Fig 3: KUPANG: Girl absorbed in a cell phone game while older kids play street soccer in downtown Kupang. Cell phones, with radios, games, music, cameras, and web access, are the new babysitters all over Indonesia.
June 2010; photo by S. Chris Brown
CLASS MOBIL: CIRCULATION OF CHILDREN IN THE MAKING OF MIDDLE INDONESIA

Jan Newberry

Mas Hadi had bought a car. This was the biggest news in the kampung neighbourhood when I visited in 2006.¹ The new car, or mobil, was actually a used minivan. The listing of its many flaws and its description as bad, or jelek, did not mask his family’s glee in having it. The mobil was in fact a great boon to this family, living a stone’s throw from the Yogyakarta kraton, the palace of the sultan. Although better off than some of the downtown kampung, this neighbourhood was likewise home to densely packed houses of the urban lower classes (Robison 1996). Site of innumerable small, home-based enterprises along with low-level civil servants, clerks and teachers, this kampung neighbourhood was more often described by locals as the home of many of the faithful servants of the sultan, the abdi dalem. It also served as residence for scrappy lower-class entrepreneurs, crooks and schemers typical of urban kampung. For all of them, the arrival of a mobil marked the attainment of a new level of consumption and the possibility of middle-class mobility. Yet, the car also marked a kind of family resource whose use demonstrated patterns of kampung kinship, even as it showed a widening class gap within the family. Although Mas Hadi had moved to a new housing development with his young family, he left the mobil in the kampung at his mother’s house where it was used by his large extended family. Every day he brought his young son to this house, centre of a dense network of kin, so that Ari would attend the same neighbourhood school Mas Hadi himself had attended and so experience an upbringing much like his own.

Kampung are urban enclaves understood to be home to lower-class Javanese who are rough and unrefined (kasar in Indonesian). In contrast to wealthier, more refined street-side residents, they are described as

¹ Located in the central court city of Yogyakarta, Central Java, Indonesia, this kampung neighbourhood has been the site of my ethnographic fieldwork since the early 1990s. Mas Hadi was the oldest son of the kampung family that had served as my most important source of social support, both as personal support and as valued cultural interpreters. I gratefully acknowledge the support from KITLV’s Middle Indonesia project, and from the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

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