Reviving the Betawi Tradition: The Case of Setu Babakan, Indonesia

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This article examines the various conditions that gave rise to a new ethnic group, the Betawi, from the diverse origins of people who settled in the area of today’s Jakarta, Indonesia. It first traces the identity-formation process of the Betawi, then examines how Betawi culture has been challenged recently by the development of Jakarta as a global city. As Indonesia’s central government has delegated more authority to localities since the end of the New Order era, the municipality of Jakarta has attempted to revive Betawi identity through development of a Cultural Village in Setu Babakan, a place where Betawis are actually a minority. However, it is questionable whether such architectural intervention either has had, or will have the desired effect on cultural revival.

Space has meaning if it is socially constructed and produced. The same may be said for the generation of ethnic identity and tradition. One might predict, then, that it would be difficult to re-create ethnic identity through a revival of traditional built form, especially on a site partially occupied by others. As the case of a Betawi Cultural Center on the periphery of Jakarta shows, it may be particularly important to critically examine such attempts to revive ethnic traditions within the context of the present, globalizing world.

The Betawi emerged as an ethnic group in Batavia (now Jakarta) when present-day Indonesia was ruled by a Dutch colonial administration. The new group encompassed people of various ethnic origins, including Javanese, Buginese, Sundanese, Malay, Balinese, Ambonese, Makassarese, Arabs, Chinese, Portuguese, and others. Over a span of more than two hundred years, people from these backgrounds successfully mixed and produced a unique language, house style, and forms of dance, music, ceremony and theater now known in Indonesia as Betawi. The rich hybridity of this tradition combined components from many ethnic origins, and as it was handed down from generation to generation, Betawis gained a distinct sense of ethnic pride and distanced themselves from their former identities. Under colonial conditions, this process of identity-construction to some extent (to use Manuel Castells’s term) came out of resistance.
After Indonesia gained its independence in 1945, Batavia was renamed Jakarta; and in the years since, the city has been transformed into a metropolis. As an ethnic group, the Betawi still comprise a majority of Jakarta’s population, and their culture is still representative of the city. But they are not politically dominant due to the policy during Suharto’s New Order era (1966–1998) of appointing local political leaders from the top down. During this period, most Betawis were marginalized as the “other” ethnic group, living either in the old kampung (urban village) of Jakarta or in its vicinity.

Recently, however, the municipal government of Jakarta has become worried about the Betawis’ decreasing cultural activities and fading identity. Among responses to this concern has been the development of a Betawi Cultural Village in Setu Babakan, on the southern edge of the city. In this district, city authorities have established design guidelines for new construction based on their idea of the traditional Betawi house. Their hope is that this may eventually help revive the cultural identity of the Betawi, generate cultural activities, and attract tourists. On the surface, such a plan might seem workable. But it is clear today that the Betawi Cultural Village lacks the force that originated Betawi culture. And despite the continuing availability of government grants to renovate buildings in the Betawi style, the district has yet to attract significant interest from local or foreign tourists. Meanwhile, the Betawi house type has been reduced in many people’s minds to a series of decorative motifs.

Using the case of the Cultural Village in Setu Babakan, I examine the conditions that give rise to ethnic identity. I first focus on how, over the course of many years, Betawi space and identity were negotiated, constructed, and produced. I then employ participant observation to understand the corruption of spatial meaning when it is imposed from the outside, rather than generated from the hybrid cultural components of a locality. The Betawi case also shows how identity and tradition so constructed are fragile, especially when confronted by the rapid processes of social, economic and political change characteristic of the present information era. This fragility is particularly marked in Jakarta, where the growth of the city since Indonesian independence has revived older bonds of ethnicity, and where residents are no longer galvanized by common resistance to a dominant colonial force.

GENESIS OF THE BETAWI

It has yet to be fully explained how a society of various ethnic origins gradually merged to become a new group. Nor has it been fully explained how this group came to be differentiated into several key subgroups. However, I will attempt to describe this process, with certain speculations, based on the available materials.

It is unclear whether the term “Betawi” was given by outsiders to certain people residing around the former Batavia, or whether it originated with those people themselves as a means of establishing a common ethnic identity. Whatever the case, the word “Betawi” is undoubtedly associated with Batavia, probably derived from a mispronunciation of the place name as batawauya by visiting Arabs. This was then popularized by the local people as “Betawi.” As such, the term is now a common attribute of those who associate themselves with the local culture of Jakarta.

Although the Betawi are generally considered a new ethnic group, related to the development of colonial Batavia, their existence can be traced further back in Indonesian history. Indeed, one epigraph from the Tarumanagara Kingdom reveals that the area of Jakarta has been inhabited since the fifth century. Early settlers there spoke Malay and Sundanese, but their origins are still a matter of debate. Known as Sunda Kelapa, the area was initially controlled by the Pajajaran (Sundanese Hindu) Kingdom. Despite not being as prosperous as its rival Banten, it had certain advantages as a seaport, and the Portuguese attempted to take control of it through allegiance with the Pajajaran Kingdom in the early sixteenth century. However, when the Islamic Javanese ruler Fatahillah defeated the Portuguese in 1527, Sunda Kelapa’s name was changed to Jayakarta. It was later renamed Batavia after the Dutch East Indies Company took control of the area in the early seventeenth century.

During their rule, the Dutch colonial administration controlled the various ethnic groups of Batavia by assigning them to walled compounds, each headed by a capitán, who was responsible for representing the community and collecting taxes (Fig.1). This system allowed each community to retain a certain regulated amount of autonomy, but it also created uncontrolled living conditions that led to overcrowding and poor public health. The Dutch strategy for control of the local population was based on dividing and ruling with “multi-otherness.” But the Dutch also established separate rules for the local Chinese population. This created a triangular series of relations, in which Europeans were the preferred group, but where the Chinese served as middlemen to the other ethnic groups.

As part of everyday life under such colonial circumstances, it is reasonable to speculate that small numbers of people within each ethnic compound would have developed intense contacts with members of other groups. Eventually, interracial marriage would have occurred among the Malay, Javanese, Madurese, and other groups of the same religion — or, with some exceptions, between people of different religions. Such interactions would have offered an opportunity for interethnic subcultures to form in certain districts of the city as a result of solidarity and tolerance. Under the pressure of colonial rule, such groups may then have developed hybrid forms of language, building, art, and material culture. Eventually, a new habitus,” to use Bourdieu’s term, would also have emerged.

The genesis of such a new group identity would also have involved a process of ethnic change. As part of this
change, each group would only have united with others after it had first separated itself from its original ethnic identity. Linguistic and religious conversion, intermarriage and procreation, and collective action are some of the activities that would have allowed such gradual differentiation of people and modification and transformation of identity. The new group would then have formed through processes of assimilation — either when a new group formed out of several groups (amalgamation), or when several groups were submerged into another (incorporation). The formation of Betawi identity probably involved both amalgamation and incorporation, with Batavia serving as a new symbol for place identity.

Betawi identity would only have crystallized after the group was able to establish new symbols and distinctly identifiable cues. Among these were a new language based on Malay; greeting cues of Arab origin; and hybrid forms of material-cultural expression through arts, theater, dress, wedding ceremonies, and — to a lesser degree — house style. Spoken Malay had long been the most popular language in coastal areas of the Southeast Asian archipelago. And although the majority of the original inhabitants of Sunda Kelapa were Sundanese, their language did not predominate. Indeed, the seaport was a multilingual zone, a melting pot of sailors from many origins. Thus, the Malay language gradually emerged as the basis for a new local language, and this language was gradually “institutionalized” as a new society was constructed in and around Batavia.

One of the earliest descriptions of the Betawi — or Selam, as Batavia residents were also referred to by other groups — appeared in the travel notes of a Javanese aristocrat, Raden Arya Sastradarma, in 1865. Sastradarma distinguished Betawi peoples from Javanese, Chinese and Arabs; and he noted their habits, dialects, fashion, wedding ceremonies, and dress. From his descriptions, it appeared that the culture of local Chinese laborers had profoundly affected Selam or Betawi behavior, particularly in terms of wedding costumes and forms of greeting and personal address. Sastradarma also described how the spiritual orientation of the Betawi had been greatly influenced by the religious devotion of Arabs. And he recounted how the main language of these people was a mixture of Malay and Sundanese, with minor influences from Arabic and Chinese, and some common terms derived from Dutch and Portuguese.

Several factors may underlie this pattern of influence. Contact with the Chinese had been established throughout the archipelago long before the coming of the Dutch. The Chinese were also the major group of foreign settlers in Batavia during the colonial era, and had been granted certain privileges by the Dutch as a catalyst to the natives. The natives also admired the Chinese for their business sense and hardworking habit, and for the fact that they exhibited a type of behavior that was free from feudalism. Indeed, one result of such Chinese influence was the development of an “easy-going” style of public relations among other settlers of the
coastal area. The Betawi, in particular, exhibited a relaxed style in public, and employed Chinese-derived terms for address and food. In contrast to the ritual politeness of elite Javanese, such behavior struck Sastradarma as rude.

Meanwhile, Arab influence grew with the spread of Islam. Among other things, Islam offered a linear concept of time that made the future and past visible — unlike the karmic (circular) sense of time characteristic of Hinduism and Buddhism. Islam also spread a notion of egalitarianism among previously stratified social groups. Religious rituals are a necessity in life-cycle rites and rites of passage in most Southeast Asian communities. And in this regard, Arabs set a new standard for religious practice. As a result, the Betawi eventually came to employ Arabic terms for religious activities and acclamation.

**THE BETAWI AFTER THE INDEPENDENCE OF INDONESIA: BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND CHALLENGE**

Following independence, Indonesia entered a period of nation-building, during which its different cultural traditions were merged to create a common new identity. During this time of cultural homogenization, the ruling ethnic group was able to gradually impose its values on the others. Under the slogan of “nationalism” in the Sukarno era, and “development” during the Suharto era, the “others” were reconciled with the power center.

As the Betawi joined the nation as equals to other ethnic groups, the creative force that once defined them ceased to function. Many social organizations continue today to be active under the label Betawi, and Betawi symbols and cues continue to serve as attributes, but no new forms of Betawi cultural expression are today being created. In addition, through the years of economic development from the 1970s to the 1990s the Betawi were largely displaced from the center of the city. During this time, government land-clearance programs in the center of Jakarta pushed many people, including most Betawis, out to scattered lands on the urban fringe, where they used government compensation money to construct new settlements. Meanwhile, the land they had vacated was developed by new elites of various backgrounds as the city’s central business district.

Under such conditions, television also helped establish and promote a particular view of Betawi culture. In particular, the “Si Doel” show has been one of the most popular TV series in Indonesia. In this and other settings, things Betawi are usually portrayed as provincial and associated with rural life. Such characterizations, of course, also reflect a perceived lack of cultural advancement in comparison to popular culture. Yet, at the same time, as political awareness has spread in the information era, more people have come to demand rights to facilities and rewards. And as a result, local authorities came to realize that, politically, the Betawi, as a “native” group, deserved special attention.

Ali Sadikin, a former governor of Jakarta, was the first to respond to these concerns. In 1974 he ordered that Condet, an area of eastern Jakarta, become a special Betawi Cultural Heritage District. Jakarta had been growing at an unprecedented rate during his administration, and the idea was to prevent Condet’s overdevelopment and retain its character as a traditional village. The designation meant that anybody who wanted to construct a building in Condet had to follow rules that specified decorative embellishments, that limited lot-coverage ratios, and that established architectural guidelines based on models of the Betawi house. Sadikin expected that such restrictions would eventually enable the creation of a special zone that would enrich local culture and improve the well-being of Betawis. But his successors were not able to maintain these rules, and the district continued to grow with little effective control. Today, Condet is almost indistinguishable from other districts of the city, and its main road bears no significant character. In particular, the embellishments imposed on new construction did little to effect the overall atmosphere, and many buildings today resemble those of other modern districts of Jakarta (Fig. 2).

Under the New Order government, Jakarta was the center of development in Indonesia, and benefited from its centralized policies. Yet financially, culturally and politically the Betawis played a very limited role in this process. They were often dismissed as a common people of strong religious devotion — fruit producers who wore sarongs as their daily dress, and who were characterized by “informal” and open behavior. Once a year, during the anniversary of Jakarta, a lavish festival agenda did revive Betawi cultural attributes. But in daily life, modern (Western) lifestyles and forms of architecture came to dominate in the city.

**FIGURE 2.** Some examples of embellishment details in a Betawi house. Based on drawing by Lembaga Teknologi University of Indonesia.
Even with such rapid urbanization, however, most Betawis still live within the city’s administrative borders. However, their built environment varies from extremely urban in the center to more rural in more removed areas. Generally, rich Betawis of the urban center live in a manner indistinguishable from their modern counterparts. Poorer Betawis continue their relaxed way of life — if in increasingly urbanized settings. And the most remote rural Betawis still live as traditional fruit producers, relying on the ownership of smaller and gradually more fragmented landholdings.

Overall, as Jakarta and its region have become a “desakota” urban-rural continuum, the built environment of rural Betawi has gradually been transformed to reflect hybrid urban characteristics. In such a region, members of traditional agricultural households are employed in a variety of occupations; land use is mixed and difficult to officially control; mobility is high, due to improved transportation systems; and women increasingly take part in nonagricultural sectors of the economy.

In terms of house form, the Jakarta municipality today classifies Betawi residences according to three types: gudang, joglo, and bapang (or kebaya). Joglo, gudang, and bapang have long existed in both urban and rural environments. But from the derivation of the terms, one can infer that only bapang (or kebaya), which employs an extended side-gable roof, bears a Malay connection. By contrast, joglo relates to the aristocratic Javanese house, with its trapezoid roof. Gudang is most likely a derivative of “go-down,” which, with its front gable, was a building used primarily for storage.

In terms of spatial division, these house types do share some similarities. In particular, joglo and bapang have a clear tripartite division of front, middle, and rear (in gudang the distinction between middle and rear tends to be more blurred). The front part of these houses takes the form of an open veranda with a low balustrade, and is used both for receiving guests and relaxing in the afternoon. From here, the entrance to the interior is normally located in the center of the intervening wall. A double door at the center of the middle wall then defines an outer semi-private from an inner private zone. And a rear door is either aligned with, or slightly shifted from, the center of the rear exterior wall.

Such arrangements are typical of dwelling space in many of the raised coastal houses of the Indonesian archipelago and Malay peninsula. To some extent such a type is also built by farmers on agricultural land away from the coast. If one follows the logic that house form generally evolves from simple to complex, one can speculate that this basic type probably generated other house forms after being elaborated by the elite classes of the coastal areas.

Yet, as none of these Betawi house styles dominate either in the urban center or on the fringes of Jakarta, and since none of the other forms of Betawi cultural expression dominate life in the metropolitan region, the Betawis have become increasingly marginalized. And this condition has now become a liability for Indonesia’s post-Suharto reformation government. In particular, local autonomy laws, approved by the Legislature and the central government in 2000 after five years of preparation and promotion, have today created confusion with regard to outsiders who still hold top local-government posts. In such a transitional stage toward a more mature democracy, mass political sentiment has emerged and led to calls for a greater role for “the native son.” To appeal to the hearts of local people and relieve some of this political pressure, the government has recently paid more attention to things Betawi, including cultural activities.

Resurgence of interest in Betawi culture since 1997 has led to two pilot projects in the Jakarta area: the Betawi Cultural Village built by the provincial government in Setu Babakan; and the “modern kampung” of Kemang by the municipality of South Jakarta. The first phase of the Setu Babakan project, the focus of this article, was completed in 2001. Kemang is a separate district closer to the center of the city, and the work there is currently in the master-planning stage. In both cases, however, architecture has been framed as a means to achieve a Betawi cultural revival. However, the two projects are not entirely comparable. Kemang grew from a housing estate in the 1970s to include a new business district by 2003, and its expensive restaurants and exotic and exclusive shops in various architectural styles largely serve expatriates. It would therefore be questionable to push for Kemang as an exclusively Betawi district. In Kemang, careful consideration should be given to what “modern” means to the Betawi, as the area already bears aspects of a “modern [Western]” architectural expression.
THE CULTURAL VILLAGE

Setu Babakan Cultural Village is located in South Jakarta (fig. 4). The word “Setu” probably derives from Betawi pronunciation of Sundanese situ, which means lake or big pond. “Babakan” is a local Jakarta term for wood skin. But in this case the reference is to a neighboring village, Kampung Babakan, home to a majority of the area’s Betawi. Before being identified for special development status, the 160-hectare lakeside site for the cultural village was inhabited both by people who claimed to be Betawi and by members of other ethnic groups (fig. 5). Yet, even then, the local Betawis did not appear in colonial-era litera-

![Figure 4. Location of Setu Babakan in Jakarta.](image)

![Figure 5. Site of Setu Babakan. Based on drawing by Lembaga Teknologi University of Indonesia.](image)

ture on the Betawi. Instead, they are today considered to belong to a new category, Betawi Udik (literally, rural Betawi). Such people may also be known as Betawi Ora — ora in Javanese means “not” — the reference being to Betawi who speak with a Javanese accent, and whose behavior is closer to rural Javanese in terms of politeness (fig. 6).

For the government, an initial key to the project was gaining control of certain areas so it could infill these with cultural activities. Toward this end, it negotiated with two of the most influential persons in the village and eventually obtained several empty lots around the lake. In 1998 the government then assigned an academic-associated engineering firm, Lembaga Teknologi Fakultas Teknik Universitas Indonesia (Institute for Technology of the Faculty of Engineering, University of Indonesia), to develop a master plan for the cultural village. Initially, the planning consultant suggested a “bottom-up” approach to developing the farmland around the lake. To enhance the sense of belonging, this would have involved community members in a participatory process. But government officials in charge of the project had other views, which included imposing a new street pattern on the site, with the consequent destruction of some of the existing environment. It was only when they realized this approach would have unacceptable social and political costs that government officials temporarily backed off the idea.

As initially constituted, the project called for a museum, a theater, housing, a management office, a children’s playground, souvenir kiosks, a horse-carriage stand, four gates, a health-care center, a recreation area and fishing pond, and a fire station. By 2003, only one gate, one residence, one guesthouse, an office-cum-gallery, an open theater, lake recreation activities (including the fishing pond), and some kiosks had been completed (figs. 7–11). Nevertheless, these improvements stand as models for future development in coming years. And eventually the government expects this
project will not only revive Betawi tradition but attract visitors of various origins, both domestic and foreign.

Of the buildings so far complete, the office, guesthouse, and residence stand side by side facing south. The residence ends a row of buildings at the edge of the site; the theater faces east toward the lake next to the office. A large paved courtyard forms the setting for these structures, located above a paved lakeshore street which provides space for kiosks and parking (fig. 12). Visitors may ascend to the paved courtyard from the street by means of concrete steps (fig. 13). Once there, they face the stage of the open theater, where they may enjoy its performances.

The residence was built for, and is owned by, one of the oldest persons of the area. Community members consider it to be of mixed style, basically derived from the Central Betawi (Betawi Tengah) tradition. It adopts the Betawi joglo form, but it also incorporates a Javanese roof shape adopted and popularized by the Dutch in the nineteenth century.31 The facade of the guesthouse resembles that of the house, and the office-cum-gallery employs a similar outlook. The theater consists of two small structures that provide backstage facilities and that support a tensile roof.
A major feature of Betawi style, as evident in these buildings, are roof eaves decorated with a repeating geometrical motif (Fig. 14). Experts in Indonesian architectural styles will, however, recognize that such a motif is not distinctively Betawi, but is shared by a number of coastal communities (Fig. 15). In the former cultural village of Condet the government also mandated that such motifs be applied to new houses. However, by reducing Betawi style to mere motifs, such government regulations run the risk of freezing building traditions and discouraging new inventions.

Furthermore, they embody an image that is not necessarily representative of the collective memory of individual communities. Instead, the imposition of such images derived from the past can be read as promoting nostalgia rather than genuine respect for local culture. Indeed, such impositions are akin to forcing those who are not Betawi to bear a Betawi mask; and in so doing, they create a false environment.

In addition to construction of the new buildings described above, the government has also offered incentives, such as easier access to building permits, for those who want to renovate their houses with Betawi decorative motifs (Fig. 16). And it now appears that many community members, whether of Betawi origin or not, have accepted this offer. The government has also created an annual cultural performance program. Thus, every Saturday, except during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, the open theater offers cultural performances for the community.

Prior to the cultural village project, most people in the area pursued a Betawi Udik type of peasant lifestyle within a subsistence urban economy. This pattern is typical of many Betawis on the fringes of Jakarta, and within the administrative borders of such neighboring areas as Tangerang, Bekasi, Depok and Bogor. But the first phase of the project generated a considerable amount of construction activity, jobs, and income for the community. It has also stimulated business, as visitors have flowed in — although their numbers are still small relative to other recreation centers in Jakarta. These visitors include many who come as part of school programs, as well as nearby resi-

**Figure 12.** Paved street at lakeside.

**Figure 13.** Open square.

**Figure 14.** Betawi-style decorated eaves.

**Figure 15.** Similar motifs in North Sumatra.
closely resembles that of other residents of the fashionable metropolis. Most Central Betawi live either in gudangs or Western-style villas, or in kampungs (crowded urban villages). A second group of Betawi live in the southern part of Jakarta next to the Central Betawi. This group is generally characterized as devoutly religious. A third group lives in the neighboring regions of Bogor, Tangerang and Bekasi. As mentioned above, they are known as Betawi Udik (rural).

They include both those of Chinese influence, who reside in the northern and the western parts of Jakarta and Tangerang; and those with Sundanese influence, who reside in the eastern and southern parts of Jakarta and Bogor as well as Bekasi.

According to a survey done by Yasmine Shahab, many Betawi Udik were originally not Betawi at all. Rather, they claimed to be Betawi only after the 1970s, during the era of Jakarta’s fast development. Shahab has further suggested that, contrary to the common view, Betawi identity is still in the making, and that the group is actually expanding. This claim is probably correct in terms of number, although culturally, it needs more supporting evidence.

If Shahab’s observation is correct, the present Betawis in the area of Setu Babakan would have undergone the ethnic fusion process by incorporation. The previous groups living in the area, most possibly the first generation born in Jakarta, assumed the identity of the Betawi and have gradually, but not totally, been assimilated. Language would most likely have played a significant role in this process, providing the hybrid location for the incorporation of cultural values.

Such an increase in the number of Betawi indicates how Jakarta, as a national symbol, remains a magnet for migrants, who over time come to identify themselves as Jakartan, or Betawi. But such a continuing process also complicates the notion of Betawi ethnic identity. Most significantly, considering Betawi to be a name for the citizens of the Indonesian capital may have a deterritorializing effect. In this case, it reduces Betawi identity to little more than a symbolic projection for the new generations living in Jakarta. As migration and urbanization increase, and as new members of each migrant group move in with those who came before them, the Betawis of Setu Babakan will therefore face new challenges. Those Betawi who live there now sense that they were the first settlers of the area, and they have come to accept the newcomers as “the others” who share space with them. But they are also intensely aware of differing cultural practices, and may ultimately come to see them as a threat to the cultural village.

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that the Betawi ethnic identity emerged in as an urban movement, even though many of its subgroups maintained rural behaviors. Its genesis was directly related to the dominating structure of the ruling colonial power in Batavia. Through force, the Dutch East Indies Company constructed a walled city whose controlling power was both spatial and political. And under the pressure of this new situation, the local coastal people who had lived under quite different conditions prior
to the contest among Europeans and Islamic traders in the early seventeenth century responded by readjusting the entire nature of their lives in Batavia. In particular, they created a hybrid condition where — to borrow Wheatley’s concept — a process of urban imposition encountered a process of the urban generation. The new identity was arguably defensive, but it evolved by attracting other existing ethnic groups. Hence, a transterritorial identity emerged, which the local communities eventually constructed and produced within the segregating frame created by the power center. The process encompassed hybrid conditions in which the “habitus” — as a collective mental habit, as well as a socially constituted cognitive and motivating structure — produced practices suitable for the group. In this way, the group constructed and reconstructed a form of knowledge which provided a framework of practice upon the site they inhabited.

Today’s Betawi ethnic culture thus emerged from a long process of cultural reconstruction. And in this process, the space of enunciation — or “third space,” to borrow Homi Bhabha’s term — played a significant role. Specifically, the reconstruction occurred under the conditions imposed by Dutch hegemony, which enabled other positions to rise and new political initiatives to emerge. This condition then led to the creation of new and different areas of negotiation. Such a condition mirrors the present relation between the global and the local, in which the hierarchical dependency between a strong center, represented by the West, and the weak margins, represented by developing countries, creates the conditions for a constant blurring and destabilizing of cultural identities.

Such relations create a continuum of hybridities in which meaning and representation are constantly negotiated. Hybridity thus understood can generate either obedience or separation. In the former case it may express assimilative acts that mimic the hegemonic power and attempt to be reconciled with it, while in the latter it may attempt to shift the drift and overthrow the center. Over the years, the formation of Betawi culture revealed both proclivities. However, since Indonesian independence, despite being to some extent marginalized, it appears to have become more assimilative, and the group is now largely dependent on the helping hand of the government to achieve its goals.

One result of these circumstances of cultural evolution is that most Betawi cultural symbols today were invented in the colonial past. And although these symbols may be renewed with new material, they are not accompanied by new interpretations or meanings. Thus, for example, exaggerated ondel-ondel puppets may enrich the festivals of city, but there has been no significant new construction and production of meaning around such shows. In general, it also appears that the force that once was able to absorb various new cultural traits into the Betawi world now seems to be in decline. Faced with this situation, the Betawi elites who occupy more influential places within the city have attempted to revive what they regard as Betawi cultural heritage. But Betawis at the fringes of the city live and enjoy their environment in a peaceful condition without striving to substantiate, improve, or reinvent their traditions. And in so doing, they become more bound to the past than open to the future.

The Kampung Betawi at Setu Babakan clearly reflects these conflicts within Betawi culture. It started functioning in early 2002 with various programs of performing arts and some occasional exhibitions. Surrounding peoples visit every Saturday, Sunday and holidays (except during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan) for recreation and cultural entertainment. Weekdays, the only activity is the renovation of houses. On the one hand, such a project depicts symbols of rural Betawi life with the hope it will propel and sustain the tradition. Yet, on the other, many Betawis, especially those at the center of the city, currently live a modern lifestyle, wear Western clothes, dwell in modern villas, enjoy pop music, watch American TV programs, and work in modern offices. In some cases they have even become detached from their Betawi identity.

The process by which the project has been developed by the government has highlighted additional conflicts that derive from the dependence of the Betawi on government funding. In some cases the “habitus” of government agency may be open to implementing such a project from the bottom-up. But the noble idea of empowering the local peoples seldom comes to fruition, because those who are charged with implementing it are either reluctant to do so wholeheartedly, or lack knowledge and patience. In this case, such a responsive approach, which might have helped advance Betawi culture, was also hampered by a definition of success that stressed the ability to meet annual budget goals and get the money absorbed.

In such projects, the consultant always works within a tight time schedule. Meanwhile, the government agency in charge seeks only visible, practical results, without fully exploring a situation or examining all potential opportunities. As a result, it is doubtful that all groups are being well represented in the work at Setu Babakan, or that the whole range of local expectations about the future built environment is being addressed. For example, the approach the government and the consultant have implemented relies too much on the view of elders, and fails to consult youth, women, and representatives of “other” groups. Such work based on inadequate data can only yield a planning scheme which will intervene in the existing context without adequately incorporating the interests of all potential actors.

Furthermore, by projecting a certain image of the Betawi upon the existing environment, the planners of Setu Babakan have taken sides in the development of Betawi culture. And since their intervention is one-sided rather than mutually resolved, they have precluded any basis on which new cultural elements might be born. In other words, the planners have used representational space to create something that is not necessarily representative of the local people — something that might have opened the possibility for different practices to take place. The planners have thus acted...
as if they occupied a position “above” the local people. In such a planning process officials reciprocally bear both the colonizer’s and decolonizer’s attitude.9

If the planners had taken a more participatory approach, the space filled by representational elements might in time have produced and reproduced new social facts. Instead, the social construction and production of space at Setu Babakan has from the beginning been activated only with nostalgically attributed meaning. Furthermore, the government has made no attempt to serve as a catalyst for constructing a sense of what it means to be Betawi in terms of global-local interaction. In such an atmosphere, it is doubtful whether any aspects of a “new” Betawi identity may emerge.

In post-Suharto Indonesia, as many local governments attempt to establish their regions as distinct from the center, there is a danger that the wrong lesson will be learned in reaction to the Javanization and centralization practiced by Suharto’s regime in the name of nation building.5 In particular, some local governments have turned to the opposite extreme, reacting to previous governmental pressure by reviving exclusively local characteristics. But such an approach may embody other forms of hegemony. And it may produce interethnic conflicts should the government be unable to retain justice and balance. Space thus constructed may not be equally accessible, and may become the stage upon which conflicts are performed.30

THE BETAWI CULTURAL FUTURE

It is important to recognize that Setu Babakan is not a homogenous district, and that attempting to revive the Betawi cultural tradition through architectural elements and spatial patterning in such a multiethnic zone represents a severe challenge. Perhaps more significantly, by encouraging the elaboration of Betawi material-cultural expressions here, while ignoring the complexity of local conditions and the facts of contemporary globalization (which may need other forms of articulation to provide needed space for cultural exchange), government intervention may be opening the way for unexpected side effects.54 Another important question is whether Betawi identity can continue to play a significant role in future mixing of cultures in the region when its former unifying force appears to be significantly diminished. It is equally important to critically examine the present strategy of building a cultural future for Betawis through the past.

In a globalized world, demographic migrations are the rule rather than the exception, and so it would seem a wise choice for localities to open themselves to the traditions of others.35 However, domestic and international visitors are also drawn to authentic local places, rather than to built-up fantasies such as Disneyland.56 In this complex social condition, the government-sponsored revitalization of Betawi cultural traditions may need to encourage some level of competition if it is to be successful.57

What may be needed, rather than building on nostalgia for past images, is a stimulation program toward the invention of new traditional elements. A productive first phase may include strengthening the self-image of local peoples through campaigns to re-create traditional forms. But in the present era of global-local competition, cultural revitalization will ultimately require the creation of new cultural expressions out of existing traditions of material culture.

REFERENCE NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my appreciation to Ms. Diane Wildsmith for helping me edit the paper. My thanks also to Ismijai Cahyono and Ary Cahyono for helping me preparing the graphic materials.


3. In a 1930s census, 778,953 people in the area of Batavia claimed to be Betawi; in 1988, this number was estimated to have more than doubled. Depdikbud, Peta Suku Bangsa: Proyek Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Kebudayaan Daerah (Jakarta: Depdikbud, 1989).

4. Betawi scholar Yasmine Shahab has categorized at least five different types of Betawi. Each has considered the other groups to be non-Betawi according to certain criteria such as religion and lifestyle. See Y.Z. Shahab, “Siapa Orang Betawi?” in Y.Z. Shahab, ed., Betawi dalam Perspektif Kontemorer: Perkembangan, Potensi dan Tantangananya, (Jakarta: Lemba Kebudayaan Betawi, 1997), pp.185–88.


7. Ridwan Saidi, a Betawi scholar, prefers the hypothesis of Notohofer, a comparative dialectologist, that the Malay language used in that area was cognate with that in West Kalimantan, which belonged to Polynesian Malay rather than Austronesian Malay, as proposed by many scholars. See Saidi, Profil Orang Betawi, p.10.

8. Based on written sources, there were contests of power between the Portuguese, the rising Islamic kingdom of Demak, the inland Hindu kingdom, the Dutch East Indies Company, and the British. The sources are recently compiled and translated by Adolf

9. For a detailed description on the condition of Batavia from a more distant view (not of the Dutch and Indonesian), see W.A. Hannah, Hikayat Jakarta (Jakarta: Obo, 1988).


21. The description is a popular joke. This joke is frequently addressed in various occasions by the government officials of Betawi origin.


25. The house type of the common peoples across the coastal areas of the Indonesian archipelago shares a similar plan and roof form. This condition can also be found in some locations inland. It is only the house forms of elite classes that vary from one place to another. See G. Tjahjono, “Dwellings of Indonesia: Tradition, Resilience, and Change,” in R. Knapp, ed., Asia’s Old Dwellings: Tradition, Resilience, and Change (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.139–84.

26. After the Autonomy Law was passed by the Legislature, many local legislatures preferred that executives should be from among “native sons.”

27. Kampung is a term for urban village in Indonesia. The term was originally applied to village compounds, but it is now commonly used to designate places with a village character in an urban area.

28. This is an ongoing project sponsored by the mayor of the City of South Jakarta. Efforts are still underway to develop guidelines and urban design elements that will enhance the Betawi atmosphere.


30. I owe this information to Mr. Abimanyu Takdir Alamsyah, a planner with whom I had several interviews. The latest was on December 18, 2002, in Depok. For the project, see Lembaga Teknologi FTUI, Laporan Akhir Penyempurnaan Masterplan dan Rencana Teknis Ruang Kampung Budaya Betawi di Situ Babakan (Final Report, Masterplan and Spatial Plan Improvement on the Situ Babakan Betawi Cultural Village, Jakarta, 2001).


32. At the time this article was being written, about thirty houses were in the process of renovation.


34. For further explanation on such types of living in Southeast Asian cities, see H.-D. Evers and R. Korff, Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000).

35. A report by a research team of the University of Indonesia on Betawi of Bojong, near Bogor, reveals a similar rural

36. This is the issue that circulates around the area. The squatters of public land had been backed by powerful persons who organized the social action and protest to claim land release compensation. Community members and consultants tend to hold this view.


44. Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, p.95.


46. Homi Bhabha uses the concept of third space in a linguistic sense in cultural analysis. However, as language reveals thought and thus the construction of concept, the term can also explain the complex situation of cultural construction. See H.K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2002, 1994), pp.36–39.

47. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and of third space was well explained by Edward Soja in E. Soja, Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.211. This condition was also explained by Soja by quoting Jan Nederveen Peterse’s idea of “Globalization as Hybridization” in ibid.


53. Since 1998, various local conflicts have occurred in Indonesia, such as those in Ambon (1999–2002) and Poso (1999, 2001) for “religious” reasons, and Sampit (1999, 2001) for interethnic causes.


56. Some tourists expect authenticity, and thus expect that conservation should lead toward a return to the original. But this view has now shifted as more tourists now tolerate minor changes in the context of Western heritage conservation. However, in Setu Babakan the case is neither of reconstruction nor conservation, and it is doubtful whether there is a connection to genuine cultural tourism. See G.F. Ross, Psikologi Pariwisata (original title: Psychology of Tourism), trans. by M. Samosir (Jakarta Yayasan Obor, 1998), pp.104–8.


All photos by author unless otherwise noted.