Weaving Nests into Gold: Socio-ecological relations and the urbanization of nature through the production of edible birds' nest

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Research Questions

Q1- how are swiftlet houses transforming Indonesian and Malaysian towns? How and by whom are these developments contested, on what grounds? and;

Q2 - How might the (urban) production of bird's nest be reconfigured in radically democratic ways?

Aims + Objectives

Empirical objectives

To trace the emergence and implications of contested normative urban landscapes through the phenomena of urban bird's nest harvesting, using empirical research from relevant sites in Malaysia.

Investigate how the material configuration of the urban landscape in Malaysian towns is an effect of the (re)production and circulations of capital, swiftlets and their nests.

Explore the potential for landscape political ecology, by considering the intersections of these two fields in everyday life.

Conceptual Framing

Urban political ecology and the study of landscape in cultural geography have similar aims and 'landscape political ecology' has started to emerge in the human-geography literature. However, few landscape political ecologists have looked at issues of everyday life, landscape aesthetics, and the experiential nature of landscape. Yet these concerns are fundamental, because many (rural and urban) landscapes involve other ways of perceiving, experiencing and representing them, which are shaped by different temporal rhythms and spatial processes, including the ongoing remaking of nature in an urbanized form (Batterbury 2001; Braun 2000; Loftus 2012). Such an approach allows for the tracing of how such conflicts have been shaped by a multiplicity of actors from local urban residents to city government officials and this is where the insights of the new literature on 'animal geographies' will become useful, due to its diligence in conceptualizing the agency of non-human actors, and their inter-relations with human species.

"Not in towns please"
-New Straits Times Malaysia (2007)

"They excrete everywhere, anytime"
-New Straits Times Malaysia (2007)

"Such a nuissance"
-New Straits Times Malaysia (2006)

"Unhygenic...a health risk"
-New Straits Times Malaysia (2008)

"Weaving fortunes for Indonesians"
-Oh (2008)

"A profitable affair"
-New Straits Times Malaysia (2008)

'demand outstrips supply'
-Asia One News Malaysia (2011)

"It's a gold mine"
-Oh (2008)
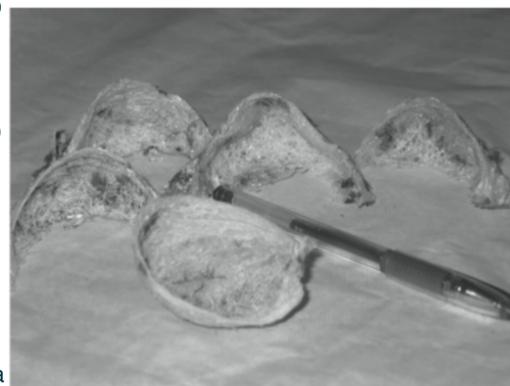
Raw bird's nest in commodity form
Source: Jordan(2004)
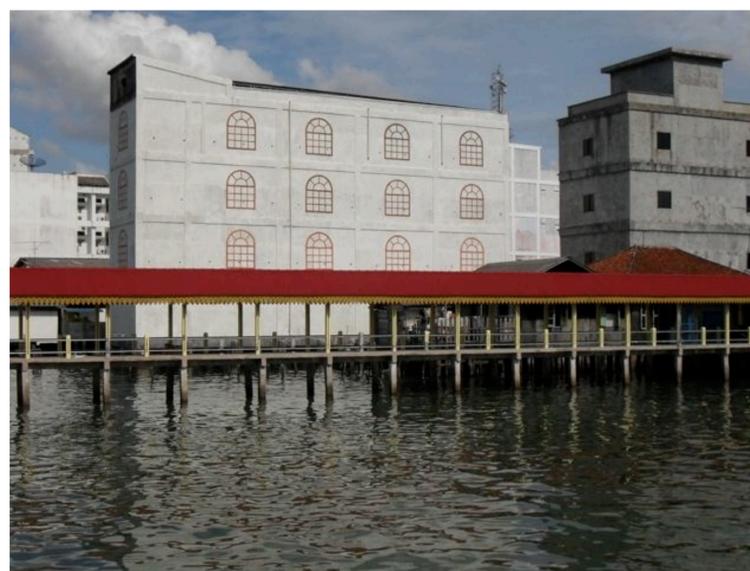
'Swiftlet hotels' in Tanjung Pinang, Bintan, Indonesia. These buildings are the first sight upon arrival at the town's ferry port. Photo: author.

Case Study

The urban harvesting of edible bird's nest in Indonesia and Malaysia is a necessary case study to explore in answering these questions because the production of the nests and their global flows encapsulate the myriad social struggles and political conflict which is quite literally built into the production of swiftlet farms. For instance, the Chinese diaspora in both countries have long been resented by other dominant social groups in their respective societies, largely due to their dominance in the economic sector. This research throws in to question, then, the meaning of often taken-for-granted entities such as nature, urban space, ethnicity, conviviality, etcetera. The controversy around urban swiftlet houses in Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular, fundamentally questions how we can all live together in an increasingly urban world, where the divide between nature and culture is up for grabs, if not collapsed entirely (Latour 2004).

Methodology

Methodologically, I will adopt insights from the critical globalization literature, particularly the strand developed by writers like Anna Tsing and Cindi Katz on 'critical topographies'. These approaches draw from feminist standpoint theory, and their usefulness for my project is due to their attention to issues of scale, and their potential for unsettling existing power relations, environmental conflicts and contest over urban environments in the proposed study area.

To me, the best method for developing contacts is the snowball method, where one actant provides the researcher with contacts for further research, which then (ideally) blossom into yet more contacts, and so on. By using such a contingent methodology, it is not possible to decide in advance on a possible list of actions to undertake when conducting the research. Therefore, I plan to decide only the essential or fundamental details of my fieldwork plans in advance, and allow for the rest to unfold 'naturally' in the field. Moreover, because the topic of my research is a nation-wide, and international phenomenon, I will be using a multi-sited methodology, which enables me to make comparisons of observations between different (related) sites (see Marcus 1995). Finally, I want to build on the new animal geographies literature, which treats humans and non-humans in an *a priori* equivalent manner, and interrogate how it might be possible to account for the voice of non-humans in political decision making. This is a vital task, as Bruce Braun (following Haraway), puts it: "we need to be able to account for a wider field of heterogeneous practices that generate social natures" (Braun 2000, 39).

References

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