

Imagining Indonesia From Afar: Exploratory Thoughts on Utopian, Nostalgic, and Embodied Longing for the Homeland

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Unlike India and China, which have the largest diaspora worldwide and have been nurturing their connections with their multi-generational overseas population for a long time, Indonesia has only recently started to pay more attention to fellow Indonesians outside of the homeland. In August 2013, Wahid Supriyadi, the head of the Diaspora Desk at the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, welcomed more than three thousand diasporans at a three-day conference in Jakarta. This event served to discuss issues, such as immigration and citizenship, business and investment, education, culture and youth affairs, and other matters of interest to the Indonesian diaspora (Soemartopo, 2012). Wahid Supriyadi, the main organizer of the event, expressed his hope stating that “the fundamental objective of engaging with the diaspora was to find ways for Indonesia to benefit”. In other words, Indonesians overseas “could potentially be courted to invest in the country and contribute to its development” (“3,000 to Attend Sunday’s”, 2013). Economic aspirations aside, how do ‘ordinary’ Indonesian diasporans, outside of such business-minded organizations, perceive their ‘homeland’? What non-economic imaginations of and “homeland anchorages” (Meel, 2011) for Indonesia do they have in their minds and hearts? In order to explore in more depth what Indonesians located overseas aspire to for their homeland beyond economic progress and how they imagine a ‘better’ Indonesia for the future, which includes their own participation and contributions while living outside the *tanah air* (homeland), this special issue has compiled the work of five authors who have critically examined this question within the realms of their specific disciplines.

Currently, between 1.8 and 6 million Indonesians are living and working overseas (Muhidin & Utomo, 2013), first and foremost in Malaysia and the Middle East. With most Indonesians just having recently established overseas communities, there are, however, also some rather established Indonesian diaspora communities (Martinez & Vickers, 2012; Meel, 2011). While away from ‘home’, the ‘homeland’ shapes the post-migratory life significantly and therefore remains a special point of reference for people’s biographies. Many overseas Indonesians choose to uphold their connections with people and institutions in Indonesia due to modern communication technologies and more affordable transportation, both of which allow for more regular real-time contact (Trupp & Dolezal, 2013). Despite these opportunities for ‘staying in touch’ with current developments in Indonesia, homeland imaginaries are shaped to a large extent by

other, often rather emotive, factors. As Peter Meel (2011) reminds us, the “homeland anchorage” includes in particular language, religion, cuisine, etiquette, art, dance, literature, and music. Whether homeland is primarily understood as the country of origin or simply the country that ancestors hailed from, remains open for debate.

Like other diasporic or exilic populations, Indonesians overseas can choose from all the homeland information available to them and selectively decide on what to consume and what to ignore. In fact, they can easily opt for cherishing past memories (or traumas) over taking into account developments and changes and thereby generate distorted homeland views and ‘time warps’ (Missbach, 2011). Depending on whether the emigration or the departure from home was voluntary or not and whether the stay overseas was meant to be short-term, mid-term, long-term, or even permanent, people create and recreate their collective and individual homeland relations over time in multiple ways, for example, through overseas student organizations, diasporic business collectives, or cultural and folkloristic associations.

While away from Indonesia, people might delve in memories of their past, or they might dream of their return and brighter futures for Indonesia more generally. In fact, current research shows that Indonesia serves overseas Indonesians as a multi-faceted canvas for projections of longings for a better tomorrow and of a golden yesteryear (Chauvel, 2009; Dragojlovic, 2010, 2012; Hearman, 2010; Hill, 2010; Missbach, 2011; Steijlen, 2010; Van Amersfoort, 2004). While such visions for Indonesia’s future and the diasporic interpretations of its past might not necessarily be shared by those living in the everyday reality in Indonesia, for the Indonesians overseas who project them onto their *tanah air*, they turn out to be powerful means for their political agitation, long-distance politics, transnational solidarity/activism, fund-raising, and even for shaping Indonesia’s reputation in the host country. Homeland imaginaries are by no means homogeneous or static; instead they develop over time and often, when coming under closer scrutiny, they may turn out to be rather fragmented, ambivalent, or even outright ‘unrealistic’ as specific actors see the Indonesian homeland in a different light.

To an extent, the same can be said about the social and political and even religious imaginaries employed by those Indonesian actors who remain in the country but have ‘exiled’ themselves either voluntarily or involuntarily from mainstream society. They project their imaginings of a better society onto a societal canvas they see as being currently imperfect, be it due to religious considerations in the case of Salafis (Chaplin in this issue), political objections in the case of Papuan independence activists (Myrntinen, 2011, forthcoming), or, in a past era, socio-political concerns in the case of the Indonesian Communist Party (interview with Hearman, Missbach in this issue).

Utopias generally conceptualize social orders and political systems for times yet to come; in some cases, they also look back at glorified pasts. Thus, in both cases, they depict responses of current dissatisfaction with political regimes, state orders, and social frameworks. Utopias serve their inventors to excogitate alternatives deemed to improve the destinies of many. However, attempts to implement social or political utopias are often characterized by a tragedy of ‘unrealizability’ or unfeasibility (*Machbarkeit* as defined by Norbert Elias in Voßkamp, 2009), or in the worst case, they achieve the opposite of what was intended. Despite the fact that many utopias

might never enter the phase of implementation at all, it is still worthwhile to examine the political contents of these utopias as they also represent a critique of contemporary societal conditions.

When examining the state of the art on the politically active Indonesian diaspora – from Acehnese, Papuans, and Moluccans to overseas student associations – it appears that antagonism against the Indonesian state and its government is a decisive element of diaspora politics (Ali, 2013; Van Amersfoort, 2004, p. 161). Scholarship on political diasporas often ignores more subtle forms of socio-cultural politics and activism. By not limiting our gaze to more or less established diasporic groups with internet presence and regular media outlets, this special issue seeks to also include less formalized and temporary group activities of Indonesians overseas that complement the already existing assemblies of Indonesian homeland narratives and imaginaries.

The special issue aims to explore the multiple readings of longings for a better life that are projected both on Indonesia's past and/or future. The papers deal with the romanticization and transfiguration of the Indonesian homeland without ignoring the darker sides of internal and external exile, migration, and long-distance politics. In particular, the papers critically reflect on the construction and perceptions of 'homeland' and 'homing', the creating of transnational political links and activism, as well as the significance of diasporic groups and their influence in Indonesia. The contributions examine in detail political utopias and homeland imaginaries held by Indonesians and, in one case, East Timorese at home and abroad. These include labor migrants (Hertzman), expatriates, marriage migrants (Utomo), overseas students (Hasyim), political exiles, and refugees (Askland). Since being in exile does not always require an actual departure from the homeland, as people can retreat into an 'inner exile', this special issue also takes into account the imaginaries of those who are physically within the boundaries of Indonesia, yet in one way or another voluntarily or involuntarily 'exiled' from the rest of society, such as Salafi activists (Chaplin) or political prisoners (Hearman).

In her contribution, Emily Hertzman examines the multiple ways in which ethnic Hakka Chinese Indonesian migrants to Southeast and East Asia navigate their lives abroad while maintaining deep emotional ties to and (re-)imagining their area of origin, Singkawang, in West Kalimantan. Ariane Utomo similarly looks at Indonesians living abroad for extended periods of time and explores how Indonesian mothers in the Australian capital of Canberra use language schooling for their children as a way to maintain their own ties to Indonesia, but also build transnational relations for their children. On a more political note, Syafiq Hasyim investigates the history of Indonesian student activism in Berlin over the years and the struggle both for a more democratic and a more pious Indonesia. In terms of examining diaspora communities, Hedda Askland's contribution might seem to be an outlier at first sight since it examines changing perceptions of exile East Timorese in Australia of their native country. The link to Indonesia here, however, is a historical one, as most of the exiles had fled Indonesian occupation. The remaining contributions – a paper by Chris Chaplin and an interview with Vanessa Hearman – examine re-imaginings of Indonesia from *within* the country by Indonesians who are either voluntarily (in the case of Chaplin, Salafis) or involuntarily (in the case of Hearman's study of letters of the political prisoner Gatot Lestario) distanced from mainstream society.

The papers in this special issue thus pay attention to individual homeland conceptions among Indonesians and East Timorese overseas but more so, they are interested in collective narratives, imaginaries, and interpretations as well as the more practical expressions resulting therefrom. The contributions follow interdisciplinary approaches and are situated at the intersections of anthropology, political science, history, as well as migration and diaspora studies. They give fascinating insights into the dynamic meanings attached by different Indonesians and East Timorese to their homelands and how these imaginings, although they might in part be at odds with the imaginings of the majority of the population, act as parts and fragments which add up to the mosaic that is Indonesian society.



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