Chapter 9

Contested Imaginings of the City: City as Locus of Status, Capitalist Accumulation, and Community: Competing Cultures of Southeast Asian Societies

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In 1997–8 many of the cities and towns of Indonesia were rocked by riots and demonstrations. The political dynamics of these riots lay in the maneuverings of armed forces, "pro-democracy," and "Islamic" forces, but they were marked also by the burning and sacking of symbols of capitalism and foreign influence, first the churches and then the shopping plazas, particularly those associated with the Chinese. One of the characteristics of these sackings was that people brought out store merchandise and burnt it together with motor vehicles on the streets. Siegel (1986: 232–54) in describing a similar phenomenon that occurred in Solo, Indonesia, in 1980 suggested that the Chinese were seen as a sign of money and money was seen as being their "natural" language. Yet they were charged with not deserving their wealth, and with holding it inappropriately. For Javanese people *pamrih*, "personal indulgence," as in personal acquisitiveness, sexual indulgence, or political ambition, is disavowed. The burning of Chinese goods was thus a disavowal of such a materialist focus, an admission by the rioting Solo youth that they had been taken in by Chinese-generated consumerism.

This chapter looks at the imaginings of the Southeast Asian city espoused by indigenous citizens and reflected in the urban literature, where "imagining" refers to images and metaphors of the city that provide a locus for diverse ideas and concepts (Low 1996). Sahlins (1976: 20) suggests that a culture can have "a privileged institutional locus . . . whence emanates a classificatory grid imposed upon the total culture." In the West, he argues, this locus is the economy, and until recently focus on the tiger economies of Southeast Asia indicated that many presumed the economy to be the locus there too. O'Connor (1995), in contrast, argues that in Southeast Asia status differentiation expressed principally through city forms and normative

behavior is the privileged institutional locus. As in the above examples these two, and possibly other, imaginings are currently being contested.

City as Locus of Capitalist Accumulation

Armstrong and McGee in *Theatres of Accumulation* described Southeast Asian cities as principally the locus of the economy, the principal theater of action for those decision makers concerned with the operation of capital, corporate business and the state (1985: xiii). Cities, they stated, act as

> the crucial elements in accumulation at all levels . . . providing both the institutional framework and the locus operandi for transnationals, local oligopoly capital and the modernizing national state. . . . . On the other hand . . . [they] also play the role of diffusers of the lifestyles, customs, tastes, fashions and consumer habits of modern industrial society. Cities are the arenas in which foreign and local capital market, advertise and sell the philosophy of modernization, efficiency and growth through imitative lifestyles and consumerism and in so doing undermine non-capitalist production systems and cultural values. (1985: 41–2)

Indeed capital accumulation was so central to Armstrong and McGee's understanding of cities that they labeled a pre-1970s urban population expansion in the absence of capital accumulation as "pseudo-urbanization."

Pinches in writing on Manila (1987, 1994) supports this emphasis on capitalist accumulation as the prime cultural force. Modernization is evident in the massive investment of capital in suburban expansion and industrial production, and the proletarianization of the city workforce. The lives of Filipinos, he suggests, are "increasingly circumscribed by the flux and uncertainty of commodity production, commercialisation and a nation-state whose political economy orientates them to a global market in goods, labour and cultural values" (1994: 36). He instances the investment of private capital in the luxury housing estates and thriving business centre of Makati on the fringes of Manila, a "showcase to the world" and the pride of the Philippines (1994: 18).

In Malaysia such real-estate developments have mushroomed throughout the Peninsula. The larger of these boast industrial and commercial centers, shopping plazas, sporting facilities such as golf course or swimming pool, and mosque. These are the urban expressions of capitalism, where personal space is purchased as individualized lots of house, security, and services. In these new constructions of capitalist culture the elite and middle classes rely on exclusivity, by means of protected walled housing, exclusive shopping malls, personal automobile travel, and the like, rigidly based around capitalist values.[1]

The 1997–8 targeting of Chinese shops and churches in Indonesia demonstrated a rejection of these values by a sizable number of city-dwellers. The most ready explanations from looters for their actions was the sudden increase in prices, seen to be lining the pockets of the Chinese merchants. They were seen to be prioritizing the continued accumulation of capital even as the general populace struggled to survive. They were also the importers of those very items of white goods, clothes, food, and the like that had come to characterize the emerging middle class, themselves a product of economic growth. The lootings frequently were galvanized by street marches protesting the excessive wealth of the president, his family, and

favored elite. Such self-indulgence was alien to a cultural imagining where status was defined through interpersonal relations and acknowledged in elaborate expressions of respect.

City as Pinnacle of Status Differentiation

In Southeast Asia cities have existed for two millennia.[2] The majority of the early cities were based on an Indian model, with its concept of kingship, the court, the army, the civil and religious bureaucracy and royal overlordship of the land. Administration centered on a primate royal capital city supported by the wealth from land taxes. Great monuments provided centralizing symbols of statehood, among them none better recognized today than Angkor Thom and Angkor Vat, the Khmer capital of the ninth century (Kirk 1990: 18–21). Richard Fox identified such cities as regal-ritual, the essential element of which was its ideological role, emerging from the "prestige and status of the state rule or the cohesive power of state religious ideology" (1977: 41). The royal court provided an image of ordered and ritualized existence as a model for the rest of society, and its ceremonials and elaborate rituals were occasions on which the king dramatized the ideal organization of the world for his followers (1977: 55). This cultural logic has thus been the dominant arrangement in Southeast Asia for centuries, and persists today in contestation with other imaginings of the city, the most powerful being that of the city as locus of capital accumulation.

Leeds (1984) was particularly scathing of an ethnocentric tendency in social analysis to equate the urban only with the features of capitalist systems, pointing out that feudal and capitalist integrations of urban society were radically different. While capitalist integration of urban society is marked by concentrations and mobility of capital and labor, with minimum intervention by the state, the feudal alternative is marked by the public display of elite pomp and wealth, an immobility of labor and fixity of class relationships.

While Leeds drew his examples of feudal society from medieval Europe O'Connor (1995) draws attention to similar distinctions in his analysis of Southeast Asian cities. The city's dominance is not to be explained by higher economic logic but by a cultural logic whereby society represents itself in symbols that presume a center. It is as status distinctions that urbanism imposes itself strictly and deeply on how people live (O'Connor 1995: 37). Many of the towns of Java (Indonesia) were, and some like Yogyakarta still are, centered symbolically in the palace of the Sultan. In Yogyakarta the palace wall encompasses a number of neighborhoods traditionally granted to princes, nobility, or power holders, or occupied by *kraton* (palace) servants. Ringing the palace was a larger city domain symbolically ordered by the presence of the sultan (Sullivan 1992: 22–3). In contrast the sultan's power was seen as much diminished in the outside ring of surrounding villages. Within the palace wall is the great park square with its banyan trees, symbols of the shelter and security afforded by the sultan.[3] In towns without an active *kraton* such a "palace" park still forms the symbolic and ritual center of the town, "a still center in a turbulent world" as Javanese might put it.

The status of the center was constructed around the conferring of privileges, awards, and titles to court loyalists, such as the titles in past and contemporary

Malay states by which the sultan rewards allies and co-opts rivals. C. Geertz's (1980) study of the traditional Balinese state indicated how rulers there conferred status down from the top even while lesser folk ceded power up from the bottom by their presence at the royal rituals. The modern Southeast Asian state, in order to consolidate its control and shore up its status, has manufactured jobs in the civil service that incorporate the newly educated into its ranks (Evers 1987). These emerging middle classes appear to rely heavily on social forms inherited from earlier and especially founding groups, combining colonial-derived Western style with the outlook of the traditional elite. The Thai military and civil service is built around the ascetic values and self-discipline originating in the Thammayut Order. More generally the Thai middle class is dependent on borrowed royal forms and attitudes and a style of Buddhism "whose gift-giving is better suited to court politics than bourgeois practicality" (O'Connor 1995: 42–43).

Koentjaraningrat, the foremost Indonesian anthropologist through the 1960s and 1970s, and himself a member of the Javanese nobility, wrote of urban culture entirely in terms of the *priyayi* (later called *pegawai negeri*), the class of administrative officials and intelligentsia, because, as he said, it is this culture, this "grandeur-addicted life style" (1985: 281), which today dominates the urban sector of Javanese society (1985: 233). This *priyayi* culture experienced its greatest elaboration under Dutch colonial government, when the elite, stripped of direct power, focused on the refinement of status distinctions. Brenner (1991: 60)[4] pointed out that the Javanese merchants of Solo, Central Java, traditionally outsiders to the royal court, "have done their utmost to uphold what they see as the most basic pillars of Javanese cultural life and tradition, particularly in their tireless attention to linguistic and behavioral etiquette and ritual detail" associated with the *priyayi*. It was the status distinctions constructed in the space and lifeways of the city that symbolized the city and beyond the city the society at large. In such a conception of the city promoted by elite urbanites the city person is seen as a person of wealth and status. Others who live in contiguous spaces but have neither wealth nor status are not of the city.

In Indonesia congested off-street neighborhoods called *kampung* are home to about half of all city residents. Some of these *kampung* are squatter settlements; in others a minority of residents or outsiders hold title to large sections of the neighborhood. The term *kampungan* is a derisory one, referring to nonsophisticates, those uncultured in speech, social habits, those separated from the true urbanite by a wide social and cultural chasm. In Yogyakarta, where I did my research (Guinness 1986, 1991) many *kampung* elders had never been inside the local shopping mall. It was not for them. Nor had they been in McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken, where prices were aimed at the urban middle and upper classes rather than the masses. Despite their central location these *kampung* residents, being of low status as defined by this dominant urban imagining, were not of the city. Although they comprised an important part of the capitalist economy, in the dominant imagining focused on status distinctions their standing in the city was more ambiguous. Geertz (1957) suggested that although the social structural forms in which *kampung* people participate are for the most part urban, their cultural patterns are rural. The *slametan,* communal feast that marked rites of passage based on the principle of propinquity, no longer suited an urban society where *kampung* dwellers were

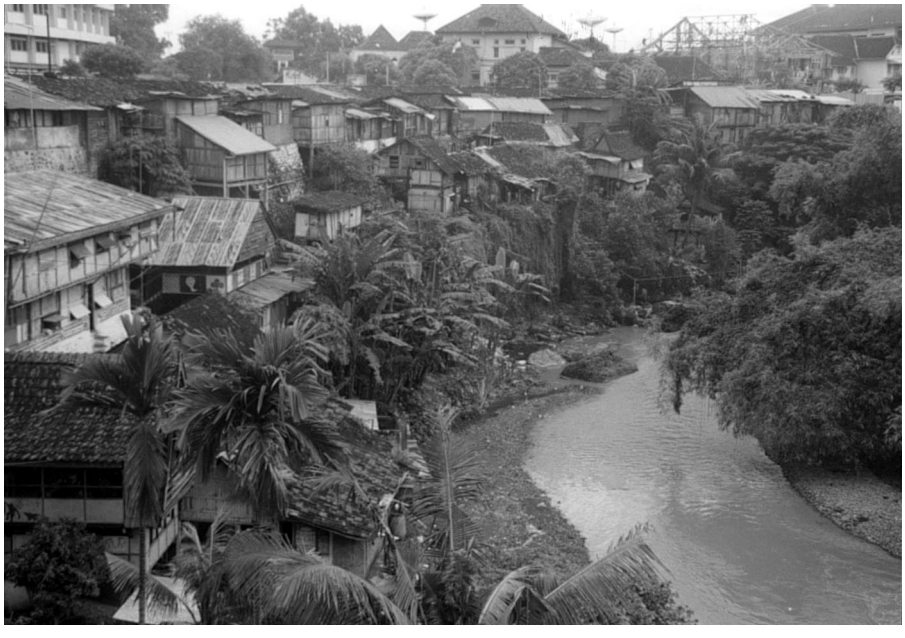

Figure 9.1 A poor kampung by the river's edge in Yogyakarta (© Harriot Beazley)

increasingly drawn into extra *kampung*, citywide, religio-political factions. *Kampung* people are thus, he summed up, not quite urban, "half rural, half urban."

For Pinches and his Filipino informants the distinction is one based on modernity rather than "urban"-ness. In Manila the squatters and slum-dwellers constitute the other of modernity, the underside, the alternative future into which the whole country could slide. They present a "moral and physical threat to social well-being, stability and development in Manila," under the so-called New Society of development and social and political order (1994: 26). To Pinches the spatiality and architecture of intimacy, improvization and flux which marked Manila's squatter settlements were a result primarily of the exclusionary and hostile stand of the Philippine state and propertied classes towards the city's disinherited (1994: 36). The elite of the Filipino New Society attempted to cancel out such settlements by hiding them behind white boards or demolishing them. The recent history of cities in Indonesia is replete with attempts by the city elite to exclude the masses. *Kampung* were demolished and their residents moved out of the city (Jellinek 1991), while pedicab drivers had their means of livelihood confiscated, and later destroyed, and were themselves trucked out of the city. Various Jakarta governments have attempted to close the city. What appears to motivate these attempts to marginalize the poor is the desire of the city's elite to display the city as modern as defined by the West and as the exemplar of the nation's civilization. The city elite moved against those elements that threatened that image.

O'Connor argued that the localisms and ethnicities that comprise Southeast Asian societies are subordinated to a higher status incorporated in the city. In this conceptualization the city, and within the city the sultan, the president or the governor is

the pinnacle, or the "axis," or the "lap," of the whole society. Located within the city the elite generates the status distinctions that govern the city and larger society. "Urbane, yet insular, elites can imagine peasantries and nations to suit themselves" (O'Connor 1995: 38). Thus the city not only subordinates but also encompasses the larger society. A much-cited illustration of the capacity of the center to incorporate and represent the whole is the Taman Mini complex in Jakarta. The brainchild of Mrs. Soeharto, the former president's wife, this Mini Park required that every provincial governor have a building representative of his province designed and constructed there. In their diverse architectural forms these were arranged around a lake on which the archipelago of Indonesia was mapped out. In this imaginative way the whole of Indonesia had come to Jakarta. It became popular for families in Jakarta to visit the Park rather than taking the more costly journey home to their province (Pemberton 1994: 159). Kahn (1992) identified a similar phenomenon in Malaysia where Taman Mini Malaysia outside Melaka attracted a largely Malay middle-class consumer of culture.

Recent attempts of the Malay elite to construct an ideal Malay society drew on the notion of a romanticized village society, ruled by harmony and cooperation. As Kahn points out (1992: 164) "the revived interest in a traditional, rurally-based Malay culture is taking place in a social setting characterised by a massive decline in what is considered to be the traditional Malay peasant community." The positive features of Malay culture highlighted by the urban Malay middle class in this imaginary included ethnic homogeneity, absence of conflict, differentiation by age and gender rather than class, communalism, and a morality that expects politeness and fairness. These urban elite reconstructions of Malay village life are being advocated as the ideal for all Malays, and actively promoted in the nation's cities.

In 1975 Imelda Marcos directed the construction in Manila of a cluster housing project called Kapithahayan (neighborliness), a project that was supposed to embody the Filipino traditions of *bayanihan* (mutual help) and *barangay* (precolonial local community) and to become the prototype for community housing throughout the country. Its significance however was as a showcase that demonstrated to domestic and foreign observers the status of the city, the president and first lady, and the nation (Pinches 1994: 31).

The superiority of the city is expressed in its adoption of foreign idiom such as the foreign languages, art, and architecture commonly espoused in contemporary Southeast Asian cities. While their origin may lie in colonial or mercantile contacts the continued currency of these cultural symbols is explicable in terms of the need for the center to express itself in an idiom different from, and superior to, that of localisms (O'Connor 1995). Jakartan and other Indonesian urban elites elaborate a "metropolitan superculture" that favors facility with Dutch, English, and other foreign languages, classical Western art forms and political ideologies, nonindigenous voluntary associations, travel abroad and Western luxury goods (H. Geertz 1963). In Yogyakarta palace guards continue to dress in a variety of uniforms of Dutch and Portuguese origin.

Manila's elite adopted first Malay, then Spanish, and finally English as its favored foreign tongue. The adoption of foreign idioms was particularly evident in the showcase architecture of Manila during the Marcos era. In the early 1970s President Marcos and the First Lady were busy constructing a New Society that found its

symbolic core in Manila. This expression of grandeur was associated with the West but designed to impress indigenes by claiming equality or resemblance to foreign symbolic status. Their efforts led to extraordinary transformations in urban architecture. Pinches (1994: 14) suggests that the design and building of the Cultural Centre complex reflected "a strong desire by the Marcos regime to win recognition from the affluent industrial West by emulating its forms of architectural modernism. Yet there is also an important sense in which the Cultural Centre and Folk Arts Theatre in particular, sought to encapsulate, dignify and display a cultural heritage that was uniquely Filipino." This was an architecture of display, where the city represented, as Imelda Marcos proclaimed in 1977, "the crown of civilisation . . . not for ourselves alone nor for city dwellers . . . [but] for an entire people" (Pinches 1994: 29).

Contesting Imaginings: Capitalist Accumulation or Status Distinctiveness?

Within this metropolitan superculture we can identify both the establishment of status through foreign idiom and a consumerist mentality central to capitalist transformations. Contrary to Armstrong and McGee's assertions quoted earlier it is not clear that capitalist accumulation is providing the dominant cultural locus. There is even a hint that commoditization and modernization provide yet other foreign idioms in which the ruling center expresses its superior status. Where society's structure arises performatively "modernization just like other exogenous changes functions as an indigenous urbanization that breaks down the local only to build up the urban" (O'Connor 1995: 35).

Pinches recognizes that these two principles have been in contention in the refashioning of Manila. The first, as an architecture of display, is exemplified by the Cultural Centre Complex, associated with a visionary language of utopian humanism. The complex is a statement of progress, national identity, and state power. The second, as a pursuit of capitalist accumulation, was exemplified by the rational planning that sought to reorder Manila along technical-bureaucratic lines, sponsored by the World Bank. Despite Pinches' earlier emphasis on capital accumulation as the dominant cultural process he admits that neither approach proves able "to harness the dynamic and complexity of Manila's urbanisation," resulting in the "deeply divided and ambiguous way in which members of Philippine elite and civil servants have approached the construction of national identity" (Pinches 1994: 37).

The interplay of these two concepts of the city is evident in the real estate complexes that have sprung up all over Southeast Asia. In constrast to Western portrayals of such complexes as "villages" (retirement villages, Greenwich village, etc.) Malaysians focus on their urbanness by terming them *bandar* (town) or *taman* (town park) and Indonesians focus on their foreignness by terming them *ril estet*. They are both the creation of capital investment and the carriers of urban status values. In 1996 the sales manager of a luxury housing estate outside Yogyakarta volunteered to me that the sultan and top military figures had purchased houses in this estate, illustrating how capitalist interests have integrated the fascination with status into their marketing. The large number of recently constructed

banks and hotels in Yogyakarta were conspicuous by the lavishness of their construction. The stately facades and spaciousness of their approaches and entrance halls seemed to appeal more to a logic of status display than of capitalist profit-accumulation.[5]

The contestation between such urban principles is clearly illustrated in the construction of new towns by mining companies. Initially mining companies appeal to exaggerated statements of status through housing design and segregation, privileged access to urban facilities such as schools, leisure centers, and health clinics, and distinctive uniforms and transportation. Such an approach attempts to engage a labor force in a new location under a feudalistic regime where the company is often both the investor and the state representative (Robinson 1986). My own research in an Indonesian mining town in 1998 indicated that as the Indonesian labor force becomes more skilled and state administration more widespread companies do not need to focus as strongly on labor retention and may attempt to surrender control of the town. However, "deconstructing" the status structures of the mining town is not readily acceptable to its citizens who preferred a "closed" town and a fixity of status symbols to a more market-driven arrangement.

All the cities of Southeast Asia have been reconstructed according to elite aspirations. The city they fashion has the symbols of urban opulence found elsewhere in the world, the highway overpasses, the world's tallest tower (Kuala Lumpur), the shopping malls, and international hotels. In its exemplary role within the society and nation the city has been fashioned by its elite to appeal to sentiments of grandeur and pride. National monuments and institutions have been created. From precolonial palaces to contemporary skyscrapers urban elites have sought to construct symbolic capital within the city. Thus the growth of capitalism in Southeast Asian cities has been marked by other priorities, those of the display of status in which the audience is not so much the foreign capitalist or the tourist but the imagined community of the nation (Anderson 1991). In this performance the tourist and the businessman are part of the display. It would be blind to ignore the dominance of capital, both foreign and indigenous, in the construction of the city. Village migrants, city factories, shopping centers, and tourist facilities are evidence enough of that strength. Yet the city as locus of capitalist accumulation feeds on, and contests with, other major, perhaps dominant, cultural forces generating urbanism in Southeast Asia.

City as Locus of Community

The anti-Chinese riots dramatized the conflict between these two conceptualizations of the city. While the Chinese stood for capitalist accumulation, their overthrow represented the triumph of indigenous values and status distinctions. There was a further key urban imagining revealed in these riots. For the *kampung* residents who no doubt formed the bulk of the rioters the Chinese were outsiders to the communities of residents that characterize these cities. They are outsiders because they do not participate in community events (Sullivan 1992; Guinness 1986). For urban low-income residents community is a stronger cultural locus than either the capital accumulation or status distinctions of other imaginings. In Yogyakarta there is a strong norm of community cooperation in *kampung* relations. Such communities are

based on female-centric cell groups (Sullivan 1992) or on neighborhoods. *Kampung* residents referred to the mutual help expected in *slametan* rites of passage, or the cooperation in public works such as building stairways or public wells, or the aiding of those in need. In one neighborhood of about one hundred households I researched in 1996 community endeavors were particularly evident. Youth, women, and men conducted separate savings groups, and two sections of the neighborhood had instituted savings and loans associations. Under these a member could borrow up to one million rupiah (roughly $A500) to do such things as renovate houses, purchase pedicabs, or pay school expenses. Residents collectively reorganized a key ritual. Neighborhood youth were building up their joint fund by organizing the payment of electricity and water bills for neighbors for a small commission. The neighborhood community held a lavish concert to celebrate Independence Day, and provided scholarships to meet school costs of poorer children. Residents had also constructed impressive safety fences along the upper pathway. On one occasion while I was there community labor was called to repair the house of a poor widow and clean up the surrounding area, with over one hundred neighbors attending. These neighborhoods exist as a form of community that downplays the status distinctions that invigorate middle-class and elite "streetside" residents. In these communities wealth is for sharing rather than reinvestment. This is evident in the obligation to invite neighbors to rites of passage, to share one's kitchen or gardening utensils, and to oblige neighbors with credit at the local shop or stall.

Kampung residents also saw a clear distinction between their principles and those that appeared to govern the outside city bent on status differentiation. In the 1970s streetsiders were seen by *kampung* people as being of high social status, reflected in their brick houses, privileged position in civil service or private business, and the foreign idiom which permeated their culture. In the 1990s, after two decades of capital accumulation, *kampung* residents counterposed their world to that of real-estate complexes. Both streetsiders and real-estate residents, however, were characterized as living an isolated, individualistic existence, where neighbors rarely spoke and family rites rarely attracted the assistance of the community. In contrast, even within their own neighborhoods *kampung* residents dealt strongly with neighbors who vaunted their wealth or their status, particularly if that restricted their participation in community.

Their idea of the city was of a mass of *kampung* communities, between which there was a minimum of interaction, but which all espoused a similar discourse. Interestingly the sultan was also incorporated within this community perspective. His person and the symbols of his presence such as royal regalia and ceremonies were focal points uniting the various communities of the city. *Kampung* residents perceived the sultan and the royal regalia that symbolized his presence in the city as protecting their communities, as for example when such royal regalia were carried about the city during an epidemic or when water from washing royal carriages was carried back to the community to be used for healing or sacralizing. The sultan in this context was seen as benevolent "father," rather than the apex of an elaborate status hierarchy. At the major royal rituals there was, in a sense, no one between themselves and the sultan, as people milled around the royal *gamelan* (orchestra) displayed in the palace park or received the food carried from the palace to the

mosque for distribution. As half a million of Yogyakarta's populace rallied in early 1998 to oppose the president the sultan himself offered to lead the march, so providing to the military authorities his personal guarantee that no looting of property would take place.

In 1996 I identified among *kampung* residents widespread dissatisfaction with the growing wealth and power disparities within society. Among the poor there was widespread cynicism about the wealth of the Soeharto family, the corruption of the local police force, and the nepotism of local officials. Bribery had become a way of life in the city that effectively excluded the poor, but was largely tolerated by the emerging middle class indulging in their own wealth and status accumulation. Those who lived in city neighborhoods dominated by a community cultural focus rejected the wealth polarities seen to result from Indonesian capitalist expansion and the foreign idiom of urban status. The goods they burnt would not have a place in homes without running water, high voltage electricity supply, and street access. Instead they were burnt as symbols of personal indulgence and of corrupted status. The 1997–8 shopburnings and lootings in Jakarta were preceded by streetmarches calling for greater democracy and the indictment of the president and his family for unfair accumulation of wealth.

Conclusion

The recent toppling of the Indonesian president, like earlier expressions of people power in the Philippines, is a demonstration of the bitterness that such status distinctions have generated in contemporary society. Under the influence of capital accumulation high status no longer carries the responsibilities and obligations to those of lower standing. Ties of patronage across social classes have collapsed, leaving the elite vulnerable to the criticism of the poor and *kampung* people regretting the loss of "connections" that could find them a niche in the city economy. The poor have always insisted on the responsibilities of patrons towards their clients in their construction of community, and in their recognition of the elite construction of the city as expressing status distinctions. That mutual respect has been undermined in contemporary urban society, leading to more overt demonstrations of violence in people's contesting of the city

NOTES

1. For real estate and shopping-mall developments in contemporary Indonesian cities see Robison (1996: 80).
2. In the early centuries AD cities existed along the Irawaddy and Sittang deltas in present-day Burma, on the Menam Chao Phraya in present-day Thailand, in the lower valley and delta of the Mekong in Cambodia, and on the Champa coast in present-day Vietnam. In the seventh century the port city states of Jambi, Drivijaya, and Palembang were found in Southeast Sumatra.
3. The dominant civil service party, Golkar, adopted the Waringin as their symbol.
4. Brenner introduced her article with a quote from Arwendo Atmowiloto's novel *Canting*: "Rank, wealth, title, that's what being priyayi is about."
5. Much of the analysis of the present Indonesian economic crisis is focused on poor banking practices.

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