



The Years of Living Precariously – the “Rob” Phenomenon in Semarang
 by Lukas Ley



Here, you have to reckon with water. You have to plan with it, think with it. Otherwise it can become your worst enemy, your nightmare, your nightly disaster. So you reckon with water, you observe the tide, how the river swells, you try to understand the water’s behavior in the canal and the gutter. If it rises you try to take timely measures. You pump it out, you move family members’ belongings out of harm’s way. Water’s altered consistence has consequences for your body. You can’t drink the water. You prefer not to touch it. It stinks. In your city, the way you intimately know water has to do with the location of your neighbourhood. Your neighbourhood is at the receiving end of the city’s drainage system. But you receive little help. The government’s inaction, fragmentary interventions at best, leave you with no choice but to take matters into your own hand. On some days, the problem looks insurmountable. But you look to the future, you still have hope. The way you thoroughly know water also has to do with your plans for the future: you’re familiar with the rhythms of the tide, the speed of land subsidence, you expect that the government will lift the streets and fix the river-banks eventually. So you invest in the present, you outlive the next flood.

The drainage system of the Indonesian city of Semarang, capital of Central Java, is supposed to prevent flooding in the rainy season and channel waste water into the ocean. It never guaranteed full safety from floods, but it is able to absorb surplus water and often prevents dramatic overflow. That is, the system most reliably prevents flooding in the central districts, home to Semarang's municipal and provincial government offices, shopping malls, and hotels. Places like Kemijen or Tambak Lorok, densely inhabited neighbourhoods located in the north of Semarang, where the drainage system meets the ocean, struggle with flooding. In addition to seasonal floods, they are regularly visited by 'rob'. This term loosely connotes both the incoming tide and pools of flood water in streets and houses.

As the local poet Djawahir Muhammad put it in the famous poem "Semarang Surga Yang Hilang" (Semarang, A Lost Paradise), the city's expansion resulted in the destruction and subsequent suppression of a lush coastal swamp. In view of permanently flooded patches of land and houses, and residents' efforts to ward off water returning from the ground and canals, the swamp seems back with a vengeance. Poor residents are doubly disadvantaged: first, in the absence of reliable water infrastructure, the swamp has been turned into a toxic environment by industrial pollution and landfill. Second, the government's plans for addressing the "rob" problem require space for water retention, leading to the "clearing" of land. Many residents are threatened by eviction and may lose their ties with Semarang's coastal ecology, their social networks, and their livelihoods. They are forced to lead highly precarious lives between punitive government interventions and resurgences of poisonous water.

Note from the author: I have spent ten months in Semarang conducting ethnographic research in areas affected by regular flooding. While I lived in affected areas, I do not consider myself a flood victim. The use of the second person is a stylistic device meant to approximate and dramatize the experience of enduring recurrent flooding. I do not pretend to represent an indigenous perspective and acknowledge the ultimate impossibility of "knowing" how it feels to be a permanent resident of Semarang's coastal neighbourhoods.