

# Lumbung Commoning

## Reflection on Kampung Network Research/Activism

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### Abstract

This article critically reflects on my engagement in kampung-network research/activism in Indonesia since 2017. I start the discussion by foregrounding what is personally at stake behind the motivation to embark on the journey, and the answer helps map the cultural climate of Indonesia and the strategic yet precarious position of kampung communities. The middle section of the article examines ethics of research/activism and discusses the challenges of transdisciplinary participatory research. This incomplete journey serves as a basis for theorizing on the strategies of cultural commoning which center on the metaphor of the lumbung, or rice granary and its articulation. The article closes with trajectories for emerging projects in the South-South transnational commoning.

### Keywords

lumbung, kampung, network communities, commoning, research/activism

## Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which is classified as zoonotic disease, scholars have identified global capitalism which has exploited the planet beyond its carrying capacity—as the root cause of global disasters.<sup>1</sup> Alternative praxis of commoning, in the form of sharing resources and mobilizing collective effort in grassroots communities, on the other hand, has become pivotal in dealing with multi-dimensional impact of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Studies in commoning have been in the scholarship since in the 1990s with Ostrom's collective idea of *Governing the Commons* which reversed Hardin's neoliberal perspective.<sup>3</sup> Garreth Hardin in his 1968 seminal essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons" argued that only privatization can secure the sustainability of an un-governed common resources, like forests, fishing area. Ostrom, in her rebuttal, showed that bottom up, community and collective maintenance of the common resources worked better. Since then, the term "commons" and "commoning" refer to collective and community effort in maintaining tangible and intangible resources for the common good have been widely used. It has been discussed from various disciplinary perspectives, from economics to the social sciences and humanities. Cultural studies scholarship has contributed to the study of commoning, among others among subculture, artists, and civilian groups in various fronts.<sup>4</sup>

This article is not about commoning per se, but about the process of engagement with kampung network communities in Indonesia, which develops into a scholar/activist practice of commoning that is yet in the making.<sup>5</sup> Kampung is a Malay word for "village hamlet," or "urban informal settlement." As fast urbanization occurred in the region and worldwide, the term kampung retained a pejorative connotation of being poverty-stricken, outdated, and not in par with the force of progress. However, starting from mid-2010s, there was a reverse movement of kampung revitalization in Indonesia, which was articulated both from the government and the civil society sectors. The kampung revitalization occurred in the intersection of differing interests, resulting in contradictions and complexities. In this paper, I focus on my involvement as scholar/activist in grassroots initiatives that use commoning as a method of activism, i.e., the collective and collabo-

rative effort in sharing kampung intangible cultural resources for kampung sustainability. The paper will examine the problems and contradictions that kampung-commoning has to deal with in negotiating with the forces on the ground and discuss its future sustainability and relevance.

Not a smooth and planned process, the experience is to throw light into the challenges of scholar/activist working in today's globalized world set in the fast-track neoliberal mode, with social and cultural fragmentation due to local-global disruptions.<sup>6</sup>

Written in a personal narrative style, the article begins by reflecting on my relations with two kampung activist network (connected via Whatsapp group), namely the Jaringan Kampung Nusantara and the Jaringan Kampung Bekasi. After contextualizing the kampung commoning within the national trajectory, I will evaluate the organic and complicated processes of doing ethnography and transdisciplinary work. The following section focuses on the concept of lumbung (rice barn/granary) which has been prevalently used to symbolize the collective work entailed in the kampung commoning. I will discuss the way the articulation of the lumbung metaphor intersects with state initiatives, social movements, and transnational project. A utopic project which is not free from complexities and problems in its implementation, I argue that the lumbung commoning speaks to an urgent need for a collective solidarity facing the world in crisis.

### **In the Beginning**

Contrary to what is considered as good research in handbooks, most of my significant research topics fall into place unplanned in haphazard ways, in coincidence with gruelling existential anguish. The topic of my doctoral dissertation, for instance, originated from an unfinished paper for a lecturer in whose class I felt like an invisible other. In the height of the Gulf war in the 1990s, my abject mental state actually helped me to research into the issue of Otherness in American literary and journalistic representations during the Greco-Turkish war in the 1890s.

In a slightly different way, I came to get involved in one kampung network community in September 2016, a distressing year. In January

2016, an informal chat from the Center of Gender and Sexuality Studies at Universitas Indonesia, which offers free counselling to gay students, leaked into media and was made viral. It was the beginning of a year-long persecution, hate speech, and bullying from all corners including cabinet ministers, house of representatives, religious leaders, as well as the conservatives within the university. The wake of moral panic and stigmatization against sexual minority lingered long afterwards, causing fear and trauma among many students.<sup>7</sup> As the initial debate only fuelled rampant anti-gay sentiment, LGBTQ activists advised supporters to dodge by being low-key and silent until the hysteria die down. It was an excruciating time for cultural studies scholars and progressive activists in Indonesia, a moment of paralysis. It was the time that I stopped using Facebook and rarely checked social media, until a colleague from the Jakarta Arts Institute introduced me to a kampung-network community called Jaringan Kampung Nusantara (Nusantara Kampung-Network), abbreviated as Japung.<sup>8</sup>

While other social media groups were not immune to the divisive agitation about sexual minority, I found that the Japung Whatsapp group chat was in a different plane altogether. In contrast to many other groups, moral dogmatism found no place here. Instead, the chat room has a relaxed atmosphere, often filled with silly chat and inside jokes, alternating with discussion about kampung issues and cultural matters. The group consists of cultural activists, artists, musicians, dancers, handicraft artisan, village administrators, cartoonist—who either live in urban kampungs or rural villages, or intellectuals who are concerned with kampung issues. The network connects kampung activists living in Java (mostly in East and Central Java) and some in Bali and Kalimantan. The coordinator of the group is Redy Eko Prasetyo, a musician who works as a staff in a university TV station, who lives in an urban kampung surrounded by gentrified residential settlements and campuses. His initial concern was to safeguard his urban kampung from being grabbed by real estate companies by establishing his kampung as a centre of cultural activities. The Japung network spawned from this purpose, as Redy Eko Prasetyo invited arts/cultural workers, and kampung activists to join the Whatsapp group. Japung connects about 100 kampungs, and about

150 kampung activists. Among them are a wellknown transgender dancer, Didik Nini Towok, and a Jazz-ethno musician Trie Utami, who is active in working with traditional musicians on the grassroot level. Getting to know like-minded activists with progressive perspective made me feel at home in the group, fulfilling a pressing psychological need in the time of homophobia. In January 2017, I met them for the first time, offline, in their anniversary gathering in Batu, to the west of Malang in East Java. Afterwards, there were a series of activities that I joined, among others giving cultural literacy workshops to teachers in a village in East Kalimantan.

In 2019, as I have become actively involved in various programs of the Japung network, I was invited by another social media group that links kampung activists in a specific area, i.e., Bekasi, a satellite city north east of Jakarta. A larger section of the area called Cikarang<sup>9</sup> has been designated by the central government to be a centre of industrial estate, with the aim of being the biggest in Southeast Asia. The development has taken place with the cost of marginalizing informal settlements that have been there for decades. There is a stark contrast between the two groups. The Bekasi group connects about 180 kampungs in 23 regencies in the Bekasi area. The WhatsApp group participants, which include factory workers, farmers and some environmental activists, have less social capital compared to Japung network. While Japung group's orientation is intellectual and secular, the Bekasi group is religious and political, with strong class sentiment. Unlike Japung's light and humorous banter, the discussion of the group is filled with concerns and reports of environmental problems, with critical if not oppositional standing towards the authorities. Local authorities are seen as corrupt officials with political and economic interest in prioritizing investors, while kampung dwellers are given attention only during political elections. As the Bekasi area is crossed by several rivers, there is strong concern about river pollution caused by industrial and residential waste and flooding due to hasty development without considering environmental impact. Many members of the group participate in the "Save Cikarang River" movement, monitoring and collecting river waste voluntarily in one of the main rivers crossing the Bekasi area. As the members of the group are native residents of the area,

local ethnic languages are used, and collective memories about place names and history are exchanged with the purpose of keeping local cultural heritage alive. The coordinator of the group is Komaruddin Ibnu Mikam, a respected informal leader who set up free environmental school for kampung children in his neighborhood, a wetland wedged between two rivers.

The two kampung groups, with their own different *raison d'être*, came to me in the time when I was questioning the efficacy of cultural studies scholarship in engaging with the power structure. For me, participating in the kampung activism is not a distraction, but a round-about way of dealing with the cultural politics of the time.

### **Lumbung Commoning**

Although the two kampung network—Jaringan Kampung Nusantara (Japung) and Jaringan Kampung Bekasi—in their own contexts deal with different challenges, both share a common strategy in mustering collective work and solidarity. One local image that is used in their icons for group identity is the rice barn, or *lumbung* in Malay. Originating from the rice culture, each rural village used to have two kinds of rice barns. One is the household one, usually made of one line of bamboo rack along the kitchen walls, where harvested corn and other crops are stored. The other one is a village rice barn for storage for rice harvest. What is kept in the village barn belongs to the whole community, serving as food security in time of need.

Lumbung as a granary for the storage of rice harvest is known all over Indonesian islands, and is called by different ethnic languages (over 700 languages). It has different shapes according to each region, but with a similar architectural pattern of pyramidal or steep roof, with a loft or space within it, the central storage area and the hollow space under the stilts.

Its existence is thought to be as old as rice farming in the region. A temple called the Lumbung Temple in Magelang built in 874 in Magelang, Central Java, suggests that Lumbung is an ancient heritage. Koji Sato argued that Lumbung used to be a sacred place that served as a model of the pile dwelling in the Asia Pacific region (31).



Fig.1. Logo of Kampung-Network Organization.  
Source: Toni Masdiono, with the permission from Japung Nusantara.

At present, with urban expansion and land grabbing for extractive and consumptive industries, granaries are disappearing. However, in my experience with various grassroots activism, be it in urban or rural villages, I found how the symbol of lumbung is widely used (fig. 1.) as an organizational logo, a symbol of the collective spirit.

In fact, lumbung becomes a symbol of an effort in gathering collective memory and cultural resources (tangible and intangible) for the common benefit of the people.<sup>10</sup> The following steps are abstracted from the observations I gathered from my interaction with both the kampung network and five kampungs in the city and regency of Tangerang, West of Jakarta in various projects. In 2013, when Jokowi was still the governor of Jakarta, he initiated the thematic kampung, whereby each kampung should find a specific theme

connected to their unique characteristics as their identity. The thematic kampung idea was widespread all over Indonesia.<sup>11</sup> As each kampung tries to construct their identity, they start by identifying what are available in the community (old people who knows history of the community, kampung dweller with knowledge about the history of the village, legends and stories, traditional music, dance, craft, herbal medicine, alternative healing method or grandmother's recipe which carries local culinary heritage).

Second, they construct space and ways for "storing the knowledge" (digital website, books, or small village or kampung museum). Another initiative is to beautify the kampung area. As the kampung space serves as the area for commoning, it is deemed important for the inhabitants to feel comfortable. They turn unused lots into children's playgrounds, common spaces for smokers, or day markets. Making murals and decorating the kampung alleys with lampions and canopies, and painting houses, are standard practice.<sup>12</sup> The thematic kampung trend and the kampung beautification easily fall into the more convenient short cut of touristic orientation—which the State also promotes through the Ministry of Tourism.

While such a short cut can divert the real purpose of commoning, creative ways in attracting millennials to stay or return to kampung is crucial. The challenge is to turn the cultural lumbung into something that can generate income and vacancy. Engaging youth to work on a locally based system for reactivating, reviving, and developing the cultural resources has been one main focus of kampung commoning. Setting up various workshops to relearn local arts or agrobusiness, is one example. In some of the kampungs I visited, the older traditional recipe can be packaged in a millennial style of menus in kampung *warung* (inn) styled as cafes, where young villagers learn to do business.

In relation to the issue of regeneration is the emphasis on the importance of organizing the sustainability and distribution of the lumbung benefits (or harvest) for economic and social welfare. Here lies the value of transparency through democratic and participatory process. Kampung assemblies are held in deciding priorities for commoning. During the pandemic, food security for laid off workers was urgent. In the urban farming initiatives



done by various urban kampungs during the pandemic. They revived a tradition called *jimpitan*, the practice of chipping in a cup of rice daily per household to be put in the kampung storage in order to be distributed in the time of need. To enhance food security, a number of urban kampungs cleared up an empty spot for urban farming and put up a schedule chart on the alley walls to remind people of their schedule in taking care of the garden.

Although these collective initiatives are locally anchored in different communities all over Indonesia, in the past five years they started to connect with each other through a digital social media platform and created a larger commoning network. Japung network, for example, came into existence due to the need of one village to find support for their cultural festival. In preparation for such a festive event, the village community from youth to the elderlies participate in reliving the kampung heritage through the food bazaar and arts performance. Japung also introduces the practice of *sonjo kampung*, a Javanese term that means “kampung visit.” Activists from other kampungs literally visit one kampung—usually the one that has some event or need—to give support or to share ideas in an open forum, attended by kampung inhabitants, from youth to the kampung administrator.

In the Bekasi kampung network, the WhatsApp group chat serves as a discussion forum, and on particular days, a venue for an “evening lecture” in which invited experts or activists in a specific field can share knowledge or give advice on specific kampung problems, such as regulations in social forestry, or practical tips in urban farming, beekeeping, or river fishery. The talk is usually done through the voice messages and the discussion is moderated by the WhatsApp group administrator through chat or voice messages. The discussion can last for more than two hours into the night. By inviting other practitioners or experts, several kampung networks got connected. For instance, Redy Eko Prasetyo, the coordinator of Japung, and some other Japung activists got invited to give evening lectures. Afterwards, they stayed as members of the Bekasi group. In this way they can share information and events organized by one kampung network to the others. All of these are done through social media—which allows activists in different provinces and islands to connect with one another.

### Multi-stakeholder commoning

In an ideal condition, the commoning could be extended to include multiple stakeholders of kampung welfare, such as the state (in this case local government), the academia, the NGO and the private sectors. In the digitally mediated commoning, the urban and rural kampungs are connected through the social media platforms like the various kampung members from several islands in the Japung network, or the inter-connection between some kampung network communities such as Japung and the Bekasi group. The annual return to the village during the Ramadhan holidays also connects the urban and rural kampungs, and can potentially be a potential link for commoning between said kampungs. Informal leaders in each kampung as well as arts/cultural workers and religious leaders can be influential agents of change in supporting kampung projects (fig. 2). Partners for commoning include NGOs and institutions working on urban and rural kampungs such

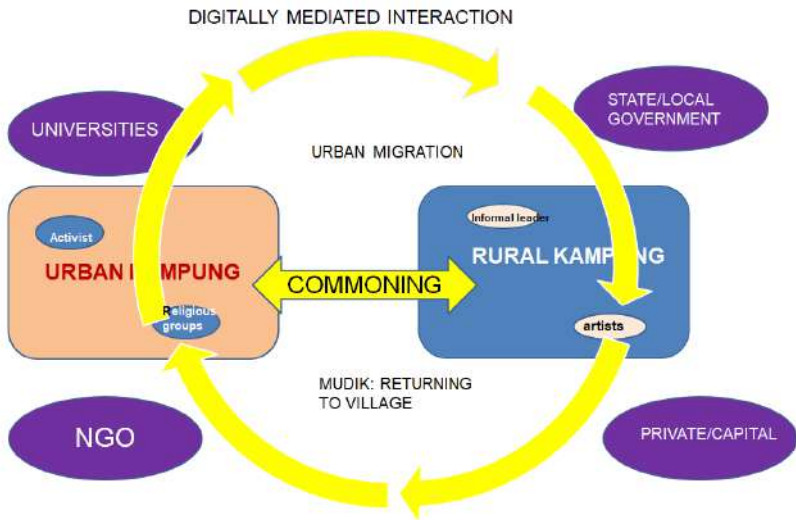


Fig. 2. Diagram of Multistakeholder Commoning.  
Source: Melani Budiarta.

as the Urban Poor Network, Rujak Center for Urban Studies, and Dian Desa and other local NGOs.

As for commoning with the university, Redy Eko Prasetyo, who is working within a university unit, proposes the concept of *kampung lingkaran kampus* (campus encircled kampung). Redy's urban kampung called Kampung Cempluk is literally surrounded by private campuses, and a number of students stay in the affordable rooms rented by kampung dwellers. Students also find it convenient to live there as there are many small warungs (inns) offering cheap homemade dishes. Redy proposes a strong collaboration between campus and the kampung neighborhood, offering scholarships to kampung youth, employing kampung inhabitants in the campuses, giving free public workshops and inviting kampung arts groups in the campus events.

Other linkages that have traditionally been used are research and community service programs that are part of the responsibilities of university lecturers.<sup>13</sup> However, in the older, more common perspective of community service, the kampung communities merely serve as subjects of inquiry or subjects to be enlightened or empowered, not partners in knowledge production. In 2018-2019, I was involved in a multi and interdisciplinary research involving a number of faculties (faculty of medicine, technology, economics, environmental science, social and political sciences, humanities, psychology) to examine sustainable living in five kampungs in the Greater Jakarta areas. As each discipline has their own methodology and perspective, it is quite a challenge to have a thorough interdisciplinary dialogue among the faculties, let alone transforming it into a transdisciplinary commoning that positions kampung subjects as partners.<sup>14</sup>

Another stakeholder that is to play a significant role in commoning work is the State and the local government. In the national level, two significant milestones have been reached which allowed kampung activists and cultural workers to strengthen their commoning work. In 2014, Indonesia issued a village law to regulate village governance and ensure transparency and participation of village councils in deciding significant matters regarding village affairs, including budgeting (Law of the Republic Indonesia no

6 2014). In 2017, another law is issued on advancement of culture, underlining the State commitment to safeguard “the diversity of cultures” which is seen as “the nation’s asset and identity that are indispensable to the advancement of the national culture” (Law of the Republic Indonesia number 5 of 2017). Acts of intolerance towards local cultures mentioned earlier are in outright contradiction of the spirit of this law. Various programs have been conducted by both the Ministry of Village, Development of Disadvantaged Regions and Transmigration (referred here as Ministry of Village) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (referred here as Ministry of Culture) to facilitate the work of cultural commoning on the grassroots level which encompass the following steps: the identification of tangible and intangible objects for cultural advancement, and the advancement and the utilization of the cultural resources for the welfare of the community. The Ministry of Culture has also set up programs and incentives for local communities to hold workshops and projects that ensure the sustainability of cultural advancement through collaboration with local universities and the private sectors.

The two laws should theoretically guarantee inclusivity in village governance and cultural advancement. In practice, however, in the era of decentralization, these regulations are not easily implemented. Relationships between local governments and their constituents cannot be generalized. Yet, reports from members of the Bekasi network group about the way administrative leaders use their position to be land brokers for private investors shows the murky face of village politics. On the other hand, a number of villages have gone far in showing that rural villages can take a lead in cultural advancement. On August 15, 2020, at the height of the covid pandemic, Panggung Harjo village in Bantul, Central Java, organized the Village Cultural Congress, publishing 21 volumes of proceedings of webinars and discussions taking place since two months earlier. Wahyudi Anggorohadi, a young village head of Panggung Harjo declared on the occasion that “it is the village that will set Indonesia’s new cultural rejuvenation and framework” (Kafa,1). However, such optimism was to face complex realities on the ground.

## Internal and External Challenges for Kampung Commoning

In reality, practicing the lumbung commoning in different villages has different problems. One common challenge is internal cohesion. Albeit being administered by a village head or, in the urban kampung, by a neighborhood coordinator for about 40 households, and another coordinator for dozens of neighbourhood units, the inhabitants of kampungs do not always share the same culture or livelihood.<sup>15</sup> Many rural villages which used to have a strong rice farming culture are now inhabited by farm laborers without land ownership, and those with various odd jobs that supply the needs of the nearby cities.

Indonesia, like many countries in the region, has for decades witnessed an escalation of urban expansion and developmentalism characterized by aggressive extractive industries and business exploitation of rural area.<sup>16</sup> Land grabbing and land use change depleted rural communities and those living near forest areas from their sources of living, resulting in marginalization and urban migration. In the case of eviction, what is being taken away are the community, their cultural resources and the collective knowledge regarding the place, values, arts, tradition and the natural environment where they live. When villagers migrate to the cities, they usually occupy affordable housing in the sprawling informal settlements, which were there before the city expanded, or which grew along with the development of the formal residential, industrial and commercial complexes. The urban kampung area, due to their proximity to developed areas in the city, provide affordable food and serve as meeting places for city dwellers. These urban kampungs, however, are not safe from precarity as the spaces are prone to be gentrified, which indicates another cycle of eviction. Besides eroding traditional values, neoliberal forces which foreground individualistic orientation and monetary transaction also curtail the communal spirit as indicated by Rutherford (10).

In such a situation, it is not an easy task to initiate a collective commoning effort. This problem was discussed at length by 20 village representatives in a workshop I coordinated in 2018 in collaboration with the Ministry of Village. Quoting one of the participants, “without a strong collective

bond, it is every person for his/her own good.” The spirit of *gotong royong* or helping one another, which is considered as one characteristic of the Indonesian societies, is not as evident as it is believed to be. One factor that contributed to this was the shift from voluntary collective organizing of village work into pay-for-work projects initiated by the central government. Initially this infrastructure development program was initiated in order to give additional income to villagers. The uncalculated side impact is the erosion of the voluntary *gotong royong* spirit. Another dimension is the socio-cultural context. Comparing her experience with those shared by the representatives from villages in Java, one village activist from outside Java noted that it is more challenging to initiate collective ideas in the outer islands. In this case, the demographic density in Java and the influence of Javanese culture is seen to be one differentiating factor.<sup>17</sup>

Since *kampung commoning* depends on bottom-up initiatives, nothing will materialize unless there are villagers who are motivated to come up with specific ideas for a collective program to solve economic hardship or social inertia in their village. Not all villages have grassroots activists with innovative ideas and ability to awaken their fellow villagers’ interest and to garner participation for the collective work. Leadership here plays a strong role. Strong leadership without the support of wider participation from the community, however, will not be sustainable. One lesson learned about the consequences of too strong a leadership came from Kampung Glintung in Malang, East Java. Bambang Irianto, a Japung member, was a strong charismatic leader whose leadership tended to be one-man decision making over the *kampung* community that adhered and followed his guidance. He chased away drug addicts and trouble makers, and turned the previously flood-prone and poverty-ridden urban *kampung* in crowded alleys into a green *kampung* with biopore infiltration system. The crowded houses were remade into beautiful spots for selfie photos. Each small house was to contribute to the alley urban-farming area, and he established a *kampung* co-op that earned hard cash. He named his *kampung*, Glintung Go-Green. The success of his green *kampung* won him international awards and made him a *kampung* consultant at the national level. However, dissatisfaction brewed among

kampung inhabitants who felt excluded from the kampung affairs. After 7 years of Bambang's leadership, the kampung inhabitants selected a new coordinator who immediately replaced the kampung brand, from Glintung Go-Green to Glintung Kultur, shifting the emphasis to the arts and culture activities of the kampung youth.<sup>18</sup>

From the other end, unlike the ideal concept of multistakeholder commoning outlined earlier, internal conflict can occur because village heads or urban kampung coordinators do not support initiatives from village activists. Such a problem was reported in two case studies about cultural activism by Japung activists. Both in subvillage Karanggreneng, Central Java and in Kampung Temenggung in Banyuwangi, East Java, the local administrative leaders did not give any support nor attention to initiatives proposed by their village activists. However, when the efforts of kampung commoning were successful, they benefited from its popularity. In fact, in the second village, the newly elected regent hijacked the program and instead of supporting it, they took it under their control and changed it to suit their political agenda.<sup>19</sup>

On a positive note, since the mid-2010s, with the slogan "developing Indonesia from the peripheries," the Jokowi government has channelled financial support to regencies especially in rural area that can be used for kampung development.<sup>20</sup> Initially, the focus is on infrastructure development, with the target of economic empowerment. Different ministries, however, push different programs within their assigned scope. While the Ministry of Culture pushed for cultural advancement, the Ministry of Tourism promoted tourism. Investment on tourism per se, however, can have an adverse impact on the kampung neighborhood. Kampung in a popular resort area experienced marginalization as the local government brought outside investors to develop the area. Gentrification, superficial kampung beautification is within this neoliberal capitalistic mode. Many urban kampung fell into this instant make-over trap. Others tried to negotiate with the trend by first prioritizing the effort in gathering cultural resources for the village to build their collective identity and their local production. In doing so, the village was turned into a cultural centre for knowledge production. In one Japung activist's term "it is a village-based tourism, not a tourist village."<sup>21</sup>

Another force that has been taking place concurrently is the rise of conservatism and Islamization of the Indonesian urban middle classes. The rise of conservatism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century occurs worldwide, as noted by Kaufmann in his book, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth; Demography and Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (2010). In some countries like the USA, Kaufmann showed that conservatism that cut across all religions has worked in curtailing progressive laws (xix). Indonesia, the 4<sup>th</sup> most populous country with 88% Moslem population has been known for its moderate religious outlook. With the rise of conservatism through the new media and new religious dynamics, there have been indications of the rise of more puritan strains (Akmaliah, 19). Events that were captured in social media in the early months of 2022 confirm this tendency. Early in January, a viral video of a young man caught throwing food and flower offerings to the crater of Mount Semeru, denounced the indigenous practice of giving offerings as a sacrilege. In mid-February, an Islamic scholar made a controversial statement to ban the wayang shadow puppet, considered as a national heritage, because he considered it *haram* or forbidden according to Islamic law. Still in February, the city of Malang in East Java, known as a tourism area, was heated with civilian protest after the mayor announced the city as a *halal* city. The hardening of Islamic fundamentalism, “a process of deepening commitment to standards of normative Islamic belief, practice, and religious identity.” (Rickleffs in Kuipers and Askuri, 45) did not happen overnight. The *Tarbiyah* or *dakwah* movement among students in secular campuses in Indonesia in the 1970s is considered to be the root of the growth of political Islam. In the era of democratization after the Reformasi of 1998, there is “a pattern of religious commodification and consumption” which according to Fealy is due to forces of “modernization, urbanization, and globalization” (Fealy in Kueipers and Askuri, 47). While the prevalent Islamic fashion and lifestyle is a welcoming expression of a democratic society with a majority Moslem population, the growing intolerance towards difference is a matter of concern.

Horizontal conflict between fundamentalist and syncretic religious groups often occurred in the villages.<sup>22</sup> Bachtiar Djanan M, another Japung activist who worked as consultant for village-based tourism, encountered



two such instances while working with Cempaka village in Tegal, Central Java, and the Luwi Jawa village in Banyuwangi, East Java. In the first village, he was helping the village community prepare a river festival, which includes the performance of *shintren*, a traditional dance with mystical trance elements. The plan was viciously opposed by a group which considers such performance as *syirik* or heresy. In the second village, the plan was to promote the traditional coffee industry as a basis for village tourism. Some villagers associated the word tourism and the coming of foreigners into the village with the infiltration of Westernized liberal lifestyle. Bachtiar and the organizers in the two villages managed to assuage the conservative groups, in the first village by involving a respected religious leader as mediator, and in the second village by dialogue and explanation. Such a confrontation also occurred during one of my trips with Japung activists to support the Buen festival in Bangun Mulya village, in North Penajem Paser, East Kalimantan in 2018. When we were about to have a meeting, the host of the festival excused himself to go with a special team to the village border as there was an urgent news that a conservative group was to “attack” the village as a protest of what was presented in the festival. Fortunately, like the earlier instances, the confrontation was resolved peacefully. In all of the cases, the role of the moderate Islamic organization of Nahdatul Ulama, one of the biggest religious groups in Indonesia with its syncretic orientation, is crucial in dealing with the rising fundamentalism on the ground.

However, a different battle occurred in the digital media where intolerant and verbal attacks against religious and lifestyle differences are launched. As mentioned earlier, the intolerant acts against ritual and wayang shadow puppet were made viral through the social media, and the media cuts across the divide of the city and kampung, urban and rural. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia ranked second to the Philippines in the amount of time spent in social media.<sup>23</sup> With about 61.8 % penetration, 170 million of Indonesia’s population are on social media.<sup>24</sup> While the extent of social media use explains the growth of digitally mediated kampung network communities, it is also an arena where attacks against local rituals and traditions are waged. In this post-truth era, the digitally savvy, the loud and the aggressive cover

more ground—without any willingness for a dialogue. The Japung group has served as a haven for solidarity and diversity. Yet, except for uploading cultural events and discussions, the Japung network, with its moderate activists has not done much intervention to hold up the rising fundamentalism in the media. The Bekasi network is even susceptible to religious conservatism and identity politics provocation, although tempered by the WhatsApp group moderator and a number of moderate activists in the group. The digital media here serves as the very arena for the battle of forces. Globalization, for better or for worse, seeps through digital connections which link the local and the global, and complicate the issues on the ground.

The two forces of neoliberal capitalism and religious fundamentalism in tandem work against kampung communities. While the neoliberal greed through extractive developmentalism shrinks the space of urban and rural kampungs, the narrow-minded religious dogmatism censures their traditional arts, rites and the rich cultural heritage that Indonesia is known for.

### **Transnational Lumbung and its challenges**

How does the commoning done locally across Indonesian kampungs translate into transnational context? The adoption of *lumbung* as a theme for Documenta, German arts festival held every five years in Kassel, Germany is an example of the global adoption of the local practice. In February 2019, ruangrupa (abbreviated as ruru), an arts collective located in Jakarta, was announced to be the host of Documenta 15, a 100 day-cultural exhibition held in Kassel, Germany starting June 18, 2022. The title of the ruru project for the exhibition is Lumbung. This is not an ordinary arts exhibition, but a long process of arts and cultural communing, involving an artistic team beyond ruru to select 14 arts communities/collectives and around 53 artists from all continents, with alternative community-based arts practice to be lumbung members and lumbung artists. Most of these artists/members are from the Global South, among others Palestine, India, Cuba, Trinidad, Mali, Thailand, Philippines, and Indonesia. A number of European collectives and Australian artists are those working for the marginalized, queer, aborigines, asylum seekers and refugees.

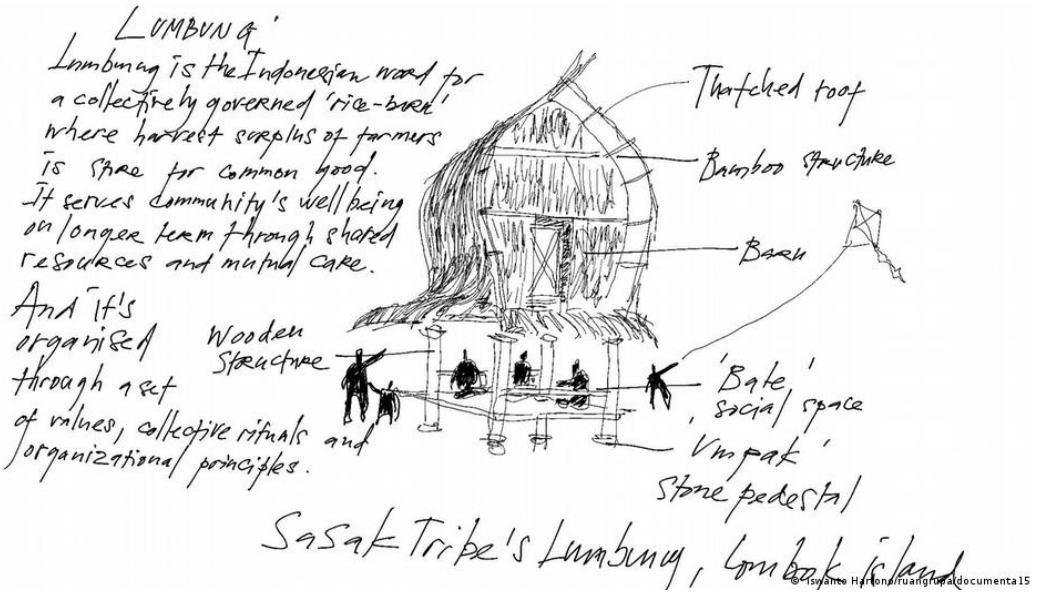


Fig. 3. Lumbung sketch by Harvester Iswanto Hartono  
 Source: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung>. With permission from Documenta 15.

The concept of Lumbung informs the selection of members and artists, the process as well as the output of the exhibition, which is “collectivity, resource building and equal sharing” (Documenta 2022, 1). Different from the neoliberal arts practice that tends to be elitist, the lumbung practice opens up the division between arts and everyday life, extending participation to cultural communities. The outreach, is therefore beyond artistic criteria, as explained in the website of Documenta:

... “rice barn,” is a collective pot or accumulation system used in rural areas of Indonesia, where crops produced by a community are stored as a future shared common resource and distributed according to jointly determined criteria. Using *lumbung* as a model, documenta fifteen is a collective resource pot, operating under the logics of the commons. It is an agglomeration of ideas, stories, (wo)manpower, time, and other shareable resources. At the center of *lumbung* is the imagination and the building of these collective, shared resources into new models of sustainable ideas and cultural practices (1) (fig.3)

Most of the Lumbung artists/members have actually integrated the concept in their work, such as the Boloho from Guangzhou, China, which has friendship as their “business model,” valorizing equality and mutual aid over hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> Another one, Arts Collaboratory, sets up commoning practice across Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe through dialogical assemblies called *bangas*. The art based on the lumbung concept foregrounds the importance of not only a space for gathering resources (ideas, thoughts, energies, local cultural idioms and arts practices) but also the collective, non-centralized and inclusive process of making the lumbung community. The first step was to set up a ruru house in Kassel, which Documenta rented from an unused mall to create a *nongkrong* or “hang-out” space for informal conversation as well as a working space where artists as well as other people can meet and share ideas. This is “a space to meet and to get noisy—to then transform this noise to voice. By sharing our resources into one, we could share many and diverse stages, spotlights, and resonances to the voice” (*Asphalt*, Chapter 1).

As interaction and dialogues in the arts ecosystem in Europe are often formalized, ruru inserts a strategy of negotiation in the form of “a play between formalities and informalities” (1). The fact that the first announcement of the lumbung artists and arts community members was published in *Asphalt*, a street magazine sold by the homeless and disadvantaged in three cities in Germany, was a strong anti-elitist statement and informality. Humor and generosity are among the nine lumbung values that are to color the ambiance and atmosphere of the whole lumbung process, as well as the principles adopted by each invited member organization. Others include the underlining of a sense of sufficiency for each member, independence from political or commercial pressures, transparency, regeneration, and local anchoring. The last one speaks of the strong local grounding of each lumbung member in its community and cultural context. This explains the use of colloquial words such as *nongkrong* from Jakarta youth slang, *majelis* (assembly/gathering) from an Arabic borrowing in Indonesian/Malay language.

The concept of collecting resources to be shared for common purposes is not merely theorized but put into practice in the following procedure as follows:

1. The Artistic Team of Documenta 15 in conversation with a group of organizations and collectives—the lumbung members—have developed a common pot of resources together. Each member artist/organization contributes to this lumbung with their resource surpluses, such as people, time, space, food, money, knowledge, skill, care, and art.
2. The different collectives and organizations started to *nongkrong* months ago online and in Kassel in order to build trust.
3. They have built mechanisms for how to use and distribute the resources through meeting in assemblies, or *majelises*, and forming working groups around the economy and wellbeing of the lumbung.
4. The lumbung members create a surplus through the *majelising* and working groups, and this surplus is shared with others. The mechanisms and shared infrastructure created by the lumbung inter-lokal—the network of lumbung members—are shared with their own ecosystems as well as the group of lumbung artists. (*Asphalt* 09/21, 1)

The procedure above shows the organizing and maintaining of the lumbung. One term that is used for reporting what is gained during *majelis* is called harvesting and the artists/writers who do the reporting are called harvesters. Harvesting can be done through sketching, visual abstraction, writing and other means of getting the gist of the *majelis* meeting and sharing them to a wider audience.

While organizational meetings usually prioritize output and timely scheduled agenda, *majelis* meetings underline process and participation. In one of the early *majelis*, it took almost one hour for each *majelis* participant to introduce themselves and “checking in” by mentioning locally anchored resources chosen by the moderator. The principle of inclusion in a safe and convenient, friendly and equal atmosphere is crucial in *majelis* and other lumbung work. The arrangement of the bigger *majelis* assembly

and the mini *majelis*, where clusters of artists/members work together to plan the exhibition projects is also challenging because of the diverse time zone. It is therefore understandable, that the list of members are not defined geographically but according to time zone: Fondation Festival Sur Le Niger (Universal Time Coordinated), INLAND (Central European Time), Mas Arte Mas Accion (Colombia Time), Britto Arts Trust (Bangladesh Standard Time), FAFSWAG (Aotearoa Time), etc.

Like *kampung commoning* occurring in many parts of Indonesia, the transnational *lumbung* of Documenta 15 shows the rise of the peripheral voices in asserting alternative political economy sorely needed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One caveat to note is that, while establishing *kampung commoning* in one village is challenging, as described earlier, forming it across transnational borders is even more demanding. A few months before Documenta 15 was officially launched, it already became a subject of political controversy. The *lumbung* network curated by Documenta 15 includes artists and collectives from Palestine, and this stirred a historical wound that Germany still had to heal from. An attack published in January 2022 through the Wordpress blog of a group called an “Alliance against Antisemitism Kassel” demanded to expel the curator of *lumbung* exhibition and to stop some artists from participating in the exhibition on the grounds of antisemitism. The alliance found the names of the artists/ arts collectives as signatories of an open letter to protest the decision of the German Parliament to ban the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against the Israeli government.

In their position as the international curator of Documenta 15, *ruangrupa* wrote a response in May 2022, showing that the attack is based on false accusation, rumor and racism. In the response, *ruangrupa* also protested against racist humor used in the alliance’s blog, making fun of the term *lumbung* as follows: “*ruangrupa* has launched the so-called ‘*lumbung*’, which is not an alcoholic mixed drink, but means ‘collectively managed rice barn.’”<sup>26</sup> In the counter letter, *ruangrupa* pointed to the derogatory allusion of *lumbung* with an alcoholic drink:

... an allusion to the infantile racist joke-name “Lumumba” for a cocktail mixed with cocoa and rum, named after the assassinated Congolese freedom fighter and former president Patrice Lumumba. Such racist jokes are seamlessly intertwined with the accusations of antisemitism that were adopted by numerous major German newspapers—largely uncritically and in defiance of basic journalistic standards. The fact that this falsification of history in the name of silencing and censoring free speech and expression was so carelessly adopted in the name of Germany’s special “historical responsibility” is not without a certain ironic quality. The consequences are extremely serious, however, revealing the dangerous proximity between German historical ignorance and racist smears. (ruangrupa)

The anti-semitist controversy, which haunts the Documenta 15 event, is an example of the challenges faced by trans-national commoning. Such commoning occurs in certain time and space, which is not free from national political baggage and historical contexts. What happened in Kassel betrays orientalist perception about unfamiliar terms coming from a non-European language, identity politics and uneasy attitude about uncommon artistic practice. How the lumbung exhibition survives through the challenges is yet to be seen.

### **Ethics in Kampung Research/Activism: a personal reflection**

From the Japung network to transnational lumbung in Kassel, my engagement with the kampung commoning has been informal, unplanned and organic. It was outside academic work, and was not intended to be a scholarly research, nor the kind of community engagement formalized by universities. In due time, however, there comes a realization that doing research together with the kampung network can serve as an important means to strengthen activism. History of a group, the challenges that the group face, projects that succeed or fail, lessons learnt, facts and documents, important interaction and discussion are often left undocumented. All of these, if gathered, can generate knowledge, understanding and critical evaluation for the group. Members of the group, although not all, might participate in the research facilitated or initiated by the researcher. The research undertaken may have different forms, but the basic principle is that it should allow the

group to learn and grow together. Various terms are used by scholars to refer to such a project: participatory community research, engaged research, transdisciplinary research, with slightly varying definitions.<sup>27</sup> One that is close to what I did with the kampung network communities is “engaging stakeholders as co-producers of knowledge” (Utrecht, 1). In this aspect, transdisciplinary research can be seen as an act of commoning in gathering and sharing resources. There is a flow of give and take in the process, but in retrospect, what I learned from the two kampung communities is more than what I can share with them.

Unlike regular research projects with a developed plan, rigid schedule and well-defined output, the overall work of kampung research/activism is organic, long term in its duration and is process and not output oriented. That being said, it does not mean that the process could not be broken into small, reasonably realistic projects that build into a long-term knowledge production.

With the Japung kampung network community, the initial step towards producing knowledge together was to gather and then publish a collection of stories, with each activist sharing his or her kampung engagement. When I proposed the idea, it was met with enthusiasm, but I soon realized that implementation was not easy. As leaders of their respective kampung communities, the activists’ schedules were tight. Writing was an extra burden that many could not afford, and something that a few of them did not feel at ease in doing. In dealing with the problem, I made use of the resources in my university to set up a team of co-authors. After the initial offline meeting in the closest, most accessible city for all participating members, activists who needed assistants were paired up with “writing partners.” A workshop was arranged by the university, inviting other scholar/activists from the region (Malaysia, Thailand) and Indonesia and participating Japung members to gain comparative perspectives. In 2018, the project materialized in a collection of 17 essays on kampung issues and stories of activism. The book, published by a non-commercial publishing company, was made available to all Japung members, with the online version to be shared to the wider public.<sup>28</sup>



An offshoot of this writing project was an opportunity, facilitated by the Association of Cultural Studies, to invite 4 kampung activists to present their stories in one panel at the Crossroads, the ACS international conference in Shanghai in 2018. My university team assisted the presenters with translation and rehearsed presentations. It was a wholesome experience for me to chair such a special panel and to see the way the activists blended in with international members of ACS in the conference. The whole process of publishing the book and connecting with scholars in the conference then gave me the opportunity to publish “Smart Kampung, Doing Cultural Studies in the Global South” in 2019.

The whole process can be summarized in the following steps: 1) identifying what the group needs; 2) proposing a project that can fill the need; 3) clarifying position, what I can bring to the group, what the group can contribute, what the output will be, how the process will be conducted and how it benefits the group and myself as a researcher; 4) facilitating the participants to present their experience, knowledge and perspective and providing support for capacity building in the process.

With the Bekasi group that faces pressing issues related to environmental hazards and community survival in the face of outright marginalization, I have so far only played the role of clearing house to find practitioners and experts from various fields to give advice to the group. There is a plan to do collaborative mapping of the problems as well as resources of the Bekasi kampungs, among others traditional knowledge, river/water technologies, endemic plants and natural resources, language and place history/toponymy. Second is to agree on small projects that a team of interdisciplinary scholars can collaborate with some activists in the group in order to strengthen the bargaining position of the kampung communities vis-à-vis the local government and the private sectors. With the onset of the pandemic, however, the plan has not been materialized.

In today’s academic culture, research involving human subjects is regulated with rigid procedures, with written consent. Activism-based research like what I did with Japung, is organic and informal, but ethical matters are in fact crucial. Different from common research, in which scholars from

outside the group do research on a community group, in Japung case the research is done by members of the same group. The relationship is long term, not one time project to gather data and then leave the research subjects never to see them again. Whatever gathered from the group should be under consent and the research result should be shared to the group for the benefit of the larger community. No quotes from group chats should result in harmful consequences, so unanimity is the best policy in using group chats as research data. The question that often arises is about critical distance. If a researcher is part of the group, how can she or he maintain a critical distance? There is no way out of subjective bias, whether one is a member of a group or external to it. However, the pressure for not causing discomfort within the group is a real problem. One way to do it is to write in such a way that critical evaluation is not personalized but abstracted as lessons learnt for the whole group and discussed within a conceptual framework.

Reflecting back to the beginning, I found that my engagement with the kampung commoning has been a journey of knowledge making, of discovering possibilities and limits, conceptual as well as practical. What is meaningful for me is that the knowledge production is a shared process that will never cease in finding alternative spaces within the current and future hegemonic structures.

### **Conclusion: Moments of Articulation**

Nationally as well as globally, the act of commoning has been on the rise due to some conjoining forces which amplify its articulation.<sup>29</sup> First, commoning is seen as an alternative to the neoliberal paradigm with its extractive developmentalism that has been seen as the roots of all problems. Deforestation has been deemed responsible for inviting zoonotic diseases such as the covid pandemic. Second, the pandemic has necessitated community-based surveillance and solidarity in providing aid and support, arising from the realization that one ill person can endanger the whole community. During the lockdown period, commoning for food security such as community urban farming and gathering resources to be shared like the practice of lumbung have been adopted by grassroot communities.

It is in this juncture that the kampung commoning that has been going for some time as a grassroots movement is attuned with the larger context. Nationally however, the local contestation is more complex. The village law aims to reverse the earlier tendency to treat villages and rural areas as objects of development to be subjects with rights for determination. The cultural advancement law speaks for the concern about the erasure of languages and local cultural resources under globalization and right-wing conservatism. On the ground however, the neoliberal urbanization trend, corruption, identity politics and marginalization of kampung communities are still gaining force. The kampung commoning occurs within this crosscurrent, finding spaces for negotiation.

Scholars of literary and cultural studies—especially those born in the fifties like me—have learned about the constant sway of historical pendulum. The question is, how sustainable is the commoning trajectory when the neoliberal force is still in place. Is it merely a utopic flame that will flicker, or will it effect a change before the carrying capacity of the planet is exhausted? At present, although the arts and cultural dimension of the State/society is in sync to support the cause of commoning, the political economy and the financial sector still go towards the regular, opposite direction. In this conundrum, the kampung and lumbung commoning faces external as well as internal tension. In spite of that, lumbung/kampung work is a space for sanity, at least for me, an opportunity to do meaningful transdisciplinary collaboration to exert a change, little as it may be.

## Notes

1. The pandemic has prompted scholars to critically question the neoliberal paradigm, such as done by Giroux. More specific discussion about the relationship of the pandemic and natural exploitation can be seen in Arenas.
2. Before the onset of the covid pandemic, Castells already discussed various alternative economic praxis which foster solidarity and mutual benefits in lieu of neoliberal money-making ventures. See also Georgiou and Titley.
3. See Elinor Ostrom's rebuttal of Garreth Hardin's classical essay. Ostrom shows how communities sharing the commons are the most reliable party to govern it for collective use.
4. See special edition on covid and commoning in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* edited by Kay and Wood.
5. Kampung (or kampong in its English version) an Indonesian/Malay word that denotes a rural village or urban informal settlements, connotes both nostalgic association to a home origin as well as a backward, impoverished village. In the context of the urban expansion in Indonesia as well as in other metropolitan cities in Southeast Asia, the kampung has either been urbanized, gentrified, or diminished.
6. See my previous publication on this topic, Budianta and Hapsarani.
7. See the report of the case written by Asmarani.
8. See the discussion of this WhatsApp group in Budianta and Hapsarani (242-243).
9. See the promotional advertisement of the area in KNIC.
10. The term cultural lumbung has now gained currency. In 2018, in collaboration with the Ministry of Village, my research team from Universitas Indonesia created a module for a two-day workshop for 20 villages from 8 provinces in November 2019. The term cultural lumbung is used in the module and it is reported in the website of one participating village, the Dermaji village in Kafa
11. The gimmick can be quite shallow and instant, such as calling their kampung as colorful kampung, and use paint to color the houses, roof, and turn the kampung to be a selfie place for youth visitors.
12. Another motive for kampung beautification is the aim to turn kampung as an object for tourism, a unique place for selfies. This shows how kampung commoning is not done outside the neoliberal paradigm.
13. The three responsibilities (Tridharma) of university lecturers in Indonesia include teaching, research and community service, which is tabulated in their administrative report.
14. Within the neoliberal paradigm that universities are now entrenched, commoning practice is still not dominant. Ego-sectoral interest within disciplines and programs is the most challenging stumbling block. Similarly, many

- state ministries are yet to increase coordination with other ministries in dealing with kampung issues, in particular in sharing the same pool of data.
15. In formal housing complexes, one neighborhood unit, consisting about 40-60 households, is administered under RT (Rukun Tetangga), chaired by the head of RT. Dozens of RT are administered under RW (Rukun Warga), with head of RW as coordinator. In informal kampungs, however, one RT can have up to two hundred households, and some stay in the same permanent or semi-permanent houses.
  16. For a discussion of peri-urban development of the Greater Jakarta area and impact on the kampungs, their inhabitants and their everyday life see Leitner, Nowak and Sheppard; and Herlambang, Leitner and Liong.
  17. In the workshop, participants from diverse kampung in Indonesia shared their commoning efforts, and learned from one another.
  18. The success as well as problem faced by Kampung Glintung has been documented in Budianta and Hapsarani, and in various media.
  19. Bachtiar Djanan M recounted the occurrence in Kampung Temenggung in Budianta and Hapsarani (187-206), and shared the confrontation in Kampung Luwi Jawa in a phone interview with Budianta (10 June 2022). With decentralization, decision making on kampung affairs rests on local government, especially regents and village heads. As Indonesia is spread out in over 17.000 islands which are culturally and demographically diverse, each village experiences different dynamics of power relations with local administrators, which also varies with the periodic changes of leadership. There is almost no censorship from the central government on village matters. Stigmatization on being leftists, like it was in the cold war era, was experienced sporadically by villagers who fought over communal land against deforestation and eviction due to extractive industries.
  20. Jokowi's "Development from the Peripheries" was announced in his presidential campaign in 2014.
  21. See Bachtiar Djanan's discussion on this village-based tourism in chapter 6 in Budianta and Hapsarani (83-87).
  22. Among the moderate Islamic groups that support traditional syncretic practices is the Nachdatul Ulama, one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia. Their Islamic leaders (kyais) and youth groups are spread out in the villages. However, the number of hardliners is growing, not only among urban population, but also in the rural area. These groups are usually very vocal in censoring traditional arts and culture, which they deem to be not in line with their dogmas.
  23. The data is obtained from Kemp.
  24. See Kemp.
  25. See the list and profile of Documenta-fifteen Lumbung members and artists in Documenta 2022.

26. The quote is taken from ruangrupa's response.
27. See Wickson, Carew, and Russel for a discussion on transdisciplinary research. As for terms for research that relates to activism, see engaged scholarship as outlined by Peterson and a discussion on scholar/activist by Tilley and Taylor. Another term used mostly for health practitioners is community based participatory research.
28. See Budianta and Hapsarani.
29. I am referring here to Li's use of Stuart Hall's concept in examining subject positioning of the indigenous identities of two villages in Li (4).

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