exact area required for the road, and ended up surrendering more land. In the majority of cases, the people were forced to leave their own land entirely. The 1970s was as an period filled with land disputes. Land acquisitions were carried out like military operations, examples of which include Kampung Rawasari in 1972, Bendingan Hilir and Pondok Indah in 1975.

Exclusion of the Betawis was also done through the market in the form of the rise in land prices. With the increase in demand for space for development and urbanization, the transfer of land rights accelerated. As a result, family conflicts often ensued within the contexts of claim disputes, which would push aside family members who did not want to sell, and even the dead members buried in the yard were evicted. Kinship proved to be a fragile in these circumstances, unlike the ideal of of a family facing difficult and easy times together, struggling against poverty together with a sense of *kampong* solidarity. The drive for a more prosperous life was far more tempting.

Since then, the Betawis have experienced marginalization and economic disparity compared with other urban residents. The situation grew worse because for the next 25 years, urban development was handed over to developers and financial speculators in the belief that the city would grow exponentially like other global mega-cities. Their fate worsened with the property market boom that began in 1973 and kept peaking until 1987 and then again in 2000. While the price of land in a crowded city like Jakarta expectedly increased with the passage of time, however, more residents were evicted to maximize the usage of land. The Betawis in Jakarta became a native community who were marginalized in their own kampongs. A satire by Abdul Chaer, a Betawi cultural expert, described their tragic fate: "when the Betawis gathered and smile and laugh merrily, they are reminiscing of the past, but when

8
Alwi Shahab, "Haji Gusuran, Haji Singapur; Ketika Orang Betawi Naik Haji," Republika, 13 February 2019.

their faces turned sour and sad, it is unmistakable that they are discussing their fate today"[9].

The Betawis took part in the narrative of growth by economic development that was promised by modernization, only to find defeat in social competition and to even get kicked out from the arena. That is the consequence when a native community that is closely tied to the land, but is no longer able to fulfil their needs from the land, and either deliberately or unwittingly is forced to let go of it. This reveals how the meaning of land for the Betawis was affected with the policy change of land utilization. This also happens because the graves in the yard, the fortresses that guard the Betawis who are connected to the land, were destroyed first.

The Meanings of the Graves

The graves in the Betawis' yards could be considered as fortresses that keep their people from being marginalized, which typically happened through seizure of the land they owned or lived on. So what circumstance would enable the graves in the yards to stop the threats of "accumulation by disposession" against them?

"Orang mati bukan kedebongan pisang" (dead people are not banana tree trunks). This old saying could be used as an entry point for understanding the meaning of land in accordance with Betawi culture. They believe that the spirit of the deceased family member will not leave the area of the family where they used to live. The same meaning holds true for the Betawis burying their newborn's placenta in the house yard. A placenta facilitates nutrition for the growing fetus in the womb, but it is also considered to be the baby's twin or sibling in Betawi culture.

Graves in the yard manifest the belief that the land holds an important position in Betawi customary law, because not only are these relatively small land holdings a significant if not only form of their wealth, they are the place where family and community reside, they provide livelihood, and also the place where dead family and relatives are buried. In accordance with their beliefs, the community lives on their property together with the spirits of their ancestors. This religious-magical perspective is the basis of Betawi customary law which mandates that the relation between the community and the land they inhabit is like that between teeth and gum: inseparable.

9
Abdul Chaer, Betawi Tempo Doeloe: Menelusuri sejarah Budaya Betawi, Masup Jakarta, 2015. Page 29.



Small building to cover family tombstone in the Betawi's house yard. Photo by Abdul Latif

The religious-magical perspective derives from the Islamic holy book, which regards the garden as an ancestral supernatural space that is transferred into real space. This view has been strongly internalized since the early age of every Betawi: *"Kencing jangan sembarangan, puhunan ade penunggunye"* (Don't pee just anywhere, trees have guardians in them). Of course, while this may be a mythical Betawi belief, it's not hard to appreciate the value of this tradition of seeing trees as a space of ancestors and the surrounding areas as a place that is imbued with their presence. The customary law mandates that any family members who pass away should be buried in the yard. These graves must be marked by planting seven fruit tress around them. The trees are believed to provide security, because, spiritually, someone is always protected by their ancestors who are not far from home. In addition, they provide some economic security in the form of trees that bear fruit throughout the year. To reiterate: this is the basis of the Betawi cultural system. Their sense of time is based on when the trees bear fruit; there is "durian season," "mangosteen season," "mango season," and so on. The trees also are the source of art objects such as the dirt mask, which is often used in Betawi traditional theatre.

The graves in the yard with the trees surrounding them could be interpreted as a space of the historical identity as well as the ecology of the Betawi community. Because these graves enable anyone to easily connect with the past of Jakarta. A past that manifests the specific characteristics of Betawi culture, which takes the perspective that nature rules humanity and that humanity is integrated with nature. This is reflected in the names of places in Jakarta which are derived from the names of trees, such as *kampong* Gandaria, Johar, Menteng, Duku, Serdang, Bungur, Bintaro, Kedoya, and so on. The strong identification with these trees created a lot of toponyms in Jakarta that begin with the word kebun (orchard), such as Kebun Pala, Kebun Jeruk, Kebun Sirih, and even *hutan* (forest), such as Utan Kayu, Utan Pitik, Utan Panjang, etc.

The historical and ecological identities are certainly correlated with

economic realities. The religious-magical perspective of the graves in the yards strengthen all these aspects due to the belief that as long as the trees are well maintained, they function not only as a form of prayer for the dead and a connection to the past as a living space identical to the trees themselves, but they also bring blessings of prosperity for those who are left behind, the neighbors, and the whole *kampong* community. The anthropologist Lea Jellinek notes in her research about the 1970s Kebon Kacang and Central Jakarta area: *"Mrs Cia is a native Betawi, her house has an earthen floor surrounded by vegetable gardens, fruit trees, it has a fish pond, and chicken and goat pens."*[10] Jellinek also observed that some of the garden harvests were for shared consumption with the neighbors, and the rest were wrapped and sold in Tanah Abang Market, or peddled around the kampongs.

This explains that apart from economic considerations, there is also a sense of community and sharing. And the kampongs are a good guarantor of air circulation and good air quality. Moreover, the trees provided protection over crises caused by the loss of ecological balance due to the accumulation of environmental damage in Jakarta, including groundwater level decline, air pollution, lack of clean water and lack of green open spaces. The Betawi architectural aspect of graves in the yard, which are actually an orchard and herb garden that dominates the yard, is more valuable than the house itself, and because the graves in the yard hold cultural, spiritual, ecological, and economical values.

Thus, with this background, remembering the stories of graves in the yard is a way of actually remembering the legacy of the past that can serve as a space where common values grow in urban contexts. The graves in the yard are a symbol of the power to unite and organize resources in a *kampong* community and they were the source of an emerging community movement. This is a life support system for Jakarta, which, as often repeated by its observers, is a sad metropolis, because it lacks common space and it residents continually experience a crisis of empathy. When all kinds of space are valued primarily as financial assets, there is pressure on these common areas, which can function to open up space that can be engaged by a wider range of utilizations and empathetic actors. At this point the graves in the yard can take on the role of the effort to reclaim urban areas from the control of capital that only sees space as money.

The graves in the yard becomes a kind of *mnemonic* code, a simple basic command to strengthen the memory, thus enabling city residents to maintain a network of memories and practices that keep the kampongs and its residents close to nature. This sense of proximity is embedded in each village and is centered on the graves in the yard. Anyone from anywhere can somehow become a part of the *kampong* community; they can find a way to coexist and, as part of the community, imagine a way to exist together, today and in the future, through empathy and a sense of unity.

Strategy to Depart

In a romance that hails from the 19th Century, *Nyai Dasima*, penned by a Eurasian, G. Francis, it is told how Dasima was trapped in a series of misfortunes when she left her brick building home and returned to her

10
Lea Jellinek, Seperti Roda Berputar: Perubahan Sosial Sebuah Kampung di Jakarta, translation Eddy Zainury, LP3ES, Jakarta, 1995.

kampong. Dasima eventually tragically dies with her neck sliced by a *kampong* thug and her body dumped into the Ciliwung. The story paints the *kampong* as a source of everything that is bad. Just as in the mooi indie painting, a *kampong* is presented as an image of dark bushes with evil power lurking within it. This negative meaning is framed by the official colonial perspective on the non-whites in the colony. As a result, the *kampong* becomes hard to define since it is not part of the regular administrative areas, as it is an informal, unplanned space of residencies spread out in the central urban or suburban areas[11].

"Tidak direken" (not recognized), is the Betawi term that describes the fate of the *kampong*. Jakarta splurged money to change its image from "the big village" into a modern international metropolis. As it turns out, the sought after transformation did not solve the chronic problems of urban unsustainability or lack of social-cultural resilience. The metropolis needs to turn to the kampongs, to see how the city actually depends on its kampongs as a support system for the day-to-day lives of its residents. Kampongs are the homes of the *babu* (maids), *jongos* (lackeys), horse cart drivers, and, in the colonial era, the mistresses, and not much has changed today, although the terms may have softened, becoming "household assistants", or "cleaning service", office boy, etc. The kampongs are the support system, supplying everything from the city workers to the kitchen preparation for the cheap food stalls around the high-rise multinational corporation office districts in Jakarta.

Furthermore, and most importantly, in addition to maintaining the existence of the *kampong* as a crucial value supplier, is to maintain the *kampong* as an antidote to such urban diseases as the greed for money and space. Jakarta is now part of the list of mega-cities with environmental crises, severe economic inequality, frequent social conflicts, and yet ironically, the city leaders seem to lack the awareness that a crisis can bring which then drives for a search recovery and survival. This fact is belied in the list of six strategic national mega-infrastructure projects planned for Jakarta and it surroundings, which began in 2013 with a Rp442 trillion budget. These projects of six toll roads in the city and the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), which will reach the farthest areas of Jakarta suburbans, will only further expand and entrench the gentrification that has always been followed by a rise in social conflict and ecological disaster.

The infrastructure mega-projects carried out by the government, along with the reader's letter from Puji and the follow-up response from Firdaus (both of whom speak as city commoners), offer an exemplary image that highlights the importance of discovering local knowledge systems rooted to local wisdom, systems that can be complemented by scientific knowledge. And yet such perspectives are far from becoming mainstream. But, although still a minority position, this does not mean that the prevailing discourses that privilege mega-infrastructure projects do not allow other discourses to emerge. Since 2010, the *kampong* resurgence movement has gained momentum. There has been a passion to rediscover the resources of local knowledge and ancestral traditions, at the same time utilizing the latest engineering to test ideas that have traditionally existed in the kampongs. This has become a tactic and an alternative approach to negotiate the dominance of capital, so that Jakarta, in particular, and Indonesia, in general, can escape the dangers that confront the country.

11
JJ Rizal, "Reading Two Dasima" in G. Francis and SM Ardan, Nyai Dasima, Bamboo Community, 2013, Depok, p. vii-xiv.

Paying attention to, and reflecting upon the stories of the last graves in the yards of the Betawis can be the place to start a tactical negotiation of capitalist development. Whether by those left in the kampongs of the inner city, or by those in the far suburbs of Jakarta who have survived the global capitalist order and it mega-cities. Or by the graves in the yard, which persist as a tradition in some of the new spaces in Jakarta's suburbs, built by the subsequent generations of the excluded community from Ali Sadikin's era, a community who refuses to lose and die.

Perhaps these residents do not quite know the full meaning of any of their actions of resistance—they are only trying to maintain tradition. But on another, global level, when most of the world has fully embraced global capitalism, the graves in the yard are one of the signs that are most specific to the kampongs in Jakarta. Although threatened with extinction, it is clear that these graves in the yard are an encrypted message for city planners and spatial researchers and other experts, and if they can read the signs, they might find the right direction for future urban planning. A direction that does not merely depart from the rat routes and small alleys of the kampongs, that moves away from the big village, and towards the global metropolis, as in Melani Budianta's earlier commentary. But a direction that knows it must learn to absorb the spirits of the kampongs and make these the city's spirit.

Author's Bio

JJ Rizal is an academic, historian, and founder of Penerbit Komunitas Bambu, a publishing house specializing in humaniora, history, and culture. His research is focusing on the history of Batavia-Betawi-Jakarta and his research has been published extensively in MOESSON Het Indisch Maandblad (2001-2006) magazine based in Netherlands. In 2009, he received the DKI Jakarta Governor Cultural Award. His writings about Junghuhn in National Geographic Indonesia were selected as "The Best International 2010" by National Geographic International Magazine, setting aside hundreds of articles from 36 National Geographic magazines outside of America. In 2011, he received the Jakarta Book Awards IKAPI (Indonesian Publisher Association) Jakarta for being considered to have "shared knowledge and change lives through books". Some of his published books are "Politik Kota Kita" (2006); "Onze Ong: Onghokham dalam Kenangan" (2007); "Sejarah yang Memihak: Mengenang Sartono Kartodirdjo" (2008); and "Raden Saleh: Anak Belanda, Mooi Indie dan Nasionalisme".

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