



Familiar Waters:

Jakarta's Floods as Colonial Inheritance, Dutch Interventions as Postcolonial Challenge

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Abstract

In the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, growing concerns over flooding have prompted responses from Dutch engineering firms, NGOs, and government agencies, all negotiating with Indonesian authorities to begin dramatic water management overhauls. Such plans have elicited public reactions that bring to the surface tensions over the memory of colonialism and competing visions for the city's development. In delving into such debates, this paper pursues two lines of inquiry: First, it examines the Dutch state's efforts to frame water management as a distinctly national expertise (and heritage) purportedly rooted in the historical experience of a country that has long defined itself in precarious relationship with the sea. Second, it illustrates how this promoted persona of the Dutch water expert abroad is complicated when engineering projects are proposed in the very same landscapes

Introduction

From the periodic inundations that paralyze the city's center, to the steady advance of the sea that spills into its coastal *kampung*¹ a little more each year, flooding (and the anxiety its possibility inspires) is an ever-present feature of life in Jakarta. Unruly water permeates not only the physical cityscape – turning its highways into rivers, its suburbs into swamps, seeping into the homes of presidents and street

vendors alike – but also its discursive and imagined ones. Along with the twin gripes of pollution and traffic, flooding (*banjir*) is a constant theme in commentary on the Indonesian capital, with journalists, politicians, engineers, and ordinary city-dwellers clamoring to explain the destructive phenomenon as well as to demand swift solutions – so far, largely in vain.

But the conversation – and controversy – surrounding Jakarta's worsening

¹ *Kampung* are dense urban neighborhoods, often with long histories of continuous occupation but at times perceived by local authorities as informal (or even illegal) settlements.

floods is not contained within its own municipal borders, or even those of the Indonesian state. As water rushes into the very heart of the metropolis year after year, so too do international agencies and their teams of foreign experts. From specialized NGOs to the World Bank itself, it can often seem as if everybody who's somebody (or indeed, who wants to *become* somebody) in the field of international development or disaster response is falling over themselves for a chance to solve the riddle of Jakarta's water woes.

Within this diverse cast of overseas characters, one set of actors is particularly conspicuous: a growing number of engineering firms, consultants, government agencies, and public-private organizations hailing from the Netherlands, the archipelago's former colonial power. Together, they have proposed an array of technical and infrastructural strategies to manage urban flooding, not only in Jakarta but also in a string of cities along Java's northern coastline that similarly suffer from regular inundations. Such initiatives range from ambitious collaborations between the Dutch and Indonesian governments, along with NGOs and private companies in both countries, that aim to protect the city through the construction of massive seawalls and the redevelopment of its entire northern coastline (a series of multi-million euro projects that are collectively grouped

under the National Capital Integrated Coastal Development initiative); to a number of municipal arrangements whereby Dutch engineers and consultants are contracted to advise on the dredging of existing waterways, constructing of *polder*², establishment of community "water boards"³ based on the Dutch model, and even the development of a dedicated smartphone apps to track water levels in real time using crowd-sourced data; to workshops, glossy pamphlets, and public exhibitions wherein water management professionals from the Netherlands present their diagnosis of Jakarta's water troubles and spread the word about how their own specialized techniques might be adapted to its predicament.

Just how effective these proposed strategies will prove to be in easing Jakarta's chronic floods is not yet clear; in any case, evaluations of that kind are perhaps best left to keen scholars in other fields. However, what is immediately striking to myself as an anthropologist (one whose primary research investigates the local and transnational politics of revitalizing colonial-era sites and districts in Indonesian cities), is the pervasive presence of history, identity, and memory – in more succinct terms, *heritage* – throughout the language and imagery used in the Dutch promotion and Jakartan reception of these flood mitigation measures. "Expertise", "capacity building", "knowledge transfer" –

² *Polder* are low-lying tracks of land reclaimed from the sea through an integrated series of dikes, pumps, and other hydrological infrastructures. While by no means exclusive to the Netherlands, much of that country is kept dry through such techniques, which have been gradually developed and expanded over the centuries.

³ Literally translated from the Dutch, "waterschappen". Water boards in the Netherlands are elected government bodies charged with managing the hydrological infrastructures of a particular region in accordance with nationwide management plans.

the jargon of an increasingly neoliberal development discourse that hails technical interventions or specialized training as the solution to the world's most pressing dilemmas can appear, at first, utterly ahistorical – and perhaps no more so than when applied to an ostensibly “natural” disaster like flooding. But while still being enthusiastic, indeed pioneering, participants in this discourse, the recent forays of the Netherlands' private and public sector into the scramble to control the movement of water through the Indonesian capital vividly illustrate how something as seemingly mundane as dredging a canal or sterile as blueprints for an improved dike are in fact steeped in both the past itself and our deeply-held beliefs concerning what we have inherited from it.

Water as Heritage, Expertise as Export

Indonesia is not the only country where Dutch agencies and companies can be increasingly encountered spearheading a range of water-related projects. Indeed, over the last decade or so, the Netherlands has energetically promoted its vaunted skills in the management of this resource as a kind of major national export. This promotion has been carried out through a variety of public and private platforms, one notable example of which is the Netherlands Water Partnership, or NWP. The NWP functions, in its own words, as a “comprehensive network that unites Dutch water expertise,” “consisting of 200 members from private companies, government, knowledge insti-

tutes, and NGOs” and coordinating projects in countries as far flung as Vietnam, Ghana, Colombia, and even the United States in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy. The aim of such public-private initiatives – which include not only flood prevention but also land reclamation, urban sanitation, and drought resistance – is to “put the breadth of Dutch water expertise into the limelight and position the Netherlands as a ‘World Leader in Water,’” while also “offering expertise as a one-stop-shop [whereby], Dutch companies can increase their world market share considerably”.⁴

Two clear themes run throughout the language and imagery employed by the NWP and the groups with which it partners. The first of these is the notion of “expertise”, a term that is repeated again and again in reports, brochures, websites, and presentations. Indeed, in a familiar neoliberal move, the primary selling point being pitched to the NWP's potential foreign clients is not the money or manpower the Dutch water sector might bring to their overseas projects, but rather the knowledge, innovation, and experience of their collective experts. That is, to punch above its proverbial weight in the ever-more crowded sphere of overseas development work, the Netherlands appears to have strategically cast itself as a nation of brains over brawn. As one NWP booklet on its recent projects in Indonesia succinctly proclaims in bold lettering (alongside a graphic superimposing the outline of an illuminated light bulb over a stylized map of

⁴ This description of the NWP's activities is available on their website at <https://www.nwp.nl/activiteiten> and <https://www.nwp.nl/over-nwp/wat-is-nwp>.

the lowland nation), “World Bank: ‘Ideas are the Netherlands’ strength’”.⁵

This appeal to “expertise” is significant in and of itself, as it speaks to larger questions concerning the crucial role that the archetype of the foreign expert (and neoliberal logics writ large) has today come to play in international development projects and disaster response the world over. Provocatively, it also echoes the particular nature of Dutch colonialism in the Indonesian archipelago, where specialized experts (agriculture experts, irrigation experts, sanitation experts, etc.) played an increasingly influential role in the running of the colony during its final decades, one Dutch historian suggesting that from the late-19th century onwards the Dutch East Indies should be understood as being administered not so much by its civil servants as by a “technical intelligentsia [who] had the final say”.⁶ Evidently, the present, global permutation of the rule of experts has a long lineage all its own.

However, particularly salient is where precisely this “expertise” is claimed to originate *from*. In the documents and presentations produced by the NWP and its related initiatives, the message on this matter is clear: contemporary Dutch water expertise is a direct product of Dutch history and Dutch culture, the natural result of a people being defined for centuries by their David-and-Goliath relationship with

the sea.

As captured so perfectly in a 2010 video⁷ produced by the NWP, entitled “NWP: Water in a Changing World”, such a narrative is communicated through a number of tropes that invariably preface the promotional materials circulated by the organization and its partners: Historical maps of reclaimed coastlines and yellowed drawings of early irrigation networks fade into one another, offering up evidence for a long lineage of successive water works in the Netherlands stretching far back into its past. Images of tulip-lined canals and smiling children at play in city fountains aim to showcase the Dutch population’s everyday adaptations and resiliencies that make water a “way of life”. Such hydrological skill is even characterized as their near-biological inheritance – “Water,” the words materializing across the screen as a double helix rotates slowly in the blue background, “is in our genes.” Couched in these terms by those eager to promote this expertise abroad, the techniques and knowledge to control water effectively become not only a potentially lucrative export but also a sort of heritage unto itself; a heritage that is, moreover, both *nation-alized* and *naturalized*.

Not incidentally, such a view builds directly upon a pre-existing, popular narrative that one encounters at nearly every turn in the Netherlands – a narrative in

⁵ Anita de Wit et al, *Air Belanda Indonesia: Cooperation between Indonesia and The Netherlands in the Field of Water* (The Hague: Netherlands Water Partnership, 2012), 10.

⁶ Jacques van Doorn, *Engineers and the colonial system: Technocratic tendencies in the Dutch East Indies* (Rotterdam: Comparative Asian Studies Program, 1982), 3.

⁷ This video is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cn2mDS-WNJs&t=9s>.

which the gradual taming of the rivers, seas, and deltas that beset the low-lying nation is cast as a defining factor in the shaping of its landscape, institutions, and collective psyche. For instance, no less than six of the Netherlands' nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites speak to past centuries of Dutch flood protection (the Defense Line of Amsterdam), the reclamation of land from the sea (Schokland and Surroundings, the Mill Network of Kinderdijk-Elshout, D.F. Wouda Steam Pumping Station, the Beemster Polder), and the control of water in urban planning (the 17th-century Canal Ring of Amsterdam). A seventh site, recognized for its natural heritage values, is the Wadden Sea itself. In 2007, when the Committee for the Development of the Dutch Canon (a group of academics and heritage professionals tasked with outlining the most significant contours of the nation's history to guide instruction in primary and secondary schools) submitted their final report to Dutch government, they proposed four units on key moments in the development of Dutch water management through the centuries (coincidentally, the same number of units dedicated to events in the expansion and decline of Dutch colonialism). In their introduction to this revised curriculum, the Committee even likened their work to that of successive generations of water management, writing "This canon was created by bringing together a number of specialists and allowing them to consult with one another and with a choice selection of interested

individuals and stakeholders for a year. A website with a discussion forum allowed every Dutch citizen the opportunity to voice his or her opinion. The process brings to mind the way in which the Netherlands for centuries has succeeded in keeping its polders dry: collective craftsmanship".⁸ Indeed, this parallel between the collective, yet expert, management of water in the lowland nation and the unique character of Dutch society and politics – based on deeply-held principles of pragmatism, discussion, and compromise, or the aptly-named "Polder Model" of consensus decision-making – is one drawn over and over by citizens in discussions of their country's history and its present.

The Engineer's Paradise

Returning to the original question at hand: what happens when this carefully curated image of the Dutch water management professional, whose legitimacy in large part emanates from this evidently inherited, almost innate, distinctly Dutch expertise, is introduced into the long-standing debate over how to best mitigate flooding in Jakarta today?

Unlike many of the locations in which NWP affiliates work overseas, Indonesia is of course not an altogether unfamiliar landscape for Dutch water engineers. Quite the contrary; it is one that was profoundly shaped by earlier generations of colonial technocrats, scientists, architects, and urban planners, the historian Jan Kop even going so far as to characterize

⁸ Committee for the Development of the Dutch Canon, *A key to Dutch history: Report by the Committee for the Development of the Dutch Canon* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 11.

the Dutch East Indies as “a paradise for engineers”.⁹ In particular, Jakarta, or Batavia then, was designed and constructed according to colonial logics of security, ethnic segregation, and hygiene – all of which demanded that water be carefully controlled as it moved through the growing metropolis. At times these logics found expression, especially during the paternalistic “Ethical Policy” period of the early 20th century, in the humanitarian-minded redevelopment of inner-city *kampung* to improve drainage and sanitation facilities. At others, they were invoked to justify the unequal distribution of access to drinking water and protection from yearly floods across the cityscape, leaving “native” Indonesian neighborhoods notably disadvantaged by comparison with the newly constructed European suburbs that sprung up in the latter decades of colonial rule. While the intervening decades have altered the morphology of Jakarta in profound ways, traces of this uneven colonial-era landscape of water access and flood protection are still in evidence today: Many of the same impoverished *kampung* still endure few or no connections to the municipal infrastructure of piped drinking water¹⁰, while former Dutch strongholds, like Menteng in central Jakarta, are spared the worst of the capital’s floods in spite of their unfavorable topography (though it is unclear if, in the case of that district specifically, its residents’ dry feet are due

more to the original prowess of the colonial urban planners or the present-day girth of their wallets and the many foreign embassies they call neighbor).

While the control of water, and engineering works in general, undoubtedly played an important part in imperial contexts the world over, in the Dutch East Indies its role was a defining one for a colony that increasingly valued expertise, infrastructure, and technology in an effort to extend and deepen its rule at the very same moment that it was unknowingly slipping into its final decades. This is not to say that this generation of colonial-era experts was always successful in their endeavors; destructive flooding, in particular, plagued cities across the archipelago throughout Dutch rule. In fact, it would perhaps be more accurate to understand the colony as a *laboratory* rather than a paradise, a place where experiments in engineering of all kinds were tested, modified, and oftentimes discarded as failures (a history that is markedly contrary to the NWP narrative of water expertise as something that has long come effortlessly and innately to Dutch engineers). Nevertheless, the dogged pursuit of effective water management, regardless of the eventual outcome of such projects, remain absolutely central to the colonial project, a point perhaps best summarized by the historian and anthropologist Rudolf Mrázek: “The threat, especially as modern cities were emerging

⁹ Quoted in Anita de Wit et al, *Air Belanda Indonesia*, 6.

¹⁰ Michelle Kooy and Karen Bakker, “Technologies of Government: Constituting Subjectivities, Spaces, and Infrastructures in Colonial and Contemporary Jakarta,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (June 2008) 32(2): 375-391.

in the Indies, was in fluidity,” “in water – polluted, dripping, leaking, or flowing unregulated...To rule the colony, to become modern there, to stay, meant to confine the flow.”¹¹

A Not-So-Natural Disaster

Set against this historical backdrop, we might very well wonder what Indonesians today may make of the news that contemporary Dutch engineers will soon be planning, testing, investing, and constructing across the very same landscapes originally shaped by their predecessors for the advancement of a colonial project. The rather odd sense of *déjà vu* such a prospect inspires is certainly not lost on Jakarta’s residents. Indeed, even if these recent Dutch involvements are momentarily set aside, the robust public debate that surrounds Jakarta’s flooding today does not portray the phenomenon as a new one; instead, Indonesian discussions of their capital’s water problems consistently frame these in broader historical terms. For instance, a visit to Gramedia, the country’s largest bookstore chain, will typically discover several books written for a popular audience which trace Jakarta’s floods from the 17th century to the present day, detailing how each Dutch or Indonesian governor struggled to cope; and ever since the particularly disruptive inundations of January 2012, Indonesian newspaper articles on such disasters

frequently make reference to prior floods or past waterworks of the colonial period.

This rising popular curiosity in peering back through the centuries to uncover the roots of Jakarta’s present water-related challenges is but one symptom of a wider and profound shift in the public debate on the capital’s floods – a shift towards understanding the phenomenon as fundamentally social and political. As urbanists (and former Jakarta residents themselves) AbdouMaliq Simone and Abidin Kusno have observed,¹² many city-dwellers have become increasingly (and vocally) dissatisfied with officials who wash their hands of responsibility for the floods and their aftermath by normalizing these as “natural” (and thus ostensibly unpreventable) occurrences, or who shift the blame entirely to impoverished Jakartans by claiming that their supposed lack of civic discipline in depositing their trash into the canals is the primary cause of the capital’s troubles. As an aside: not only are such “environmental” arguments empirically suspect in and of themselves – overlooking the fact that while the clogging of some canals by the actions of the urban poor is undoubtedly unhelpful, it is by no means the main contributor to the city’s worsening floods, not to mention that it is the oft-ignored responsibility of the municipal government to ensure that those canals are dredged regularly – it is common

¹¹ Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 56.

¹² Interviews with AbdouMaliq Simone and Abidin Kusno in Etienne Turpin, Adam Bobbette, and Merideth Miller, eds, *Jakarta: Architecture + Adaptation*. (Depok: Universitas Indonesia Press, 2013), 61-101, 129-175. See also Abidin Kusno, *After the New Order: Space, Politics and Jakarta* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i, 2013).



Water, heritage, and development meet in northern Jakarta. In the foreground, the ruins of warehouses built in the colonial period; in the background, recently constructed apartment complexes. Between these, a garbage depot. Photo by the author.

knowledge amongst Jakarta's activist community that such narratives have been deployed by politicians for decades as justification for the forcible eviction and swift bulldozing of informal settlements from the vicinity of Jakarta's waterways, usually to make way for more lucrative, higher-end housing developments.

Indeed, since the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 (and the consequent loosening of strictures on the press and public discourse in general), there has been increasing popular awareness and voiced outrage over the realization that urban flooding is by no means a random phenomenon. While some of its contrib-

uting factors may be both newly emergent and out of the immediate hands of Jakartans (sea level rise or severe seasonal weather patterns due to global climate change, for instance), increasing attention is being paid to the significant role that local histories of government corruption, socio-economic inequality, bureaucratic negligence, and unchecked construction play in determining the patterns of flood waters across the cityscape today. In this newly democratic nation, particular public criticism has been levied at the rampant development by private business conglomerates (closely allied with influential government officials) of luxury malls, gated housing complexes,

and elevated ring roads – structures that have multiplied in a seemingly exponential fashion across the city since the 1980s. Built for the convenience of Jakarta’s burgeoning middle classes, such construction works are more and more regarded as major contributors to the capital’s worsening floods because of their impact on the urban morphology in two regards: land subsidence due to privatized groundwater extraction (that is, the drilling of large wells to sustain such developments causes swaths of the city to actually sink, sometimes by as much as ten *centimeters* per year), and the disruption of existing drainage networks as sensitive water catchment zones along Jakarta’s southern reaches are paved over at an alarming rate. All of this serves to further compound an already – since at least the colonial period – unequal landscape of water access and flood protection, with the urban poor set at a dramatic disadvantage as the community that historically has suffered the most from the floods and been attended to the least by relief efforts in their aftermath. In light of this inequality, where the waters rise and who is protected from them can no longer be dismissed by government commentators as a matter of chance, wherein flooding represents a “natural” (and so, politically neutral) problem that demands a solely technical solution. Rather, a frustrated Jakartan public, and in particular a vocal assemblage of local NGOs and community activist groups (for instance, Marco Kusuma-wijaya’s Rujak Center for Urban Studies),

increasingly demand that the challenges in water management their city faces today be recognized as the product of sedimented histories of urban planning, social tensions, and political influence. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that talk of water and talk of inequality – both its historical and contemporary manifestations – have become inherently tied together in contemporary Jakarta, with the former increasingly functioning as a kind of proxy for the latter in public debate.

This has certainly been the case in the recent run-up to Jakarta’s contentious 2017 gubernatorial election (the outcome of which, at the time of writing, remains uncertain¹³). The incumbent, Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama, built his campaign on a platform of pragmatism, touting his supposedly results-driven approach as the solution to the city’s most pressing problems – flooding in particular. Ahok has attracted a great deal of attention from media outlets outside of Indonesia in the run up to the election because of the vocal opposition his campaign has faced from hardline religious organizations (most notably the FPI, or Front Pembela Islam), who accuse this Christian and Chinese-descendant politician of blasphemy. In the eagerness of outside observers to cast the election as a battle for Indonesia’s soul between conservative religion and secular pluralism, the strong criticism of Ahok that also emanates from many of the city’s progressive circles has gone largely unnoticed. This left-leaning dissatisfaction

¹³ Ahok ultimately lost the election in April 2017 to rival Anies Baswedan. Shortly thereafter, he was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of blasphemy.

with the governor has crystalized in large part around objections to his single-minded management of urban water issues, most controversially so his administration's evictions of several poor *kampung* communities from along the city's rivers and canals. Justified in the name of overcoming Jakarta's flooding emergency, these dramatic bulldozing of neighborhoods like Bukit Duri have become flashpoints of public debate. But, most apropos of our discussion here, whether Jakartans cheer or abhor Ahok's attempts at waterproofing their city, the arguments inevitably take on a historical tone, as urbanites look back into the past for benchmarks against which to judge their current government's achievements or failures. This can be seen to play out especially in social media, for instance (to give only one example of many) on the popular Facebook page, Indonesia Jaman Dulu ("Indonesia in the olden days"). A nostalgia-tinged hub for over 300,000 history enthusiasts, Indonesia Jaman Dulu typically posts black-and-white photographs of *becak* (rickshaws) lining dusty lanes, bungalows with smiling Dutch children playing in the garden, and President Sukarno meeting with foreign celebrities and heads of state. Since the gubernatorial campaign has gathered momentum, however, these have been replaced with multiple rounds of images showing an inundated Jakarta through the decades of the past century, all the way up to the (ostensibly) dry present. The page's admin-

istrators, clearly proud supporters of Ahok, frame these images as archival proof of the governor's successful management of the capital's floods – a claim hotly contested by followers in the comments. The key point here is that just as to speak of Jakarta's water woes is necessarily to speak of its citizens' inequalities, so too are discussions of water innately entangled in discussions of time – its passage, cadence, and memory.

To return to the case of interventions from the Netherlands: we cannot yet be certain what the returned presence of Dutch experts and projects in Jakarta's waterways will bring in terms of reactions from Jakartans, but set within this domestic shift in popular discourse towards what we might call the "de-naturalization" of the capital's floods – and within the Dutch's own promotion of their hydraulic expertise as a kind of national heritage steeped in their own collective past – we can surely expect that it will give rise to local and transnational discussions that link together past and present in unexpected ways. While more ethnographic study of this discourse is necessary, even a cursory glance at blogs posts, newspaper articles, and online discussion forums where the floods and Dutch interventions are debated reveals local opinions that range from distrust ("Indonesia should be aware that there is no such things as 'free lunch' in regards with the aid and funds"), to sarcasm ("ah it's [*sic*] reminds me of 400 years ago...")¹⁴, to relief – the latter especially from those

¹⁴ A selection of reader comments on the article by Abdul Khalik, "The Dutch return, this time as friends," *The Jakarta Globe* (November 20, 2013) <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/the-dutch-return-this-time-as-friends/>.

foreign residents inclined to agree with one outspoken ex-pat blogger who in reaction to the unprecedented floods of 2012 lamented, “Unless the lowlanders of Holland were to return and govern the city I can’t see any other solution but to abandon it to Mother Nature”.¹⁵

Indeed, the insistence of organizations like the NWP on water management as an innate skill-*cum*-heritage of the Dutch nation actively *encourages* the drawing of such connections between past and present. The problem, however, for those who seek to advance such a narrative is that when promoted in a country that still bears the memory (and material imprint) of a uniquely technocratic tradition of Dutch governance and the centrality of water management to colonial logics (compounded by contemporary entrenchments of urban inequality), those connections will be necessarily complex, likely contentious, and possibly undermine the very authority and expertise to which they lay claim. That is, to give your opinion on why Jakarta’s floods were so bad this year, or on who should be tasked with attempting to solve them altogether, might very well amount to a statement on the successes and failures of the colonial project at large.

“Heritage, mister”

Following a particularly destructive spate of floods that left many in the city stranded and sick, a cartoon appeared in a

Jakarta newspaper. One of many wry illustrations to be found in Indonesia’s thriving print culture that poke fun at political figures and critique social injustices, it depicted the then newly-elected governor (now president) of the capital region, Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, waist-deep in the rising waters, holding his shoes above the waves and wearing a nervous expression on his face. A smiling passerby – straining against a current that in the background threatens to engulf shacks, motorbikes, office buildings, and even the city’s iconic National Monument – cheerfully shouts out to him: “*Warisan masa lalu, pak*”. The phrase can be translated as “Inheriting the past, Mr. Governor”¹⁶; but even more succinctly might be read as “Heritage, mister” (*warisan* being one several terms commonly used by those working in the country’s fledgling conservation sector to refer to cultural traditions or objects, and *masa lalu* here meaning “the past”).

Besides its dry (pun intended) humor, this cartoon encapsulates the core conclusion to be drawn from this case of rising waters and vaunted expertise, former colonizer and colonized, and the discourses that have formed at their intersection: things that might appear at first utterly ahistorical are in truth steeped in the past and our diverse understandings of what we have inherited from it. A “natural” phenomenon turns out to be a historical one through and through; the efforts to mitigate it blend

¹⁵ Terry Collins, “Floods of Excuses,” *Indonesia Expat* (January 16, 2012) <http://indonesiaexpat.biz/featured/floods-of-excuses/>.

¹⁶ This translation suggested by Dr. Abidin Kusno from York University in Ontario, Canada. My thanks to him for first making me aware of this cartoon through a paper he delivered at the University of California, Berkeley on April 2, 2014, entitled “Floods, Dams, and Difference in an Indonesian Metropolis”.

together technical expertise and deeply-held beliefs about collective identities and national character; the local perception of these measures inevitably frames such contemporary interventions in light of both a long history of colonial governance and engineering across that very same cityscape, as well as more recent patterns of social inequality and political failure.

Indeed, for the burgeoning field of heritage studies itself, an even broader lesson can be drawn from this story of Dutch water management and Jakarta's worsening floods: phenomena, practices, and materials that would not seem to have anything to do with "heritage" proper as we have come to expect it – "natural" disasters, technical expertise, infrastructural repair – are often about *just that*, interwoven with the past, and our beliefs about what has been handed down to us from it, in surprising ways. As researchers, we need not look only to the conventional sites of

reflection on history – the museum gallery, the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the archaeological dig – to witness the development and deployment of heritage discourse today; in fact, we may not be so well served by turning our attention too quickly to those places that proclaim *a priori* "here be heritage". Rather, in our enthusiasm for elucidating and explaining the power of the past in the present, we might equally look to the orderly board room, the trash-clogged canal, the glossy policy brief, the unfinished piece of infrastructure still encased in scaffolding. Here also, governments, companies, professionals, and ordinary city-dwellers trade in potent notions of inheritance, identity, and memory; here also, the weight of history is a force that can be seen to shape our present material world, our aspirations for its future improvement, and our fears of its potential disruption.

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