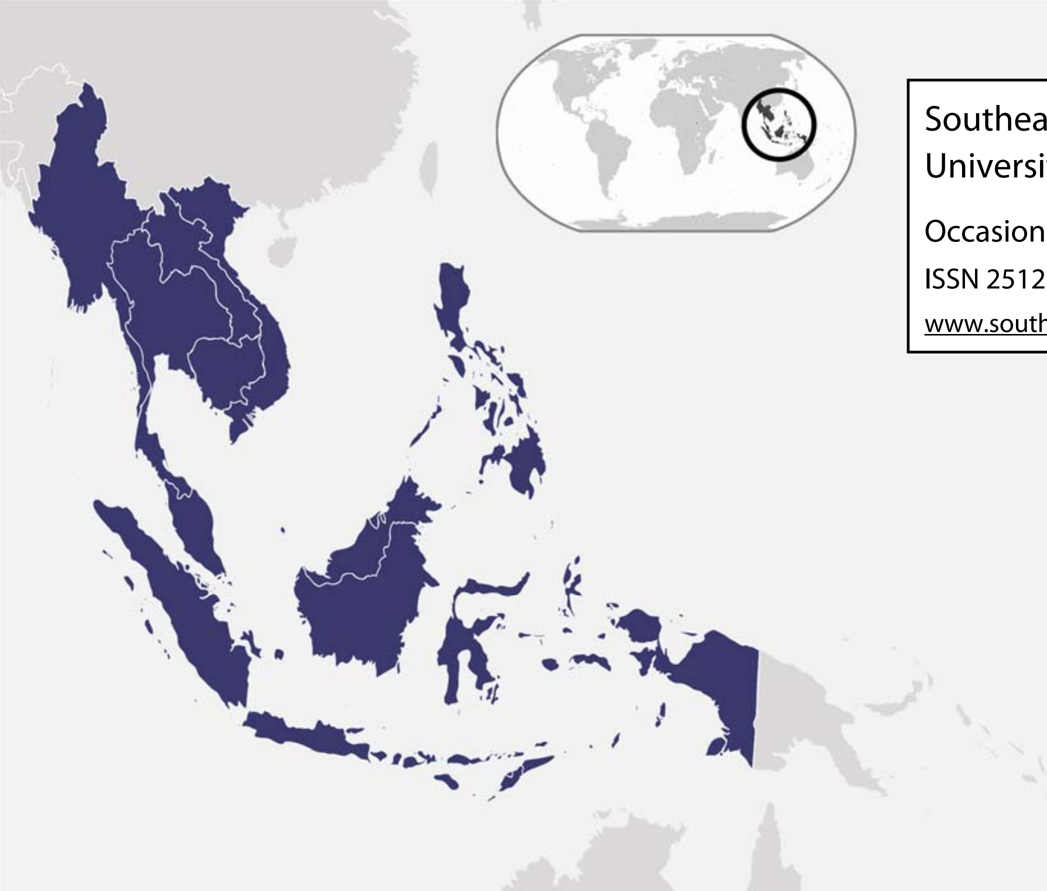

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The West and the World in Indonesian Imagination and Experience

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The West and the World in Indonesian Imagination and Experience[1]

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Abstract:

In 2005, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit published a remarkable book about what they saw as a rise of Occidentalism in many parts of the Global South. In Southeast Asia, intellectuals critical of the West agreed with their idea that Occidentalist perspectives represent a complete reversal of what once Edward Said had harshly criticized as Orientalism in Europe's relationship with the "East": Essentializing the cultural "Other" in highly unfavorable terms to legitimize the West's colonial and neo-colonialist mission.

In this paper, we strive to ground the debate on Occidentalism in empirical field research and seek to provide answers to the following research question: "How are the various ways to make sense of the West related to world-making in Indonesia?". We thereby focus on a number of issues, including religious practice and morality, attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination, and Indonesian views of the West in the field of international relations. We combine anthropological and international relations perspectives, which best converge in a constructivist, relational analytical framework that highlights the significance of images, frames, and identities. In our findings, we note that Indonesia's relationship with the West is much more complex and ambivalent than adherents of the Occidentalism argument claim. Varying across issue areas, situations, and contexts, it is characterized by a marked decentering of the West and the rise of other important "Others", including East Asia (particularly China) and the Arab world. Thus, the ways of world-making in Indonesia refer primarily to the conditions, experiences, and imagination within the country.

Keywords:

Occidentalism, Orientalism, World-making, Anthropology, International Relations, Indonesia

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Introduction: On powerful imageries

We thought the East–West binary is outdated – but we were wrong! At present, the figure of the West – its ideological representation – gains new relevance in the Ukraine war. We know, at least since Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), that imaginations and representations are not innocent as they legitimate power and dominance. Thus, it is noteworthy that the West in Russian political war rhetoric is the absolute evil, and that many countries in the Global South are affected by this Russian propaganda due to their colonial past and/or because they experience the West – a catch-all designation for a very diverse set of countries – as a continuously hegemonic force. Furthermore, social media platforms considerably contribute to this anti-Western sentiment (or even contempt) by portraying Russia's invasion as a response to the "threat" to Russia instigated by NATO (Loh & Mustaffa 2022). Last but not least, religious constructions of difference play an important role.

Every community carefully organizes its ways of contacting and transacting with others. In this paper, we explore the imaginations and experiences of the West in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy. After centuries of Dutch colonization, the first president of independent Indonesia, Sukarno, took up a firebrand anti-Western political stance, whereas the autocratic developmental "New Order" project of his successor Suharto was based on a modernization equated with Westernization, globalization, and developmentalism. In the so-called reform era that followed Suharto's fall (1998), domestic Indonesian debate over fundamental values and orientations has intensified. There is a vigorous renegotiation of national identity, cultural and religious identification, social relations, and belonging.

For sure, power structures and struggles related to political and economic inequality play a crucial role in constructions of Self and Other. What we seek to discuss in this paper is the related politics of representation, both in official foreign policy stances and in the moral politics in everyday discourse. We focus on strategies and representations, subjectivities and lived experiences of ways of relating to the world within imaginative geographies of and beyond West and East. Our central question is: "how are the various ways to make sense of the West related to world-making in Indonesia?"

This paper draws from the findings of the interdisciplinary DFG project "Beyond Occidentalism: Indonesian images of the West" (2009–2013) and reflects some recent pandemic-related developments. We conducted empirical fieldwork and media analysis over many years, though during the pandemic we practiced only remote studies/ethnography by digitally connecting with the fields.

Theoretical background

James G. Carrier (1992, 1995) introduced the term Occidentalism as a signifier for essentialist imaginations of "the West." In 2005, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit published a remarkable book about nationalists in the Global South who identify capitalism, liberalism, and secularism – ideational markers attributed to modern Western civilization – as threatening their cultures and societies. Buruma and Margalit related this to the rise of Occidentalism in many parts of the world. In Southeast Asia, intellectuals critical of the West (e.g., Mahbubani), as well as postcolonial and Islamist thinkers, perfectly fit Buruma and Margalit's observation

that these Occidentalist perspectives represent a complete reversal of what Said once harshly criticized as “Orientalism” in Europe’s relationship to the “East:” essentializing the cultural “Other” in highly unfavorable terms as a rhetoric frame to legitimize the West’s colonial and neo-colonialist missions. Yet the idea of Occidentalism, as a simple inversion of Orientalism, provoked harsh criticism because the embeddedness of Orientalism and Occidentalism in historical power structures differs fundamentally. Alastair Bonnett thus rejected Buruma and Margalit’s analyses as Eurocentric, stating that the field of Occidentalism emerged from the intertwinement of Eastern and Western intellectual traditions. Western and non-Western identities are mutually constitutive (Bonnett 2010: 205) to the extent of radical (yet often unconscious) interdependence.

Said intended to overcome the Orient–Occident dualism by making its social and political construction visible, and we learned that representation of the “Other” is always also crucial for self-assertion and self-representation. Furthermore, Othering easily appeals to positional superiority claims as well as xenophobia and racism. Polarization is related to affective and cognitive consonance. Thus, self-Orientalization goes hand-in-hand with identity politics such as emphasis on “Asian values” or an ”Asian way” in both strategic political objectives and deep-seated emotions. Nevertheless, in recent decades critical analysis of fantasies and crude stereotypes of Oriental and Occidental differences and imageries of “the West” or (neo-liberal) “Western globalization” have been counterbalanced by increasing scholarly attention to decentering tendencies.

World-making goes beyond the dichotomies of East/West or South/North. In a multipolarizing and mediatized world, there is a diversification of experiences and frames of reference – and not only for cosmopolitan elites. Ideas and practices in transnational circulation refer to diverse, albeit entangled, centers and cultural reorientations. Images of the West vary between official representations in the conduct of foreign relations and subjective notions, lived experiences, and discourses in the wider society. Therefore, we combine critical discourse analysis with ethnography. We start with an analysis of how high-ranking Indonesian government officials portray the West in international fora. Subsequently, we will ground the debate in the empirical everyday imaginations and practices of ordinary people in Indonesia.

The West through the lens of the Indonesian government

We start our empirical analysis by examining how, in the field of foreign policy, images of the West shape world-making in Indonesia. To find out how the Indonesian government views the West, we conducted an open-coded discourse analysis of the addresses delivered by high-ranking Indonesian government representatives[2] to the annual general debate of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Their statements provide insights into their worldviews, their perceptions of other member states or state groups, and their visions for a just and peaceful world order.

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[2] Including Presidents Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo, Vice President Jusuf Kalla and Foreign Ministers Ali Alatas, Alwi Shihab, Hassan Wirajuda, and Marty Natalegawa.

Like many other countries in the Global South, Indonesia regards the current international order as unjust and unequal. While the Indonesian government views the developed countries of the West as bearing major responsibility for this deplorable state of affairs,[3] unlike other representatives of southern countries, Indonesian leaders express their critique in moderate and balanced language, usually even without explicitly naming the West. Four themes stand out in Indonesian government leaders' explicit or implicit framing of their notions of the West: developmental issues, governance norms, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the relationship to Islam.

As shown by a previous survey, "development" is the most frequently addressed theme in these speeches (Rüland 2019). Indonesian leaders thereby criticized the developed world – largely identical to the West – and its promotion of a volatile process of neoliberal globalization that favors developed countries over economically less advanced ones in the Global South. A case in point is the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997/1998, which affected Indonesia like no other country (Dieter 1998, Rüland 2000). Recovery suffered from the inequitable power structure of international financial institutions (IFIs), led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Dominated by the United States and other major Western powers, Indonesian leaders regarded the fund's rescue packages, with their burdensome conditionalities, as a deliberate move made by (Western) developed countries to subdue the competition of aspiring (Southern) economies and as a source of bitter medicine that drove them even deeper into the crisis.[4]

Indonesian leaders are also dissatisfied with developed countries' debt relief policies,[5] as well as their unfair trade and investment practices. Putative trade protectionism curtails developing countries' access to international markets and obstructs the completion of the World Trade Organization's Doha Round,[6] once solemnly declared a "development round." Developed countries are seen as slow in financing development and failing to tangibly promote the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) or foster technology transfer.[7] In the second half of the 2000s, Indonesian leaders also began to address environmental issues, calling for prudent use of finite resources, admonishing developed countries to comply with their responsibilities[8] and control their insatiable thirst for raw materials.[9]

The second major theme providing insights into the Indonesian government's views of the West relates to governance norms. Statements on governance seem to suggest that Indonesia shares key norms championed by Western governments, such as democracy, respect for human rights, good governance, and rule of law. Foreign Ministers Hassan Wirajuda (2001–2009) and Marty Natalegawa (2009–2014) especially used democracy as a rhetorical *leitmotif.* They refer at length to Indonesia's successes in democratization, including

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[3] A/53/PV.8, 1998.

[4] A/53/PV.8, 1998.

[5] A/57/PV.14, 2002; A/61/PV.18, 2006; A/64/PV.13, 2009; A/73/PV.1118-30073 13/61, 2018.

[6] A/61/PV.18, 2006.

[7] Address of President of the Republic of Indonesia at the General Debate Session of the 76th General Assembly of the United Nations 23 September 2021, available at: https://setkab.go.id/en/address-of-president-of-the-republic-of-indonesia-at-the-general-debate-session-of-the-76th-general-assembly-of-the-united-nations-23-september-2021/, (accessed 31 May 2022).

[8] A/61/PV.18, 2006.

[9] A/70/PV.26, 2015.

decentralization,[10] free and fair elections,[11] the Bali Democracy Forum,[12] and human rights policies.[13] The characterization of Indonesia as "the world's third-largest democracy" became a customary *topos* in Indonesia's self-references in and outside the general debate.[14]

Indonesian speakers also extend the democracy norm to multilateral fora. This entails a thinly veiled critique of the world's great powers – including Western countries, foremost the US, but also implicating the UK and France – for recalcitrantly sticking to a global institutional architecture that reflects the power structure of the immediate post-Second World War period and blocking reforms that adequately take into account the rise of newly emerging powers in the Global South.

However, the seeming reference to Western governance norms does not mean that the Indonesian government has become an adherent of liberal democracy. Official Indonesian conceptualizations of democracy – and human rights – are strongly linked to national sovereignty, implying a critique of the West's conditionality policies[15] and interference in the internal affairs of other countries.[16] Clearly anti-Western is the notion that human rights policies should avoid "double standards" and "politicization."[17]

Moreover, foreign policy studies suggest that the democracy theme is more instrumental than normative (Rüland 2017a, 2017b; Karim 2017). It is a "home-grown" version of democracy that deviates from liberal concepts on several counts: it is strongly informed by organic state theory, unity, and skepticism towards political pluralism (Reeve 1985; Bourchier 2015). The Indonesian government's perception of democracy thus includes a penchant for executive superiority and state-led corporatist practices (Rüland 2014). This is exacerbated in current processes of democratic backsliding, although these are less forceful than in other Southeast Asian countries (Croissant & Haynes 2021).

For the Indonesian government, democracy promotion is primarily a strategy for generating "soft power." Believing that "democracy" is globally the most highly valued form of governance, Indonesian leaders harp on the democracy theme to augment their country's international recognition. With the reputation of a fledgling democracy, Western conditionalities can be sidestepped, more development aid generated, FDI attracted, and the influence on world affairs increased. This implies that, in multilateral organizations, Indonesia presents itself as a steady advocate of democratization. For Indonesian leaders, this means strengthening executive multilateralism. Countries of the Global South – and especially the Muslim world – must be better represented in international institutions, while Western voices calling for the inclusion of non-state actors or the parliamentarization of international organizations are ignored.

The third theme indirectly defining Indonesian leaders' images of the West is Palestine. Here, Indonesian leaders see Western countries (in particular, the US) as tolerating Israeli human

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[10] A/56/PV.54, 2001.
[11] A/59/PV.11, 2004.
[12] A/63/PV.14, 2008; A/64/PV.13, 2009; A/65/PV.22, 2010; A/66/PV.26, 2011; A/68/PV.17, 2013; 2017.
[13] A/53/PV.8, 1998; A/60/PV.14, 2005; A/62/PV.5, 2007; A/65/PV.22, 2010; A/68/PV.17, 2013; A/70/PV.26, 2015; A/71/PV.18, 2016; A/74/PV.9 19-29461 5/63, 2019.
[14] A/56/PV.54, 2001; A/64/PV.13, 2009; A/65/PV.22, 2010; A/66/PV.26, 2011; A/70/PV.26, 2015.
[15] [15] A/63/PV.14, 2008; A/64/PV.13, 2009; A/74/PV.9 19-29461 5/63.
[16] A/54/PV.11, 1999.
[17] A/60/PV.14, 2005.

rights violations against Palestinians. This suggests that human rights violations perpetrated against Muslim populations do not seem to figure prominently in the Western human rights agenda. Although in the past Islam played a subordinated role in Indonesian foreign policy (Sukma 2006), recurrent solidarity addresses to the Palestinian people and harsh criticism of Israel are concessions to the country's Muslim-majority population and, here, especially, political Islam. While the brunt of critique is directed against the state of Israel, Western powers' support of Israel and involvement in the maintenance of the *status quo* are implicit targets.

Unsurprisingly, thus, critical notions of the West also prevail with regard to the fourth theme, writ, Western images of Islam. While the Indonesian government shares with the West an uncompromising position against all forms of terrorism, it rejects what it considers the Western equation of Islam with violence. This obvious lack of respect and empathy towards other religions extends to Western media, as shown by the controversy over the Mohammed cartoons.[18] To cope with this problem, Indonesia promotes interfaith dialogue, which it regularly conducts with various Western countries.[19]

In sum, while Indonesian foreign policy has a Third Worldist orientation, it does not entail a harsh and fundamental critique of the West. This must be attributed to Indonesia's carefully nurtured concept of itself as a bridge-builder in international relations and, in particular, between developed and developing countries.[20] Criticizing the West does not go hand in hand with showing sympathies to developmental models and political systems challenging the West, a posture that reflects Indonesia's overarching and age-honored *"bebas dan aktif"* (free and active) principle of foreign policy. Quite to the contrary, Indonesia is positioning itself as a model to be emulated: as a country that successfully marries Islam, modernity, and democracy.

The West in everyday Indonesian lives

In several research projects a decade ago, we simply asked how "the West" is understood and used by whom and for what purpose. Field research in Manado (Ita Yulianto), Makassar (Melanie Nertz), Madura (Mirjam Lücking), and Yogyakarta (Judith Schlehe) revealed that a rigid dichotomization of East versus West does *not* reflect the nuances of Indonesian thoughts and practices in daily life. However, we found remarkable ambivalence between cosmopolitan ideas and their rupture in polarizing, orientalist, and occidentalist imaginaries.

In general, knowledge of the West is relatively limited in spite of modern media and widespread access to information technologies. For instance, even students of history associate with Europe first of all colonialism and crusades – the attacks of Christians against Muslims.

Unsurprisingly, there are – along with class, educational, generational, and rural–urban differences and differences due to direct or indirect experiences with Western people or travel experiences in the West – significant regional disparities. Due to colonial and cultural

[18] A/61/PV.18, 2006.
[19] A/62/PV.5, 2007.
[20] A/62/PV.5, 2007.

legacies, people in Manado – in the Minahasa region, a predominantly Christian province in North Sulawesi – are more pro-Western than in other parts of Indonesia. Conversely, an interesting finding of Ita's dissertation was that the orientation towards the West has shifted from the old Dutch to the new US-American West, which has become a key reference for Manadonese material and spiritual culture. The West, thus, is no longer seen as a single entity but rather as divided into two categories: Europe and America.[21] At the same time, the Manadonese show an intense engagement with affluent Asian countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Yulianto 2015).

In contrast, the Muslim-majority regions of Makassar (South Sulawesi) and Yogyakarta (Central Java) are more shaped by "Islamic modernity." This corresponds with a growing emphasis on Islam in recent decades. Noteably, in spite of considerable differences and conflicts between conservative and moderate Muslims and although the former harshly criticize everything seen as Western, in practice most adherents share ambivalent attitudes towards the West. For instance, it is quite popular to combine the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) with a visit of Paris – the so-called Hajj plus. At the same time, however, research participants also referred to "Asian values," allegedly manifested in Asian popular culture (such as K-Pop), media, lifestyle, etc. And, of course, the economic rise of China is very much at the center of most people's attention. This tallies well with the fact that, in a survey among international relations students in four Indonesian universities,[22] respondents rated relations with China markedly better than with leading Western countries (including Australia, the EU, and the US) (Nguitragool 2013: 8). Hence, "local tradition" interacts with certain aspects of "Asian," "Western," and "Arabic" modernity. Orientation is shifting towards new imagined centers as the West is no longer the single and ultimate frame of reference (Schlehe, Nertz & Yulianto 2013).

Concerning "Arabic" modernity, Mirjam Lücking showed clearly that even people who have their own overseas experiences – Mecca pilgrims and migrant laborers – translate their acquired knowledge into the dominant discourses and conflicts in their home country. They are "making Arab one's own" (Lücking 2021).

"Local tradition" is, of course, also highly contested and politicized and often gains from statements of contrast with the Other/foreign/Western, although there are actually many traits of ideas and practices in transnational circulation, such as folklorization and commodification as well as globalized spiritual, alternative, or ecological discourses (Schlehe 2019).[23]

What all these regions and issues have in common is that our research participants – when asked – associated certain features with the West such as advanced technology and high-quality products, football, development, economic strength and capitalism, good education, a loss of religion, gender equality, rule of law, democracy, liberalism, freedom, materialism and individuality, honesty, rationality, discipline and work ethics (punctuality and

[21] See also Nguitragool (2013: 5).

[22] Universitas Indonesia, Depok/Jakarta, Gadjah Mada University Yogyakarta, Hasanuddin University Makassar and Mularwarman University Samarinda.

[23] For instance, ecological movements often use indigenous cosmology as cultural strategy to challenge the state–led development (extractivism) that is equated with the Western idea of nature being separated from culture/society.

thoroughness), consumption of alcohol, but also colonization (Schlehe, Nertz & Yulianto 2013: 10; Nguitragool 2013: 5). Some of these features were seen positively, others negatively, and many were evaluated in ambivalent ways or it was said that they might fit for Westerners but definitely not for Indonesians (e.g. individuality was most often associated with selfishness, loneliness, and the abandonment of old people). Therefore, many interlocutors stated that Indonesians should apply a kind of filter that only lets the good, appropriate things through. What nearly everybody condemned was feminism and – most prominent – an alleged moral decay. The gendered and sexualized images of the West refer to indecent female clothing and "free sex" (ranging from promiscuity to all relationships outside marriage). On the other hand, what is related to Indonesia is spiritual strength, local wisdom, sociality/strong sense for one's community, tolerance, patience, softness, politeness, and altogether moral superiority.

These ideas and the deep-seated ambiguity towards the West seemed to have been somewhat weakened in recent years by globalization and the growing complexities of interwoven cultural resources from all over the world. However, the COVID-19 pandemic revitalized them, at least partly. In Indonesia (as in other parts of the world). the coronavirus was seen as a threat coming from outside. Global conspiracy theories associated the virus with American imperialism and Bill Gates or with efforts to destroy Islam.[24] They sowed distrust and stimulated vaccine hesitancy. Diverse Others were associated with the novel danger: hostility against Indonesians of Chinese descent grew[25] and the Chinese Sinovac vaccine was first associated with communism. Later, it was assumed that vaccines from the West would contain traces of pork which would make them forbidden (*haram*) for Muslims. Criticism of Western biomedical systems and "the West" in general goes hand in hand with the promotion of "homegrown" ideas and products (e.g., *jamu* – traditional herbal medicine) for strengthening individual bodies and the body of the nation. Apart from simple measures of personal health care, religion was elevated to the most effective protective device in combating the pandemic: as recommended by then Minister of Health Terawan Agus Putranto, regular prayers are the best precaution against infection (Mietzner 2021: 6).

Concluding thoughts: Decentering the West – reimagining polarization?

Coming back to our initial question of how the ways to make sense of the West are related to world-making in Indonesia, we wish to keep in mind that, like all constructions of alterity, ideas of the world and the West are historically situated, relational and dynamic. The various ways of world-making in Indonesia reflect the historical experiences as well as the leading normative discourses, structural conditions, cultural values, affective resonances, and personal imaginations within the country. The dialectics between othering and appropriation that come to the fore in the narratives of the West are often related to identity politics and nationalist sentiments. This is reflected in Indonesia's official views of the West, which are shaped by Indonesia's past as a country severely victimized by colonialism, its

[24] These voices stemmed from conservative Muslims. The large organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, took a much more rational stance.

[25] *South China Morning Post*, 22 March 2020; *Nikkei Asia*, August 4, 2020.

status as a developing country, a majority-Muslim population, and the identity of a country that has successfully gone through a major political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. What is remarkable is that, in Indonesian society, the contested meanings and situated representations of the West(s) were in the last decades increasingly decentered by the diversification of the frames of reference in the context of globalization: East Asia – particularly China in economic terms and Japan and South Korea as pop icons – and the Arab world, as an Islamic center, gained importance. Thus, there was a tendency to overcome the imaginary of binary blocks and transgress the East–West and Occidentalism–Orientalism polarity – not only in scholarly, relational approaches but also on the ground, in the thoughts, desires and everyday practices of ordinary people. Only very recently, it seems that, widespread reactions to the pandemic (not only in Indonesia but everywhere) were closure in the sense of an imagined, safe, national "we" vis-à-vis an "outside" world. Similar to the rhetoric concerning the war in Ukraine, where we find novel re-imaginings and propagandistic narratives of a global East–West conflict, there is a dangerous tendency in our contemporary world of political block building related to identity politics, values ("culture") and morality. Therefore, we definitely subscribe to Arturo Escobar's request that "...we all need to actively unlearn the ontologies of separation" (2020: xxxi).

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