



“Becoming” an environmentalist in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at how five environmental leaders in Jogjakarta became environmentally active, and at the groups and interventions they formed. Interview data are drawn from a broader project that aimed to find out what might turn an Indonesian person into someone who cares for the environment. It examines the journey in leadership as “becoming” in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari (1987); a journey constituted in the desire to make something different. Against a backdrop of day-to-day practices in Central Java that do not favour environmental conservation and sustainability, the five informants seized upon an idea, a praxis, and explored it in the company of like-minded others, to join or make an organisation or action dedicated to redressing environmental crisis or neglect.

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In the future, much more than the simple defence of nature will be required.

[Guattari (2000, p. 66)]

Introduction

This article responds to the question,

How do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity – if it ever had it – a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetative species.

[Guattari (1995, p. 119–120)]

It engages interview data from local environmental group leaders in Jogjakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. Data was collected for a multi-faceted project that aims to find out what turns someone into an environmentalist in Indonesia. In the course of collecting survey and interview data on youth environmental attitudes in five very different Indonesian cities for that broader project,¹ there came an opportunity in Jogjakarta to interview some leaders/members of local environmental groups that were referred to by

environmental activist students interviewed at Gadjah Mada University. A renowned centre of education and traditional Javanese culture, the small city of Jogjakarta is certainly not representative of Indonesia as a whole, yet there are some insights that emerge from the material below that could be relevant to pro-environmental developments in other parts of the archipelago.

The quotes from Guattari above invoke “moving beyond”, “changing”, “reinventing”, “giving back” in pro-environmentalist activism. This implies working at the micro-level of people and places; the grassroots of change in local communities and landscapes. Here the data is ethnographic and the scope of this paper is to grasp something about local environmental activism in Jogjakarta; how the status quo of unawareness might be challenged and altered on a small scale. In this endeavour some key interpretive concepts from Deleuze and Guattari (becoming, assemblage, the rhizome) seemed appropriate to explain how these instances of environmental activism emerged from everyday conditions, were primarily constituted in actions and interventions, and evinced currents of contemporary environmentalism at national and/or international level. In this regard we follow the pioneering work of Tania Li. In her work on forest conservation practices in Indonesia Li (2007: 263) argues – with direct reference to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – for an “analytic that focuses on practices of assemblage – the on-going labour of bringing disparate elements together and forging connections between them”. Below we acknowledge that while individuals may “become” environmentalists (and leaders), it is through collective knowledge and initiative – including online sharing – that environmental action

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groups come about. Thus the concept of “becoming” can be applied to both the individual and the group, but the concepts of “assemblage” and “the rhizome” apply to the formations and actions of groups. The individual stories in the latter part of the paper are testament to those intersubjective processes.

Our interpretive framework echoes the Deleuzian approach advocated by Coleman and Ringrose (2013); one that avoids determinist assumptions and the temptation to look for and celebrate resistance. It challenges teleological thinking. Thus “the aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, p. vii). Grassroots environmentalism is recognised as “that which is already in the process of coming about and never stops coming about” (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 242), rather than reaching a fixed position of activism that directly implies revolution or reform on a larger scale. This means looking for moments in interview data that pertain to concerned people going forward, not in a determined way, but into new ground; an exploratory, creative trajectory with like-minded others.

The paper starts with methodology, followed by broad background on Indonesian environmentalism. An explanation then follows of the theoretical framework that drives the analysis. Some studies of grassroots interventions that use Deleuzian concepts are briefly described. The latter half of the paper focuses on the five interviews, showing how each demonstrates the process of becoming-environmentalist, and the assemblages which that process engendered. The rhizomatic formation of environmental activism is also engaged. The discussion synthesizes the main findings. The conclusion considers the value of an interpretive approach based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and looks at the wider implications.

Methodology

As noted above, in the course of conducting the broader project, some student environmental activists in Jogjakarta named off-campus pro-environmentalist groups or interventions and their leaders (or mentors). The five groups represented here were all named in terms of a particular public figure who either led the group, or served as a mentor. Crosschecking with relevant newspaper articles and websites confirmed them as such so they were interviewed about their apparently inspirational actions and interventions.

While there is no simple answer to the question of how someone becomes an environmentalist (see Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002), in the US and Norway the following shaping influences were identified: childhood experiences in nature; experiences of environmental destruction; environmental values held by the family; environmental organisations; role models (friends or teachers); and education (Chawla, 1998, 1999). In-depth interviews probing those influences were conducted with the identified leader/mentor. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 min. While different in their environmental focus and orientation, all were engaged in practical activities as well as awareness-raising in the community. They were eager to talk and share their views and experiences. Responses were primarily in Indonesian and were translated by the authors.

Environmentalism in Indonesia

The world’s largest archipelago, Indonesia faces environmental challenges from both poorly regulated development and growing pressure of population, now over 250 million. Indonesia is currently ranked at only 108 of 187 countries according to the 2014 Human Development Index, with high levels of poverty,

unemployment and corruption (World Bank, 2014). In 2015, the urban population should reach 53.3 per cent (BPS, 2014). Rapid urban expansion means higher rates of “domestic consumerism, energy usage and CO2 emissions” (Savage, 2012, p. 244). Yet it seems “environmental values are not deeply embedded in [Indonesian] society” (World Bank, 2011). Bohensky et al. (2012) did find awareness of global warming amongst 6310 Indonesian households in 2007/2008. 81.9 per cent of respondents had observed climate change and 70.7 per cent perceived it as a risk. However, of those, less than 31.8 per cent were taking any action (Bohensky et al., 2012, p. 349). It would appear that environmental knowledge, where it exists, does not often extend to environmentally beneficial practices, either individual or collective. Environmental groups try many different ways to raise public awareness. Attention to the history of environmentalism in Indonesia gives some background to the recent development of grass roots “assemblages” of environmental activism in Jogjakarta. Those early endeavours constitute the background to the contemporary “becoming” of environmentalism.

As Grove (1995) points out, environmentalism is not something that only began in the twentieth century. Dutch colonial powers controlled the Indonesian archipelago for 300 years without directly exploiting large parts of it until the early twentieth century. They put regulations in place to conserve the environment, such as protected areas for water catchment which included mountainous forest lands. Cribb (1988) documents further forest conservation measures implemented by the Indonesian state following independence, describing the declaration of the first national parks under pioneering environmental minister Emil Salim, and the close relationship of some government ministries with national environmental NGO WALHI, which still exists today. Similarly, Gordon (1998) unpacks the important political role that environmental NGOs played during the repressive New Order regime 1966–1998. Peluso et al. (2008, p. 377) explain that “environmental activists used the appearance of technical ‘apolitical’ concerns to their advantage. They mobilized at multiple scales, targeting laws and other institutions of state power at the same time as organizing the grassroots”.

Tsing (2005) documents some later history of various “environmental connections” in reference to the rainforests of Indonesia, illustrating different ways that people came to have concern for the environment in Indonesia through a creative tension between local, national and global influences. For example, groups of students in the 1980s and 1990s joined local university “nature lover” groups, and many went on to become activists at a national level against the New Order regime. The “movement” at that time was diverse; “organized around differences within the framework of nationalist advocacy. Rather than build a single centralized policy board, the movement was committed to negotiating amongst small groups organised by place, issue or campaign” (Tsing, 2005, p. 17). To some extent this paper documents the continued salience of that late twentieth century trend. Following the end of the New Order in 1998 and the beginning of full democracy, environmental groups have proliferated in the new freedom to organise and speak out.

For example, Crosby (2013, p. 257) found that the youthful environment movement in Central Java in the last decade incorporated not only the national network of student nature lovers’ clubs, but “local genealogies of resistance to colonialism, the politics and styles of global punk, and the popular images of ‘green’ circulated by advertising and transnational environmental bodies”. In her view this diversity contributed to the capacity of local environmental activists to construct and perform multi-scaled identities in different conditions. Most recently it is claimed that the active and vocal environmental NGO community in Indonesia “is finally gaining traction in their long struggle for greater environmental justice and forest peoples’ access rights and sustainable

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