

Jakarta's Indigenous Population: Social and Cultural Dynamics Through the Ages

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Abstract

Jakarta's indigenous population, known as the *Betawi* people, is the product of centuries of cultural blending and historical evolution. Their origins trace back to a mixture of local inhabitants and various migrant groups—such as Malay, Arab, Chinese, and European settlers—who arrived during the colonial era, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries. This fusion of influences gave rise to a unique ethnic identity that has become central to Jakarta's cultural landscape. Despite the rapid modernization and urbanization of Jakarta, the Betawi have maintained strong ties to their traditions, reflected in cultural expressions such as *lenong* (traditional theater), *gambang kromong* (musical ensemble), and culinary specialties like *kerak telur* and *soto Betawi*. These traditions have transcended their community, becoming symbolic of the city itself and enriching Jakarta's cultural diversity. Although often overshadowed by the city's multi-ethnic population, the Betawi's contributions continue to shape Jakarta's identity, highlighting their unique blend of historical roots and cultural adaptability.

Introduction

Once known as 'Sunda Kelapa', the city has undergone thirteen name changes, yet its iconic Sunda Kelapa harbor still pays homage to its ancient origins. With roots tracing back to the 4th century AD, Jakarta has served as a significant global trading port and the de facto capital of the Dutch East Indies in the 17th Century. Indonesia declared its independence against Dutch colonial rule in 1945. The national monument 'Monas' stands in the centre of Jakarta at 132 metres tall and signifies Indonesia's struggle for independence. Home to over 60 museums and 132 heritage buildings, the city's colonial past is well documented in the Museum Sejarah Jakarta, the National Museum, and the Museum Bahari.

Located in the historic Sunda Kelapa Port area of North Jakarta, the Museum Bahari reflects the city's maritime legacy. Jakarta, Indonesia's bustling capital, is a city renowned for its rich cultural diversity and rapid urban growth. Amid the fast-paced modernization and the continuous influx of people from different parts of the country and the world, there is one indigenous group that holds a significant place in the city's historical and cultural landscape—the *Betawi* people. The Betawi are considered the native inhabitants of Jakarta, with a heritage deeply rooted in centuries of interaction with various cultures, including Malay, Arab, Chinese, and European influences, dating back to the colonial period. Their unique identity emerged as a product

of these cultural exchanges, forming a distinct community that has played a central role in shaping Jakarta's cultural heritage.

However, as Jakarta has grown into a sprawling metropolis, the Betawi population has faced numerous challenges in preserving their identity. Rapid urbanization and migration have reduced their demographic presence, pushing many Betawi people to the outskirts of the city. Despite this, they have managed to keep their cultural traditions alive, contributing significantly to the city's vibrant cultural scene. Betawi arts, such as *lenong* (a form of traditional theater) and *gambang kromong* (a fusion of traditional and Chinese musical styles), as well as their culinary delights like *kerak telor* and *soto Betawi*, are emblematic of Jakarta's heritage. These traditions have transcended the Betawi community, becoming symbols of Jakarta's cultural identity and enriching the city's diverse social fabric.

The social and cultural dynamics of Jakarta's indigenous population will be explored over the centuries, examining how the Betawi people have navigated the pressures of modernization and urban expansion while maintaining their cultural roots. It will also delve into the challenges they face in preserving their traditions amidst the rapidly changing landscape of Jakarta, as well as the significant role they continue to play in defining the city's cultural identity. Through this exploration, we aim to understand the resilience of the Betawi community and their enduring contributions to the cultural heritage of Jakarta.

Body

Jakarta's origins can be traced back centuries, before the city became a colonial settlement, starting from the Neolithic in the Buni area (ca. 400 BCE). Stretching along the north western coast of Java towards the southern hinterlands, various civilisations have been superimposed over each other. One of these, the oldest in the Indonesian archipelago, is Tarumanagara. The remains of this kingdom are represented by the Tugu Inscription found near Tanjung Priok, Jakarta's modern-day port. In the 9th Century, as the Sunda Kingdom emerged as one of Sriwijaya's vassals, Sunda Kelapa became known as one of the main port-cities on the coast of northwest Java. The port first became a capital city during this period. The resilience of the Betawi people is not only evident in their ability to preserve cultural traditions but also in how they adapt to the shifting landscape of modern Jakarta. As the city continues to expand and modernize, the Betawi have embraced new ways to safeguard their heritage, utilizing technology and media to promote their culture. Social media platforms, for example, have become a tool for younger generations of Betawi to share traditional music, food, and performances with a broader audience, ensuring that their heritage remains visible in the digital age.

Traditional arts like *lenong*, a form of Betawi theater characterized by its humor and lively performances, and *gambang kromong*, a musical genre that fuses traditional Indonesian sounds with Chinese instruments, are just a few examples of the distinctive Betawi contribution to Jakarta's artistic life. These art forms, along with others like *ondel-ondel* performances, continue to be performed at cultural festivals and celebrations, preserving the spirit of the Betawi people while also providing entertainment to wider audiences, and also the iconic dishes such as *kerak telor*, a savory rice dish with a crispy egg crust, and *soto Betawi*, a creamy coconut-based soup with beef, reflect the bold and flavorful nature of Betawi cuisine. These dishes have become synonymous with Jakarta's food scene, serving as a gastronomic representation of the city's

cultural roots. Additionally, local initiatives, such as community-based cultural centers and workshops, are gaining momentum as spaces where Betawi arts and crafts can be taught and practiced. These initiatives provide opportunities for the Betawi people to not only preserve their traditions but also to evolve them in ways that resonate with modern audiences, keeping their cultural identity alive and relevant.

However, the Betawi people have not been immune to the effects of Jakarta's rapid urbanization. As the city expanded and transformed into a sprawling metropolis, many Betawi communities were physically displaced from their ancestral lands, pushed to the outskirts of the city as new developments took over their traditional spaces. This shift has made it challenging for the Betawi people to maintain their cultural practices, with many younger generations growing up disconnected from their roots. The influx of new residents and cultures into Jakarta has further diluted the presence of Betawi traditions, raising concerns about the future of the community's cultural identity.

Yet, despite these challenges, the Betawi people have shown remarkable resilience in preserving their traditions. One of the ways they have done this is by adapting their cultural practices to modern times. The blending of old and new is evident in the way Betawi arts and traditions have found a place in contemporary Jakarta, often showcased at cultural festivals and tourism events designed to promote the city's heritage. Through these events, the Betawi people can share their unique culture with the broader public, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their contributions to Jakarta's identity.

Moreover, the Betawi community's efforts to preserve their traditions are supported by governmental and non-governmental organizations, which recognize the importance of safeguarding Jakarta's indigenous culture. Cultural preservation programs and festivals, often backed by the local government, aim to raise awareness of Betawi heritage among Jakarta's modern elements of the city, fostering a sense of shared identity among its residents. As Jakarta continues to develop into a global metropolis, such efforts are crucial in ensuring that the Betawi people's cultural contributions are not only remembered but actively integrated into the city's evolving identity.

Due to its strategic location, Sunda Kelapa rapidly became a coveted possession of the surrounding Muslim kingdoms of Demak and Cirebon. After Sunda Kelapa fell to Fatahillah, the leader of the Islamic forces, the port's name was changed to Jayakarta, and a short-lived period of glory graced the city ([Gultom, 2017](#)). The increasing pressure exerted by the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) would eventually undermine the relationship between the Kingdom of Banten and the English East India Company, leaving the path clear for the Dutch to appropriate and totally control the port. During this period the VOC began constructing the citadel, a spatial reference identified as the starting point of colonial Batavia (Idem).

Present-day Jakarta and its metro area seem a massive and chaotic jumble of concrete, asphalt, vehicles, and people. Each day the streets carry more than 20 million vehicles; every year, approximately 11% more motorcycles, cars, buses, and trucks take to the streets (BPS Provinsi DKI Jakarta, 2018). On average, motorists spend more than half their daylight hours stuck in

traffic, and when they can move, their speed is only about 5 km/h during rush period (*Tempo.co*, 2015).

The city (comprising Jakarta and its metro area) spans 4384 km² and has a population density of around 13,000 people per km² (Idem). Such a high population density makes land one of the most highly desired commodity in the city, a situation not unlike megacities elsewhere. The continual pressures a rising population put on scarce land result in acute mobility problems and permanent infrastructural deficiencies. Concomitantly, the competition for land in Jakarta gives rise to an endless cycle of conflicts, invasions, evictions, and eternal legal disputes between original owners, developers, and other powerful agents (Herlambang, Leitner, Liong Ju, Sheppard, & Anguelov, 2018).

Every day, city and countryside seem to merge in this spatial conglomerate, in a sort of babel of skin and eye colors, languages, conversations, memories, shouts, watchful eyes, rumors and gossip. Intermingled with sirens, pounding and drilling, singing birds, helicopters' whumping roar, the *adhan*, vehicle horns, squealing cranes, croaking frogs, vendors' harangues, quacking ducks, the roar of engines and the whistling of the wind all become part of the same ubiquitous miasma of vomit, urine, sweat, *kretek*, stagnant water, burning trash, smoked meat, perfume, smog, *gorengan*, kerosene, open sewage, *siomay* and *soto* that seem to permanently envelope residents and passers-by alike in Jakarta.

In addition to these community-driven efforts, government support has been crucial in sustaining Betawi cultural practices. Local governments in Jakarta have initiated several programs aimed at preserving and promoting Betawi culture, such as the establishment of cultural centers, museums, and heritage sites dedicated to showcasing the community's contributions to the city. Moreover, the government's backing of cultural festivals and performances has provided the Betawi people with platforms to express their identity and pass on their traditions to future generations.

In the preceding paragraphs, we see how time and space materialise in various modalities and intersect in the city of Jakarta, a living, layered landscape of people and objects – a city of cities. Profiling a city with all its complexities and contradictions is never a straightforward or settled endeavour. Nonetheless, we will attempt to do so by heuristically profiling Jakarta in two cuts. First, we approach the city from a conventional perspective, including predictable negative aspects of megacities like Jakarta. Second, in a somewhat more unconventional cut, we propose to profile and understand Jakarta by observing the city from below, by foregrounding the standpoints of citizens and practitioners of the city. This is to illustrate the various ways a city, including Jakarta, could be seen, and how these are being done through understanding the everyday transformations of the city, which evolve across space and time.

Conclusion

Jakarta is a city of immense historical, cultural, and urban complexity. Once known as Sunda Kelapa and shaped by centuries of global trade and colonial rule, the city has evolved into a sprawling metropolis characterized by rapid growth, dense populations, and significant infrastructural challenges. Amid this development, Jakarta's indigenous Betawi people have

played a pivotal role in shaping the city's cultural heritage, despite being pushed to the outskirts due to urbanization. Betawi traditions, from performing arts to culinary heritage, have become iconic symbols of Jakarta's identity. While the pressures of modernization have threatened the preservation of their culture, the resilience of the Betawi people—supported by community initiatives, government programs, and modern platforms like social media—ensures that their cultural identity endures. This interplay between Jakarta's past and present reflects the city's layered existence, where both heritage and modernity coexist and influence one another. Ultimately, Jakarta's identity is a fusion of historical legacies, indigenous traditions, and urban modernity. The resilience of its people, especially the Betawi, demonstrates the city's ability to adapt and thrive amid constant transformation, maintaining a rich cultural fabric that continues to shape its future.

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