



Lumbung.space. Instagram feed, with drawing by Baan Noorg Collective, one of lumbung.space's members, September 26, 2022. The drawing pictures the spirit of *lumbung* sustainability going beyond Documenta 15.

Reflections on *Lumbung*, Storytelling, and Collective Learning

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A central theme for Documenta 15 was the idea and spirit of the Indonesian *lumbung*: literally, a communal structure for storing grain and agricultural tools; more broadly, an invisible and hereditary system that prepares a community for crisis. Thus, Nuraini Juliastuti's talk on "Commons People: *Lumbung* as a Traveling Concept" (for Documenta 15's "Let There Be *Lumbung*" session) considers how the idea of *lumbung* involves management of resources on many levels, highlighting that *lumbung* extends beyond form and materiality.¹

This article resonates with Indonesian perspectives on *lumbung*, collectivity, and collective narrative making.² It was written as a reflection on how to write about Documenta 15 without experiencing it directly, since many people do not possess the ability to travel freely. I hope this text will help explain and extend the spirit of collectivism in Documenta 15 far beyond the exhibition itself.

Let us begin with the spirit (*jiwa*) in a story that is literally connected to spiritualism (*keyakinan spiritual*). Here, the word *spirit* refers to ancestors as guardians of the land. Different people have different experiences for how they know the spirit. Some would say that the spirit wears a green skirt, while others believe the spirit is wearing a batik scarf.³ None of those stories is false. All narratives regarding the spirits are true, without any doubt.

Consider, for example, an old swamp named Buret located in Tulungagung (East Java, Indonesia). Local people believe that the swamp is sacred for the praying rituals of the Baranusa animist community. Buret looks like most swamps: humid, surrounded by forest, with green or blue spring-fed water inhabited by algae. However, Buret is located in the middle of a marble quarry established during the colonial era (circa 1880). More recently, the swamp has been the site of an important story about illegal logging during the reformation era's monetary crisis (1998–2000). The swamp holds the story of how an animist community initiated a ritual after the monetary crisis to preserve the forest and the spring. The swamp holds knowledge about how the surrounding land was extracted for marble mining. The swamp holds the story of the relationship between human beings and nature.

The swamp alone has no medium to tell those stories. The swamp depends on people for its stories to be told. The swamp teaches us how oral history became both a preservation method

and a mode for connecting people. No one knows who started to tell the story about the spirit's swamp; nevertheless, people believe that the swamp has important knowledge about the land and struggles over extraction—an often violent history. The actions people then undertake—if they agree to believe in that narrative—are a continuation of the swamp's story: generated by and supporting that story.

To continue the story is not merely to retell the exact story that people have heard before but also to think deeply about how to translate the belief, nuances, and thought of the swamp's spirit, the knowledge holder. The work of *translation* is discussed by James Clifford as work that goes *beyond transmittance*.⁴ Therefore, I shall try to decode the spirit of translation through the *nyantrik* method of apprenticeship, as adopted and adapted by the KUNCI Study Forum and Collective (a collective based in Yogyakarta that works at the intersection of art and critical pedagogy) in their learning method laboratory: the School of Improper Education. The idea of spirit will then lead to a discussion of how to foreground immateriality in collectivity discourse.

Feelings, Nuances, Beliefs, and Thoughts

Founded in Yogyakarta in 2016, the School of Improper Education is an enabling space for learning, questioning, recontextualizing, and practicing *nyantrik* (an important neotraditional model for pedagogy in Indonesia today).⁵ This model has had several contextualizations in the school's situation. Because *nyantrik* is a long-established learning method developed when people had limited access to learning platforms for how to be an artist, recontextualizing *nyantrik* in collective learning became necessary. One of *nyantrik*'s compelling features for adaptation concerns the senses. The idea of engaging the senses as collective learning tools becomes a prompt for reclaiming knowledge as part of our bodies and emotions.

The wisdom of the *nyantrik* learning method is not about the result but about a willingness to learn about process.⁶ Apprentices seek out a master and tell them of their desire to learn. In the *nyantrik* process, permission from the master is the core aspect of *nyantrik* implementation. *Nyantrik* begins with the apprentice moving to the master's studio and/or home and following all their daily activities, even including domestic work (if so stipulated by the agreement between master and apprentice). *Nyantrik* highlights the ways domestic work and personal life are both attached to the master's practice.

A master is one who is highly skilled and publicly respected in their field of practice. In some popular cases, *nyantrik* learning applies to music and other traditional art practices that culminate in the materialization of the *nyantrik* process. For example, the gamelan is a set of traditional Javanese musical instruments; a gamelan musician not only learns how to play the instruments but also develops *rasa*, a broader capacity of intuitive sensory knowing.⁷ The materialization of the *nyantrik*

process is therefore not only a manifestation of the learning process but also an effort to understand the universe.⁸ Nyantrik should also be seen as a way of regenerating knowledge among practitioners.

Knowledge cannot be separated from where we are and where we came from, how that knowledge is shaped, and how to enable a collective learning platform for activating the senses. As such, nyantrik could serve as a model for better understanding the positionality linking collective learning platforms, domestic work, and the importance of bodily involvement in the learning process. All of these were important for Documenta 15, with its themes of friendship, connection, and situatedness.

These themes are also central for the knowledge that inhabits the swamp. The swamp alone has no medium to speak or tell its stories, but the swamp has spirit, senses, and emotions that animist practitioners engage with to preserve it. Baranusa animists positioned the swamp as their sacred place and demonstrated to a broader public how the swamp is an important area by performing rituals there. The Baranusa animist community thus weaves, in the words of bell hooks, a spirituality and spiritual life that gives us the strength to love.⁹ The Baranusa animists tried to build a love connection between human beings and nature through constructive belief. In Indonesia, a country dominated by six officially recognized religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism), animist practitioners are out of bounds due to the alternative spectrum by which they view the differences between nature, human beings, and divinity. To valorize their practices, they must travel a rocky road that includes efforts to reclaim ritual as a cultural product with no relation to religion.

Because Baranusa rituals often take place in the swamp, knowledge and wisdom are materialized through communion with the swamp. Baranusa animists made of their ritual a cultural product and allow all people (regardless of whether they have roots in the area or are just generally interested in Javanese culture) to attend and learn about the ritual. The cultural product involves a rooted context but no material demands: rather than commodification, the focus is on engaging the community spirit that assembles the community's stories. Ritual as a cultural product thus becomes a learning process for understanding the universe: its spirit, nuances, and even its violent history. That said, the number of people who have engaged in the ritual has not translated into the success of public efforts at land preservation. Thus, the success of this engagement among people, ritual, and place must be understood from a particular point of view. The cultural product's most important impact has been the act of presenting identity, rituals, and togetherness to a broader public.

An Assemblage of Community and Storytelling

The existence of the swamp's spirit will not stop marble quarrying. Even though the spirits are known as ancestors who have

the power to be guardians of the land, they cannot stop the marble quarrying that has taken place since the colonial era and its established force of a capitalist system of resource extraction. Nevertheless, the ritual of storytelling established an alternative survival strategy by creating an assemblage of relations among the animist group and the broader public.¹⁰ Therefore, one of the methods for fighting the destruction of the swamp is to create a space where people can see the land beyond quantification: revealing how they are part of an (unforgotten) constellation linking natural and human worlds.

The story of the swamp's resistance tells us how the swamp became a pool of resources for living people. The swamp thus became a monument to how people struggle for their land; a monument to how the people's power could create an alternative mode of living that is not grounded in simple extraction; a monument to how people manifest a sovereign life for their own culture, land, and rooted knowledge. The swamp cannot be sustained without maintenance work, however, especially work involving the distribution of power, the decentralizing of a sense of belongingness, and a prefiguring of the people's movement. The swamp's resistance is a reminder that resources are also bound up in infrastructure and collective maintenance work, as well as the mutual relation between the swamp and the community that depends on the swamp's existence. That is, the idea of *lumbung* should not be seen as simply involving form and materiality stored up as in a static, physical warehouse. We must not forget the ongoing maintenance work that allows *lumbung* to be constantly of the present, constantly renewed.¹¹ *Lumbung* will gain sovereignty by working through the community that inhabits it.

Moving back to the swamp and how its spirit and Baranusa animists collaborate to resonate belief through a regular ritual (as cultural product) is to reflect on narrative as a mode of collective making. But collective making also needs endless maintenance work. The collective spirit provides a method by which to find alternative means of surviving in a crisis. The form will be a form of collectivism. And although the idea of collectivism will not demolish extraction and capitalism, collectivism does provide a means by which to find an alternative form for building solidarity amid crisis. Is it not important to imagine a sovereign solidarity network while talking about collectivity? "Let there be *lumbung*" requires a longer process for generating social impact without getting stuck in a rigid definition of form and the materiality that is attached to the art itself. And we must not forget to appreciate the people who circulated stories about *lumbung* in the hope of making those values real and believable.

Notes

1. “English: Let There Be *Lumbung* (Day 4),” Documenta 15, streamed live on 23 September 2022, YouTube video, 2:37:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tRTcX1C3AE>. In contrast, consider the various Indonesian “improvement” projects chronicled in Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

2. I am part of the KUNCI Study Forum and Collective, based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. KUNCI experiments with methods in producing and sharing knowledge through the acts of studying together at the intersections of affective, manual, and intellectual labor. Since its founding in 1999 in Yogyakarta, KUNCI has been continually transforming its structure, forms, and medium of working. Initially formed as a cultural studies study group, KUNCI’s practices today emphasize collectivizing study by way of space making, discussion, library research, publishing, and school organizing. See KUNCI Study Forum and Collective, <https://www.kunci.or.id/>; and Struggles for Sovereignty, <https://strugglesforsovereignty.net>.

3. The term *batik* refers to certain fabric dyeing techniques that are well known in Indonesia. Batik clothes can be worn as a daily fashion, but in some traditional rituals batik is prescribed as an important element. Not limited to fashion, batik can also be used, for example, for tablecloths. Batik patterns often indicate where the batik was printed. For example, batik from the highlands might tell about the mountains or farming, while batik from coastal areas might tell about the fish, the sea, or fishing. Metaphorically, batik also has spiritual meaning in rituals that are implied by its motifs. Through the processes by which it is manufactured, batik also reveals a sacred, respectful, and strong connection to the place where the batik was made. As another example of this sacredness, when people own a batik for decades, it gains its own power, which must be maintained and should not be treated carelessly.

4. James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

5. KUNCI Study Forum and Collective, “The School of Improper Education,” *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (2020): 566–578, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-8662448>.

6. Haryono, “Nyantrik Learning Model in the Field Experience Practice Program for the Bachelor (S-1) Workforce Education Institutions,” *Dewantara: International Journal of Education* 2, no. 1 (2014): 82–92, <https://www.neliti.com/publications/241217/nyantrik-learning-model-in-the-field-experience-practice-program-for-the-bachelor>; Anik Purwati, Malarsih, and Agus Cahyono, “The Process of Inheritance Ayu Mask Dance in Tanon Backwoods,” *Catharsis* 8, no. 1 (2019): 60–68, <https://journal.unnes.ac.id/sju/index.php/catharsis/article/view/30311>; Mitha Budhyarto, “Unlearning Together: Collective Efforts Are Key in Art Education for the Future,” Asia Pacific Network for Cultural Education and Research, May 2019, <https://www.ancernetwork.org/mainap/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Article-by-Mitha-Budhyarto.pdf>; and Haryono, “Effectiveness of Nyantric Learning Models in Field Experience Practice (PPL) for S1 Students of Education and Manpower Education Institutions (LPTK),” *International Journal of Management* 11, no. 12 (December 2020): 3333–3349, <http://dx.doi.org/10.34218/IJM.11.12.2020.312>.

7. Paul Stange, “The Logic of *Rasa* in Java,” *Indonesia*, no. 38 (October 1984): 113–134, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3350848>.

8. Antariksa, “Nyantrik as Commoning,” *Qalqalah*, no. 2 (February 2016): 9–18, <https://kadist.org/program/second-issue-qalqalah/>.

9. bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000).

10. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015);

and Elizabeth Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

11. See also Andre L. Russell and Lee Vinsel, “After Innovation, Turn to Maintenance,” *Technology and Culture* 59, no. 1 (January 2018): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2018.0004>; and Nikhil Anand, “After Breakdown: Invisibility and the Labour of Infrastructure Maintenance,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 51 (December 2020): 52–56, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/51/review-urban-affairs/after-breakdown.html>.