Urban Kampongs and contesting space in a modernizing Island city of George Town, Penang

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Abstract: Urban areas including island cities are popularly viewed as “sites of conflicts” or “contested space” between groups of people with divergent motives in the city. Due to intense globalization and modernization, some places are becoming isolated and gradually disappearing, especially the villages. One of the traditional villages in George Town, Penang that is struggling and challenged against contested urban space is the Dodol Village (Kampong Dodol). This paper intends to address the declining identity of Kampong Dodol. While we must consider the need for spaces of development, an integrated approach towards sustainable urban development with a view on village heritage is crucial and valuable. The study focuses on people’s views on sense of place, its heritage value and sustainable livelihood, which influence their opinion on how the village should be preserved. Based on questionnaire survey and face-to-face interview, it discusses the importance of place identity in creating an affect on current experiences living in a village that is gradually deteriorating in favor of a bustling island city. The research summarizes an important contribution towards preservation of village identity in a city as a heritage value that can be sustained for the generations to come.

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1. Introduction

Globalization has caused the diminishing identity of village due to efforts in achieving urban development. The lives of communities in villages of urban settings are challenged and thrived in the midst of urbanization and intense globalization process. This research paper addresses the importance of place identity amongst villagers and their efforts to sustain village identity in the changing environment and landscape of Penang Island. While we must consider the need for spaces for development, an integrated approach towards sustainable urban development with a view on village heritage is crucial and valuable.

Kampung Dodol (Dodol Village) is amongst the traditional Malay village in the island city of George Town, thriving and challenged against Penang’s need for contested urban space. The value of the communities on past experiences and their aesthetical attainment will be analyzed to address the emotional bonding and love of place by the villagers. The emotional bonding and love of place is based on the concept of Topophilia, which was introduced by Tuan (1974). According to Tuan, Topophilia is the “human love of place”. Using Kampung Dodol as a case study, the study focuses on people’s views on sense of place, its heritage value and sustainable livelihoods that influence their opinion on how the kampung should be preserved.

Intense globalization and urbanization processes in the island city of George Town, Penang since the 1970s have given drastic changes to the physical as well as the socioeconomic and cultural environment of the city. The longstanding traditional villages have transformed when development agencies from the private and public sector as well as individuals take over the land to develop the urban areas, industries and housing. As a result, the villagers have to be relocated to new settlement area living in flats, apartments, cluster houses, terrace, and new villages or arranged villages (Ghazali, 2013). The changes to the environment and living place affect the sense of place and sense of belonging, thus the villagers felt they lost their identity. Without the sense of place, the village, which was loved before now, becomes a public place without meaning (Peet, 1998). The new environment is feared, felt very foreign, and confusing. The “fear of place” (Topophobia) reflects confusion and worries towards the place of living amongst the post-industrial communities who live in the urban environment (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974).

1.1. Sense of place

The research on place has long become a focus in various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, geography, ecology, psychology, culture and heritage. The sense of place can be simply defined as “the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals and groups associate with a particular locality” (Williams & Stewart, 1998). It is the importance of a place based on human experience, social relationships, emotions, and thoughts (Stedman, 2003; Tuan, 1977). However, the sense of place is very dynamic and quite contextual in nature. As Gieryn (2000) noted, “places are interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (Gieryn, 2000). In other words, sense of place reflects not only experiences with places but also the historical, cultural, religious, and personal meanings of places and the power and economic relationships that shape historical and current interactions with places. Together, these may build attachment to a place in ways that contribute to and are affected by a person’s or group’s identity and worldview (Fresque-Baxter & Armitage, 2012; Lewicka, 2011; Williams & Stewart, 1998). For example, families of farmers and fishermen who have lived in the same place for generations often feel strong attachment to their place.

Most scholars have written about sense of place from a psychological perspective and perceive it as a socially constructed process. Tuan (1977), for example, contributes to the foundational writing of sense of place by differentiating between “space”, which is the physical environment and “place”, which has experiential, narrated, and imagined meanings. Tuan (1971, 1977, 1979) and Relph (1976)
expressed the humanistic and phenomenological traditions within geography, stressing that places encompass the physical setting and human experience and interpretation. Thus, sense of place from a phenomenological approach is socially centered, focusing on human interpretations of the setting in particular, contexts and circumstances. Tuan (1974) also explained the concept of topophilia (love of place) which embedded the sense of belonging, place identity, place attachment, spirit of place and sense of community (see also Cresswell, 2009; Davis, Huang, & Liu, 2008; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Relph, 1976). These concepts reflect human elements in an individual, who wish to have a place that is pleasant, comfortable and safe to live in.

The love of place can be defined broadly to include all emotional relation between human with the place and his environment (Tuan, 1974). Topophilia is an important aspect behind the symbolic meanings given by human to a place. Live experiences, realization, and knowledge of an individual or group about a place leave emotional effect to that place. Love emotion to a place creates strong bonding between a man and his place. According to Tuan, human show bonding to the environment visually, esthetically, and physically. Appreciation to a place will sustain if an important incident happens to himself in that place; or if there is an aesthetical fulfillment, besides scientific realization of the advantages of that place (Holt-Jensen, 1999; Peet, 1998). Appreciation to past incidents led someone to love the place and create a sense of patriotism such as loving his village neighborhood and his country. Based on sense of place and place attachment, communities defend their beloved place in order to sustain place identity and heritage (Chapin & Knapp, 2015; Davis et al., 2008). The beloved place or landscape becomes regional image for those communities. Sometimes this image is promoted to become tourist destination (de Blij & Murphy, 2003; Driver, 1999). Nevertheless, in many cases where cities develop nearby traditional settlement, those traditional settlement often “invaded” (Abeyasekere, 1987; Kelly, 1998). In the case of Penang, the invasion occurs as urbanization and modernization processes diffuse through and gradually take over the traditional villages, thus forcing villagers to move out and find new place for settlement.

The love of place also involves biological component (Tuan, 1974). Place where one was brought up has background origin besides relational bonding with others in that place. Past memories of the house and environment where they live also reflect aesthetical elements and the bonding of people with their place of origin, thus reflecting their pride of their place (see also Pile, 2010; Zabielskis, 2002). This is because human live in one place that is very meaningful from the emotional attachment with that place. Urbanization and industrialization in the twentieth century and forth have given drastic changes to the environment. The new environment is dominated by concrete buildings, congested and saturated to diminish the sense of place and place identity. Finally, a “Place” is seen as a common place with no meanings, “flatscape”, or “placeless geography” (Relph, 1976, 1981, 1993; see also Seamon & Sowers, 2008). This creates the term topophobia, which brings the meaning sense of fear or hatred to the place and environment (Xing & Hogben, 2007). The home and place environment provokes sense of place of an individual to a place, from love to hatred and vice versa. A place that is disliked feels like a prison, a conflicting and manipulative space and a space that is unsafe (González, 2005). In the post-industrial era, urban environment is considered as “a concrete jungle that is confusing” (Peet, 1998; Tuan, 1974), not safe from various aspects, in example in terms of health and safety (Leach, 2007). In Xing and Hogben (2007) opinion, most of the urban cities in the twentieth century and beyond failed to provide a safe environment, where urbanites do not have sense of belonging to the place and there is no sense of place. Therefore, this research intends to explore the love aspect of the villagers in the city towards their living place.

With intense urbanization in Penang since 1970s till now, the urban environment is taking over the suburban environment be it in terms of physical, economy or social. Many traditional kampongs none exist, and for those still existing, they are “trapped” in between mega buildings, left as “deteriorating island in a city” (Brookfield, Hadi, & Mahmud, 1991). The esthetical elements in human–environment relationship, economic activities and social relations are also destroyed in the urbanization process.
1.2. Sustainable development in the global era and challenges to an Island city

In response to urban challenges, the concept of sustainable development has been stated since the UN Conference of 1972, 1992, and 1996. At the global level, the UNIHABITAT have launched various programs including The World Habitat Day 2011, promoting the agenda of sustainable development and the promotion of place culture. In this respect, culture should be considered in development agenda, where dimension of culture such as social capital, tradition, cultural symbol, sense of belonging and pride to a certain place is preserved to unite ethnic minorities, to preserve language, religion, and local values, resolve conflicts and preserve the heritage (UNHABITAT, 2010). Future cities should have these elements to protect cultural heritage and to increase modern creativity through various diversities that exist. Thus, it can create a city that is harmony and comfortable to live in. Old settlements in a city become cultural heritage to the city. It also has esthetical values for the old settlement communities (Lee, Conroy, & Levy, 2009). Besides being a resource, old settlement is an important asset to a community for now and future. Thus, old settlements have to be preserved and managed effectively.

Further on, the World Urban Campaign under the UNIHABITAT launched The City We Need in 2014, which is a collective undertaking to recognize local contexts, cultures, and customs. The City We Need principles for a new urban paradigm calls for the city that is socially inclusive, thus providing spaces for all segments and age groups of the population to partake in social and cultural expressions (www.mirror.unhabit.org). The focus is that it eliminates all physical and spatial forms of segregation and exclusion. Furthermore, The City We Need fosters the concept of singular identity and sense of place whereby it strengthens the bonds between city and its surrounding hinterland. Later in 2016, the New Urban Agenda was developed to include significant focus on equity in the face of globalization, as well as how to ensure the safety and security of everyone who lives in urban areas (www.habitat3.org). Amongst others, The New Urban Agenda strategy envisages cities and human settlements that are participatory, promote civic engagement, engender a sense of belonging and ownership amongst all their inhabitants. Of this, the item number 125 state that “We will engage indigenous peoples and local communities in the promotion and dissemination of knowledge of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and protection of traditional expressions and languages, including through the use of new technologies and techniques” (www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment).

The HABITAT Agenda’s influence has been wide-ranging over the past two decades and its main provisions worked their way into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 with a target of achieving “cities without slums”. Finally the follow-up development agenda to the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focused on urban through the Goal number 11—to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Cities nowadays faced challenges due to major trends such as globalization, decentralization, rapid population growth, problems such as social inequalities, slums, informal settlement, climate change all had the impact in economic, social and environmental condition (Rasoolimanesh, Badarulzaman, & Jaafar, 2012). In this case, the terms urban sustainability, and sustainable city apply to the suitable conditions such as the proper use of resources, protection of the natural environment, least possible use of non-renewable resources, economic growth and variety, community self-confidence, individual welfare, and satisfaction of basic human needs (Roy, 2009; Shen, Jorge Ochoa, Shah, & Zhang, 2011). Thus, for the context of urban sustainability there is a need to balance the economic, institutional, environmental, and social necessities. As Saha and Paterson’s (2008) defined, there are four aspects of sustainable urbanization: (1) Environmental Protection, (2) Economic Development, (3) Social Justice and Equity, and (4) Administration and Governance. In particular to safeguarding villages in urban settings, it would be the third aspect, which is social justice and equity, focusing on a holistic approach in terms of equal opportunities for all.

However, it must be noted that urban communities have no clear boundary because they have diverse origin, language, religion, and other aspects, which can form different identities. Communities that live in urban locations that are used to be village some time before carry a unique place identity within a village environment, which has been long built. Housing reflects a cultural product of a
community such as a traditional Malay kampong, which has unique characteristics of traditional Malay architecture, for instance, the roof, balcony, arches, window, and external staircase. Therefore, the developers have to understand the kampong environment and its sense of place when trying to alter the villages in urban location. Any development in the area has to consider social and physical changes to the kampong in order to avoid conflict in local communities.

Meanwhile, Beatley (2005) clarified the importance of creating a place that will make communities' development sustainable and thus, creating interconnections. Beatley also discussed that the strength of a place can be strengthened with the understanding and history of the past such as festivals and social institutions that have been formed. Sustainable development also can be achieved through a system that can maintain the strength of a place and which requires a different approach. In places like China for instance, village transformation has been prevalent, whereby several municipalities have sought to regulate village development and planning (see Smith, 2014). Therefore, the local spirit and sense of place is essential to decision-makers in the urban population in order to make a pleasant stay there. How we shape and develop the city should be in line with the conditions in that environment.

2. Methodology

The Dodol village is located in George Town, Penang island through Jalan Perak stretching towards south of Jelutong (see Figure 1). This village and others in the surrounding area are trapped between flat buildings, apartments, offices, and shops. Few villages remain as a name only, whereby the land has been built with flat buildings to resettle the villages and those from outside that village who bought the flat units. In this research, about 60 respondents were surveyed using questionnaire in 2016. Likert scale were used to compare and contrast to what extend the respondents agree with the statement given. This was followed-up with in-depth interviews targeted on 10 villagers in order to understand their emotional bonding to the village and their efforts to sustain the Malay kampong identity. Information from questionnaire surveys were processed using Statistical Packages for Social Scientist (SPSS), whereas information from in-depth interviews were noted in a form of field notes, analyzed qualitatively using interpretation and reflection technique as well as content analysis. In the discussion of research findings, some data were presented in a form of tables whereas information from the interviewees was written in textual form to allow individuals to speak for themselves (Robinson, 1998).

3. Findings

The questionnaire surveys were intended to explore the issues on sense of place amongst the village communities, especially their values and appreciation towards place identity (the place that they live), place attachment (since they have been living there for generations), emotional bonding (particularly their interaction within the social network), sense of community (activities done collectively), place dependence (quality of activity done in the neighborhood), and place dependence (quality of community).

Table 1 shows the perception of the respondents to the place they live (Dodol village). As shown in Table 1, it was found that 98.3% of the respondents (from the total of 60 respondents) do not agree with the suggestion that they prefer to live in other place as compared to Dodol village because it is not suitable for them, thus showing high incidence of bonding and strong identity to the place. Place identity is a strong structure for forming social identity process. In terms of place attachment, 91.7% of the respondents agree that they are comfortable and like to be in the present neighborhood (Dodol Village). This shows the high bonding between place attachment and emotional attachment to the place. This is build based on communities live and activities done amongst neighbors, support system amongst them and safety factor when they are in the kampong.
In terms of emotional bonding, respondents were asked to give answers based on perception towards three aspects—sense of community, attachment amongst villagers and closeness to neighbors, 86.7% of them agree that their village provide the three aspects. Furthermore, the element relating to sense of community shows that 95.0% of respondents agree that “if the villager in the neighborhood plans an activity, I will participate to make it a success”, which shows that there is a strong sense of community. This high percentage shows that the study area is active with various programs for the community. As noted by informant A (Mole, age 65) from Dodol village,

When the neighborhood plans an activity, I will participate”, showing that there is a strong sense of community.
Table 1. Respondent perception towards Dodol Village (study area)

| Element                                                                 | Total Frequency analysis | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|------------------|
| 1. Prefer to live in other places as compared to the present location. This location is not suitable for me (Place identity) | 60                       | 0              | 0     | 1       | 59       | 0                |
| 2. I feel comfortable and like to be in my present neighborhood area (Place attachment) | 60                       | 3              | 55    | 2       | 0        | 0                |
| 3. If I needed help/advice/friend to talk to, I will find someone in my neighborhood (Community attachment, a good and unique relationship with neighbors and closeness to neighbors) (Emotional bonding) | 60                       | 1              | 52    | 5       | 2        | 0                |
| 4. If a neighborhood member plan an activity, I will participate to make it a success event (Sense of community) | 60                       | 0              | 57    | 3       | 0        | 0                |
| 5. The quality of communities life here is boring (Place dependence—quality of activity) | 60                       | 0              | 0     | 0       | 59       | 1                |
| 6. The life of the communities here will constantly change to a better life as compared to communities in other area (Place dependence—quality of community) | 60                       | 1              | 55    | 4       | 0        | 0                |

NOTE: The bold values indicates the highest scoring for each element.

Source: Questionnaire Survey, Field Work, October 2016.

*Element section is adapted from Proshanyak, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983), Sabine (1983), Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) and Gustafson (2001).
The measurement of place dependence is a measurement of perception towards the quality of activities and the quality of communities in the study area. The fifth criteria of the table suggest that the life of the communities here are quite boring and not a quality one, based on perception of the respondent. The findings show that majority of respondents (98.3%) do not agree with this statement. This shows that majority of respondents agree that quality of life for communities are good. This is because there are various cultural activities favored by the villagers and practiced here like working together i.e. to clean up the surrounding living area (they call this gotong royong or communal work) and participating in social gatherings (kenduri).

The study area is active with various programs for the community held by the villager’s society group. As noted by key informant B (Head of the Village, Male, age 72):

We often have gatherings like kenduri where we have the opportunity to organize community programs like Dodol making (a Malay sweet delicacy made from glutinous rice flour, caramelized brown sugar and coconut milk-served during festive season), the festival of Asyura (dessert made from rice flour, lentils, coconut milk and palm sugar) and also religious choir (Nasyid). From time to time we also have gotong-royong to clean up the kampong such as the Anti-ADEDES campaign (to fight dengue mosquitoes) and flood mitigation project.

Figure 2 shows the making of Dodol by the villagers. The quality of community interacts with the quality of activity. It is suggested that quality of community is a community that is active with various activities, which resemble a community that is healthy and not passive. In this respect, 91.7% of the respondents agree that the Dodol village community and the surrounding have more quality than other places because they have advantages, i.e. locational factor in the city that caused the village to have advantages to access city facilities—thus they are able to involve in various village activities.

In-depth interview with the villagers that live there for more than 20 years revealed that most of them prefer the Dodol Village to be historical site full of cultural and societal value. Their perception is that this aspect is important so that the heritage is preserved for the future generation. Information from in-depth interview also revealed support to the findings from Table 1. Most informants are so attached to the place and love their village, reflecting their high sense of belonging to the village. Most informants also appreciated past experiences when the village was in its traditional form. The changes and development are accepted with fear and worry that they might lose the village physical form and have to be live in apartments as how it is experienced in other places.

One informant (Informant C, Male, age 65) mentioned that he had to move to an apartment when the apartment developer took his land. He flashed back his memories:

“It was nice to stay in kampong. We know each other and our neighbors. If fasting month, we exchange food and this is favored by the religion. When we live in flat, we are not able to do this”. The community element such as neighborhood and gotong-royong is important element to bond the people and the place, thus bringing sense of place.

As noted by Informant D (Male, Age 62):

Last time when we have wedding ceremony, all relatives gather and cook together, wash the dishes. Those days when any feast like this is on(called kenduri), it will last whole day and sometimes even for few days. During the daytime the men will meet and eat, at nighttime the ladies will meet and eat. But now the feast is different. It’s more like a buffet and they order food from catering services. Relatives only come for a little while for eating then they will leave.

The explanation by an Informant D about gotong royong shows how much the value has deteriorated in the flat settlement. He says:
I have been a leader of the block for two years. I have to invite people for gotong royong when necessary, and need to go when there is a funeral, illness etc. at that time I felt how little the relationship and bonding amongst the flat communities compared to villagers. Some do not even know their own neighbors.

Comfort issue, safety, and sense of attachment to place are reflected from informant’s explanation. Appreciation to past incidents and esthetical satisfaction are explored to see the emotional bonding and human love to place. As stated by Informant E (Female, Age 60):

When I miss my village, I will roam around the Makam village, Dodol village, and Kebun Lama Village where I can meet my friends, and the old neighbors

Another informant (Informant F, Male, Age 78) expressed his nostalgic memories and flashed back on how their land was taken and houses were demolished:

I live here for a long time, in my mom’s house. But 10 years ago the developers took over the land and demolished my home and other villagers. They promised to relocate us in the flat homes but there are still few who haven’t got any home yet. So we have to stay in our friend’s home and this is very troublesome. (interviewed May 2016)

Although there is no guarantee that the village homes will be sustained in the future, most informants stated their high sense of place and attachment to the village, as mentioned by Informant G, Age 66:

Now the village has shrunk, there are not many houses left like it used to be before. But I still love my village, we already lived here for a long time, we are so attached into the way of life and the people that we know amongst our neighbors who are also our relatives and friends that we know for a long time, it’s not easy to find a place like this elsewhere.

Nevertheless, with rapid urbanization and infrastructure development that is continuing at the expense of traditional and heritage villages, these communities are stuck in between, as they have to
let go their village and witness the village diminishing physically. New development of apartments and flats as well as road/highway construction is gradually taking over the place (village).

In another instance, Informant H, Female, Age 42 also stated:

I love my home, this house is left by my late father and we were born and grew up here ... there are lots of memories

The nostalgic element of their past have important impact on the communities and present the feel of love to the place and sense of attachment that is strong to form an identity to the villagers.

Although urbanization impact has significantly affected the urban villages and there is a fear amongst villagers of their loss of culture and identity, there are still some elements that sustain their natural culture. Still some of them continue with heritage economic activities i.e. selling rice, Malay cakes and sweets and sharing homegrown vegetables and fruits. The Dodol village is a potential area to be promoted as a cultural heritage site since it has all the elements of the traditional Malay culture and lifestyle.

Besides, the love of place amongst kampong community in George Town is high, it has potential to be seen as a heritage location, to show identity of the Malay communities and represent a lifestyle that is culturally unique. The love of place amongst villages in the city has historical heritage on its own and must be understood so that future development takes consideration of the village and their communities. This study suggests that the Malay village in the island city of Penang is categorized to become traditional kampong zone to sustain them in the future. The original communities and their sociocultural values should not be forgotten in the development process so that the identity and uniqueness are conserved (Figures 3–5).
4. Conclusion
This study has revealed the Dodol villagers’ views on sense of place, its heritage value and sustainable livelihood which influence their opinion on how the village should be preserved and sustained for the benefit of the future. Village is seen as a place where one is born and brought up, and thus need to be nurtured and sustained for the generations to come. Village is considered as the homeland and thus must be defended. Infrastructure development and urbanization cannot continue in the present manner at the expense of traditional and heritage villages. The kampong is not only a tangible place, it is also intangible space — it is a spiritual and a moral dimension. The kampung has a collective memory, and the loss of the kampong spells the loss of the narrative, history and the
past. All kampons, including in Penang and elsewhere needs to be reconstituted and reconstructed. Village also gave birth to their identity, which translates in their everyday life as a Muslim Malay population and the freedom of religion and culture in their villages. In the case of Kampong Dodol of George Town, Penang, the future of the village could be secured through promoting its heritage and attracting visitors to experience the customs, food, and way of life. In addition, neighborhood and community elements are maintained in preserving their identity and the identity of the Malay village in a city that is changing drastically due to globalization. People’s love of place especially for the case of urban village such as Dodol Village has a heritage value for generations, and this has to be understood so that development efforts takes consideration of the interests of the village and its residents. Village life has always shaped a Malay community here, and it is conducive to Malay rites of passage—weddings, births, and deaths which are still community-managed and not farmed out to caterers in rented premises in George Town. This study suggests that the village sites in cities throughout the country to be declared as a village zone under the National Heritage Act to ensure the traditional villages would not be out of the picture. Appropriate planning and implementation should be taken into consideration for sustainable development agenda in which any forms of development are to be enjoyed by residents now and in the future. This should be in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda. In particular the indigenous groups and their sociocultural elements should not be overlooked in development planning because of their unique identity and establishment of a place. Maintenance of the urban village (physically and culturally) will not only keep the place loved by the people, but also reflect the intrinsic image of the city and not just focusing on physical aspects and modernization of the city alone.

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