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## The Social Life of Flooding in Jakarta

The issues around flooding have increasingly received attention in a variety of fields, and Jakarta has been a primary case study. Existing research has significantly contributed to our understanding of the inadequate institutional, organizational and individual capacities for flood management in a city that is rapidly expanding. They also point to “universal” forces, such as urbanization and climate change, that exacerbate flooding. It is fair to acknowledge, however, that most existing studies on environmental problems tend to be technocratic and limited as they do not take politics and culture as the primary focus of their investigation.

My recent research project builds on the insights of current scholarship from critical geography and anthropology of infrastructure to make sense of a social formation (such as Jakarta) in which flooding has led to both disaster and opportunities as well as modes of governing society. This project began in 2016 and will be completed this year. The essays produced will form a monograph on urbanism in Southeast Asia.

A central part of my inquiry thus explores the multifaceted dimensions of *banjir* (flooding) in Jakarta. It raises issues such as:

- how flooding is culturally perceived, understood and managed;
- how it is implicated in knowledge and power;
- how it becomes a form of “governmentality”, which nevertheless produces critical consciousness among the public about environmental crisis;
- how it constitutes a feeling of uncertainty and anticipation as well as speculation among policy makers, planners, developers and residents of the city, some of which have found expression in various forms and practices of infrastructure.

The research project starts with an observation that the government of Jakarta has never implemented a unitary infrastructural ideal to deal with flooding. Instead the city is sustained by a series of fragmented “privatized” infrastructures that stem from strategies and imaginations of



Abidin Kusno photograph, 2018

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different communities. Such a formation of plural infrastructures divides urban space in terms of class and ethnicity, but it also generates a shared sense of uncertainty over the threat of flooding and the city's future. The different infrastructures people built for themselves operate like an infrastructure of difference as communities are both united by flooding and yet divided by their responses to it. As people experience flooding, they see the city in and through their diverse infrastructures that work (or fail to work) for them.

The fragmented infrastructures nevertheless serve as a mediator that works at the interfaces between different communities. They share the difficulty of controlling the slippery object and subject of flooding. The lack or the absence of an integrated urban infrastructure in dealing with flooding encourages exchange between people, power and money. It raises questions regarding human and non-human agency (who is responsible for flooding) to occupy an unsettling position that is opened for interpretation. The uncoordinated infrastructure, in this context, shapes the way flooding enters social and political realms. Looking at how flooding is lived, understood and taken advantage of in the context of unreliable infrastructures demands an approach that looks for materials that are equally discursive, ranging from news reports, official publications, popular cultures and advertisements to my own participant observations from the field.

I organize these discursive materials around certain local vocabularies seen as representing the various meanings of flooding (*banjir*), such as *banjir* as *bencana* (disaster), as *bocor* (leakage), as *berkah* (blessing), and as *budaya* (culture). I suggest that the discursive nature of Jakarta's infrastructure has shaped multiple narratives of flooding. There are all sorts of readings, interpretations and rationalities to come to terms with *banjir* as *bencana*, *bocor*, *berkah*, *budaya* and so on. At different moments the Queen of the South Sea (a local superstition) has been blamed, as has urbanization, the urban poor, capitalist modernization and property developers. At other times (or even simultaneously), blame has fallen on the contour and topography of the land, the typology and morphology of the built environment, the moon, and climate change. All of those have been seen as the causes of flooding. Environmentalists, green activists and the urban middle class see the lack of green space as partly responsible for the floods, and the governor blamed those living in irregular riverside settlements for clogging the waterways.

These examples demonstrate how people, at different times and under different circumstances, make sense of flooding and assign "agency" to human activity, nature, the supernatural and infrastructure. These different explanations and imaginations provoke anxieties, the responses to which have different effects—they cause evictions and new multi-million dollar projects; they give political legitimacy and social life to the divided city; they beget culture, which links *banjir* and everyday life with the cosmos; and they are conveyed to project engineers' and managers' conflicting messages, as, after all, there are benefits and profits to be made from keeping *banjir* alive. Like water, when touched, the manifold responses to flooding flow one into another, and leave the city in a state of flux. In the end, none are reliable to counter the thoroughgoing deterioration of the city's social, natural and built environments.

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