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Women's Agency and Power in Sendang Biru, East Java

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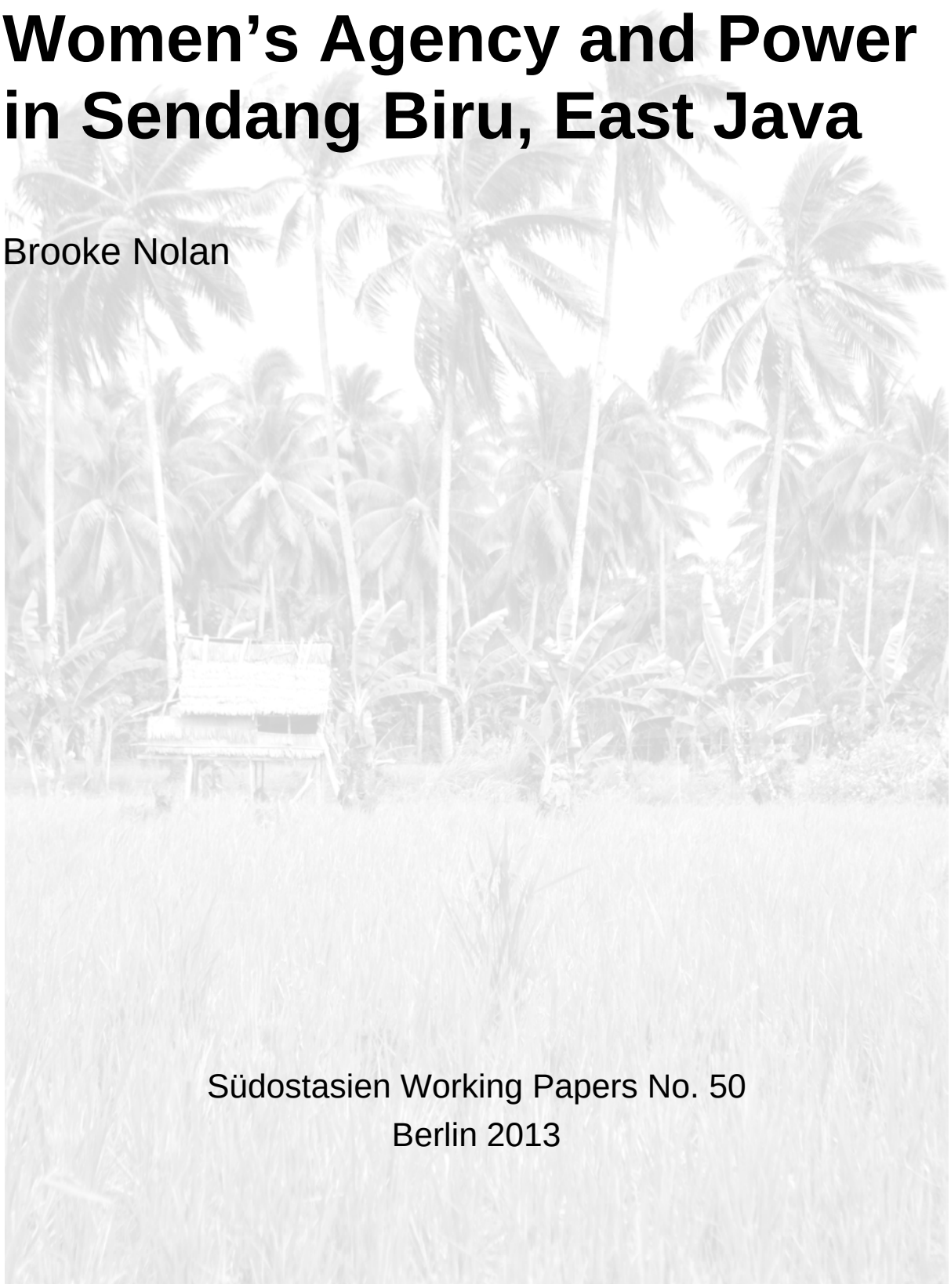

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on local understandings of how women exercise agency and power in Sendang Biru, a fishing village on the south coast of East Java. The development of the fishing industry in Sendang Biru has brought about improved standards of living for many women, both locals and migrants. These changes have meant a corresponding shift in how agency is enacted in women's everyday lives. This paper examines how the exercising of power and agency are related to changes in the surrounding socioeconomic environment. Another component of this paper is the linkages between agency, power and status. This work is based on several months of fieldwork carried out in Sendang Biru in 2010.

Keywords: Agency, East Java, power, class, status, women, fishing villages.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how the trajectories of rural women's lives in Sendang Biru, a fishing town on the south coast of East Java, have been shaped by power, class and status. In this paper, agency is viewed as a 'powerful tool' through which to '[f]ocus on the everyday lives and experience of women' in Indonesia (Parker, 2005, p. 218). Such a focus must include an investigation of 'gender roles' and 'gender relations' (Chant, 1996, p. 317). Over the past 30 years in Sendang Biru, numerous changes in these areas have occurred. The workplace has been the site of many of these developments. In this paper, I argue that the agency displayed by women employed in the Sendang Biru fishing industry is best defined as a relational form of empowerment. In the workplace, women's agency has played a significant part in creating 'a world structured by multiple forms of gender interdependence' (Volkman, 1994, p. 568).

STRUCTURE

Women's agency is examined in this paper in terms of its relationship to power, class and status. Following a discussion of the methodology used in the fieldwork process, I present the ethnographic setting of my fieldwork before explaining some socioeconomic developments in Sendang Biru over the last 30 years. The rest of the paper focuses on how Sendang Biru women's enactment of agency within systems of power, class and status over the last 30 years has engendered their empowerment.

The socioeconomic changes which have occurred in Sendang Biru over the past 30 years have occurred simultaneously with a shift in how agency is enacted in women's everyday lives. Therefore, it is important to understand agency as a contextually-defined 'form of social action' (Ahearn 2001, p. 110). This means that there is not one 'correct' definition of agency, but rather, agency takes its meaning and its definition from its social, cultural and historical context. Context here refers not only to the social and cultural environment, but also to temporality. As a quality of individuals and groups, agency becomes most interesting not merely in how it is enacted but in the multiple meanings given to these enactments. These meanings are contextually, culturally and historically specific. A critical factor in these dynamics is gender.

In seeking to expand understandings of agency beyond simple binary structures in which individual intention, motivation and action oppose structure, stability and maintenance (Hay, 2009, p. 4; Hay, 2005, p. 37), I take Ortner's framework to be a useful analytical guide. Ortner advocates defining agency in a given context according to three criteria:

> The issues involved in defining agency are perhaps best approached by sorting out a series of components: 1) the question of whether or not agency inherently involves "intentions"; 2) the simultaneous universality and cultural constructedness of agency; and 3) the relationship between agency and "power". (Ortner, 2006, p. 134)

This paper aims to broaden understandings of agency in Java by examining how agency works in terms of its contribution to both social cohesion and social mobility. In Sendang Biru, the agency of women is not necessarily opposed to, or in conflict or competition with, that of men. Women's opportunities in the workplace, for example, have been greatly expanded, a development which has been embraced by many women without causing any decline in the availability or efficacy of men's work. However, women's agency is not simply about action: it is ultimately about women's decisions.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Sendang Biru in 2010. Sendang Biru is a town with a population in 2010 of approximately 3500, located approximately three hours south of Malang, East Java. During the research process, group interviews were conducted with women who worked in the Sendang Biru fish market selling fish and other marine products directly or exporting fish to buyers in cities such as Surabaya and Malang, boat owners, fishermen, men responsible for preparing boats for fishing trips and unloading the catch when they return and employees of the village cooperative (*KUD, Koperasi Unit Desa*). Individual interviews were conducted with Bugis, Madurese and Javanese fishermen and their wives and boat owners, both men and women, in their homes. Much of this research used participant observation methods and Indonesian was the language used in all the interviews.

In addition, I lived with one of the most prominent fishing families in Sendang Biru during the research period. The family with which I lived had been in Sendang Biru since 1983. They had come to Sendang Biru from Pasuruan, on the north coast of East Java, where Bu Tri was born. Haji Umar, Bu Tri's husband, was a Bugis man from South Sulawesi. They had three daughters, one son and five grandchildren. All their daughters were married and lived in Sendang Biru. The youngest daughter lived with her Madurese husband, who was a fisherman, and their young son, at Haji Umar and Bu Tri's house. Muhammad, Haji Umar and Bu Tri's son, was studying at university in Malang and came back to Sendang Biru only during holidays. Haji Umar sold boat equipment to other boat owners and also owned 20 boats himself. These boats were seen as the property of the family and run as a family business. Haji Umar's daughters oversaw the running of the business, working at the port most days, keeping track of which boats were out at sea, which needed repairing and which were being prepared for future fishing trips. Along with Bu Tri, they also took care of financial matters. Haji Umar, who had worked on boats at sea for over 50 years, was now 70 years old and, apart from making occasional trips to Malang to pick up fishing supplies, arranged business with men who would come to his house.

SENDANG BIRU

It was a typical morning at the Sendang Biru port. Groups of women sat talking, looking out at the Indian Ocean. Two Bugis boats were approaching. As they docked, the women stood up and men ran down two rickety planks to the boats. One woman, wearing a lot of gold jewellery, strode past the weighing station towards her boats which were coming in after a two week fishing voyage. She greeted the women as she went, and shouted to the men behind the scales where the fish were weighed.

As the boats docked, men began heaving baskets of fish onto bamboo poles and carrying them on their shoulders up to the weighing station. Women stood near the scales, overseeing the weighing. The baskets of fish weighed about 100kg each. A man employed by the *KUD* then auctioned off the fish, using a loudspeaker. Women crowded around inspecting the baskets of fish and bidding. Dewi, a 22 year old woman from Palembang, in Sumatra, who owned a stall in the Sendang Biru fish market, stood beside me. Dewi had been a domestic worker in Singapore for four years before coming to Sendang Biru in 2010. She pointed to the woman beside us, saying, 'This woman very rich one, got a lot of boat.' The woman Dewi referred to, who was from Jember, East Java, said she owned six boats. Another woman beside her was from Madura and bought fish from the Jember woman's boats. The Madurese woman, who had a stall in the fish market, had been in Sendang Biru less than a year while the woman from Jember had come to Sendang Biru in 1989. Her husband worked offloading fish from the boats and re-loading them with ice in preparation for fishing trips.

As women bid for the baskets of fish, the line of men waiting with fish to be weighed got longer. Most baskets were auctioned off and receipts were handed out to buyers. The bidding prices for some baskets of fish were considered by the women to be too high and they began walking away. Once women had bought baskets of fish, nearby men were told to carry the baskets to the fish market to be sold, or they were packed into ice boxes and hauled onto the back of trucks. In 15 minutes, approximately 30

baskets of fish were weighed, sold and taken to the Sendang Biru fish market or put on trucks. Officials from the Department of Fisheries and a few policemen were present.

All the fish had been taken off the Bugis boats and now the fishermen were cleaning and re-filling boxes with ice in preparation for their next trip. These men had been at sea fishing for about two weeks. Some were Bugis, others were Madurese or Javanese. Soon a large, colourful Madurese boat carrying about 20 fishermen and less fish than the Bugis boats, began to dock. The men ran down the plank with bamboo poles as they had done 15 minutes ago, and the process started again.

Dewi and I walked across to her stall. She took out an expensive phone, showing me a picture of her seven-year-old daughter who lived in Palembang with relatives. The young girl and her grandmother had visited Dewi once in Sendang Biru. In my conversations with her, Dewi repeatedly emphasised the importance of her daughter attaining a higher education than she herself had. In fact, Dewi hoped to send her daughter to university abroad one day, possibly in Malaysia. Dewi's own parents had taken her out of school when she had become pregnant at 15 years of age. Two years after giving birth, she had gone to Singapore to work as a domestic helper while her parents looked after her daughter. After nearly four years of working in Singapore, she had returned to Indonesia to marry her fiancé, who was from Surabaya. Since he could not find work in Surabaya, the couple moved to Sendang Biru to work in the fish market. With her savings from working in Singapore, Dewi bought a stall in the market and a small, wooden house in Sendang Biru. Her husband worked with her every day, selling fish in the market.

BACKGROUND

Situated on the south coast of East Java province, Sendang Biru was established by the New Order as a fishing area in the early 1980s. Prior to the 1980s, the Sendang Biru area, like much of the southern part of East Java, was inhabited primarily by rice farmers and their families. In the 1980s, however, the New Order sought to incorporate these parts of Java, which were less crowded, less industrialised and less developed, into the national development project. Not only were fishing areas such as Muncar, Probolinggo and Pasuruan becoming overcrowded, but fish stocks in the Java Sea were rapidly diminishing. The government recognised that there were numerous advantages in developing a fishing industry in Sendang Biru. Firstly, the relocation of people would ease pressure on more densely populated fishing areas in Java. Secondly, the Indian Ocean represented a vast resource to be exploited. Thirdly, the government hoped a prosperous fishing industry would transform the south east coast of Java from an impoverished, subsistence rice-farming area into an economically profitable national development project, a political success story. Finally, the south eastern part of Java, an area where much of Sukarno's support had been based, had a history of rebellion against the New Order. By establishing military and police stations, a small, government-run tourism office, a co-operative under the authority of the Ministry of Fisheries and other government agencies in Sendang Biru, state control would be enhanced.

Small plots of land in Sendang Biru were offered in the early 1980s as an incentive to attract people from outside the area with knowledge of fishing practices to come and teach local Javanese farmers how to fish. In encouraging migration to Sendang Biru, the New Order displayed its intention to establish a fishing industry. This was a pattern repeated throughout East Java, where migration became 'a dynamic response to the unevenness of economic growth and specialization' (Dick, 1993, p. 15). Dick's observation that migration patterns in East Java during this period were 'more complex than simply rural-urban migration' accords with the movements of people coming to Sendang Biru (Dick, 1993, p. 15). Many Bugis and Madurese, who were concentrated in crowded cities like Makassar and towns along the north and east coasts of Java, went to Sendang Biru to '*cari rejeki*'. Some of these men brought their families with them, but many younger men came alone. Javanese farmers in Sendang Biru were taught by these newcomers how to fish. Increased prosperity in Sendang Biru mirrored development trends across East Java during this time. As Howard Dick points out, across the province from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s, 'development has translated into a dramatic reduction in numbers in absolute poverty' (Dick, 1993, p. 1). Today, although farming remains, fishing and associated work forms the basis of the Sendang Biru economy.

The New Order government did not, however, intend to open up development in a socially equitable manner. Berman, for example, shows that according to the class and gender ideologies of the New Order, '[p]oor women are "not yet ready" for development' (Berman, 1998, p. 33). Nevertheless, with the rapid development of the Sendang Biru fishing industry in the 1990s, came the arrival of female fish sellers from Muncar, Probolinggo, Banyuwangi and other highly competitive fishing areas. Some of these women came alone, others brought their families. Today, many of the women who arrived in Sendang Biru in the 1980s and early 1990s no longer sell fish in the market because they own boats and have trading networks with restaurants, shops and exporters in Surabaya, Bali and other places. The women selling fish in the Sendang Biru fish market today are recent arrivals or local women. These women have come primarily from Madura, Sumatra and other parts of Java.

The type of work performed by Sendang Biru women bears resemblances to the activities of women in some other small to medium sised Indonesian fishing towns. Volkman (1994), for example, has documented the work of Mandar women in South Sulawesi fishing towns. As in Sendang Biru, Mandar women not only sell fish in local markets but also own boats and are active in the inter-regional fish trade (Volkman, 1994).

Although not the only source of agency, status and power, owning boats in Sendang Biru makes the enactment of agency certainly more efficacious in economic and sociopolitical terms. It is clear that agency is influenced by political economy and enacted within specific social and cultural contexts (Carter, 1995, p. 83; Parker, 2005, p. 228). In this paper, rather than analyzing agency as 'resistance', or 'oppositional agency', (Scott, 1985; Parker, 2005; Ahearn, 2001, p. 114) it is 'the social nature of agency and the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions' (Ahearn, 2001, p. 114) which will be examined.

The nuances of both 'cultural concepts' and 'political economy' (Greenhalgh, 1995, p. 19) are important in understanding the sorts of agency enacted by women in Sendang Biru. A full analysis of all forms of women's agency in Sendang Biru is beyond the scope of this paper and for this reason I will limit my discussion to the workings of women's agency in Sendang Biru as they relate concepts of power, class and status. This paper does not claim to represent the agency of Indonesian women as a whole. Nor does it seek to exemplify the functions and meanings of agency throughout Java. Understandings of the sociopolitical and cultural dynamics of widely divergent parts of Java are hindered by essentialising tendencies towards 'the Javanese'. For these reasons, I aim to avoid the sort of absolute statements on 'Javanese culture' made by Adamson (2007, p. 9).

This paper seeks to illustrate that there is considerably more variation in terms of the influence of hierarchy on gender in Java than conventional claims such as, 'gendered moral hierarchies keep "men" and "women" in their place' (Adamson, 2007, p. 10) would suggest. Adamson goes on to state that these 'gendered moral hierarchies' are necessary to

> provide a sense of control and continuity over conditions of social change that ordinary citizens may otherwise feel disempowered to manage (2007, p. 10).

What I found in Sendang Biru was quite different. Despite the high degree of 'social change' which has occurred in Sendang Biru in the last 30 years, there was little evidence of women (or men) being 'disempowered to manage'. On the contrary, instead of women being kept 'in their place' in order to 'provide a sense of control and continuity' women were active agents in bringing about this 'social change'. It is important to recognize that rather than remaining static, as Adamson's statement implies, the role of women in the workplace and the enactment of their agency and their empowerment developed along with the socioeconomic advancement of Sendang Biru.

The enactment of women's agency as a group is closely linked with certain forms of social change. Particular socioeconomic developments, such as the desire to transform Sendang Biru from a rice farming community into another one of East Java's fishing villages, have been instigated from above, by the political elite. The New Order government put special incentives in place in the early 1980s specifically to attract new people to come and establish a fishing industry out of what had been a rice-farming community. For example, small plots of land were offered to newcomers. However, top-down

change has its limits. This paper will demonstrate how, in Sendang Biru, the changes which have occurred in women's agency, gender roles, and empowerment were enabled by top-down support from the government but produced by women themselves and their families.

WOMEN'S WORK

In both urban and rural parts of Indonesia, women have a history of high levels of employment (Branson and Miller, 1988, p. 5; Chant and Brydon, 1989, p. 43). This is true more broadly throughout Southeast Asia. Blackburn (1997, p. 11) describes how,

> in Indonesian society, even more than in Dutch society, the vast majority of women worked for a living, joining the men in agriculture and dominating petty trade.

In Sendang Biru, changes in the work undertaken by women since the early 1980s have transformed understandings of 'gender roles' and 'gender relations' (Chant, 1996, p. 317). These women have become empowered in the workplace by using their social capital in adept ways to increase their material wealth. Social capital is defined here as 'the resources that inhere in social relationships and are drawn upon in human action' (Bebbington, Dharmawan, Fahmi and Guggenheim, 2006, p. 1959). Today, women sell fish from small stalls in the local fish market, trade as middle-women, own boats themselves or with their husbands, work in the local fishing co-operative, dry and smoke fish to be exported, oversee the finances of boats belonging to their families, sell fish products to restaurants and other businesses in Malang, Surabaya and other cities and work in the local weighing and auctioning station. Some of these forms of work indicate transformations in the roles that are seen as proper for women; others are a continuation of forms of work Indonesian women have always done. All of these activities have a bearing on the status and the empowerment of women.

In examining women's agency in Sendang Biru, a distinction needs to be made between 'gender roles' and 'gender relations' (Chant, 1996, p. 317). Over the past 30 years in Sendang Biru certain gender roles have undergone transformations as women have taken up forms of work which were once the domain of men, for example, by becoming owners of boats. Other gender roles have remained much the same as they were 30 years ago. Most women, for example, are responsible for childcare, cooking and cleaning duties. The roles women take on (or refuse to take on) affect the relations they have with their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers. It follows, therefore, that as women's roles change, their relations with men also change. However, this does not mean that displays of agency in new workplace roles necessarily correlate with increased agency in women's overall relations with men.

Stivens (1994) and Wolf (1988, p. 88) argue that although 'large-scale industrialization in Java draws heavily upon female labor', scholars of Indonesia have largely neglected the role of rural women in land ownership and industrialization. Similarly, in studies of rural Indonesia, women who own boats and other assets, manage cooperatives and perform other less traditional forms of work have often been overlooked (Dawson, 1994, p. 74). An exception is Volkman (1994), whose work examines the multiple forms of employment taken on by women in Mandar fishing communities. Throughout Indonesia, women have long been active in fishing communities.

AGENCY

Before commencing an analysis of agency in the lives of Sendang Biru women, it is important to note that 'active and passive modes of behavior bear a different significance in Javanese culture compared to Western thinking' (O'Shaughnessy, 2009, p. 130). As Ortner (2006, p. 137) and Mahmood (2001, p. 217) have shown, agency in diverse cultural settings is not always associated with 'the transformative capacity of agents' or 'the capacity for progressive change'. However, since the ability of women in Sendang Biru to affect change in their own lives and the lives of their families over the past 30 years has been so significant, it is these rather than the conservative aspects of agency and power

which will be examined in this paper. In this, my approach resembles that of Hay (2005, p. 37) in her study of rural Sasak women.

Although in certain circumstances, agency is a form of action, as Parker (2005a, p. 8) argues, it is never 'independently conceived aims, individual motivation, independent action and imperviousness to possible effects'. Instead, it is through the 'capacity' of an agent or a group of agents and the 'effects' of interactions between agents and their environment that agency is realised (Bebbington, Dharmawan, Fahmi and Guggenheim, 2006, p. 1962). As a relational quality, the 'capacity' of a person to exercise agency is always affected by their social capital. Both women and men in Sendang Biru have well-developed networks of social capital which often extend to cities in East Java such as Malang, Surabaya and Banyuwangi and beyond. Therefore, I suggest that in Sendang Biru, agency among women in the workplace is fundamentally a relational form of empowerment.

In an effort to combat poverty, Sendang Biru women have been engaged in 'projects' of socioeconomic advancement (Ortner, 2001, p. 78). These 'projects' have generally developed along the following trajectory. Firstly, the arrival in Sendang Biru in the pursuit of employment to escape debts, support children and build a better life; secondly, selling fish in the Sendang Biru fish market during the nascent stages of its development; finally, the 'project' of buying boats, either individually or with husbands and developing trade links beyond Sendang Biru. One woman who personifies these movements is Bu Agus.

Bu Agus had come to Sendang Biru alone from Banyuwangi, far East Java, in 2006. Most days, she sold fish from the small stall she owned in the fish market. Bu Agus was divorced. She had come to Sendang Biru to escape the debts she owed to people in the fish trade in Muncar, leaving her three children with her mother in Banyuwangi. In Sendang Biru, Bu Agus said, not only did she earn more income selling fish than in Muncar, but she was not in debt to anyone and rent and other living costs were lower, leaving her more money to send to her children in Banyuwangi. Working in the Sendang Biru fish market enabled Bu Agus to improve her own and her children's circumstances, thereby empowering her. I asked Bu Agus about the role of the *KUD* in Sendang Biru. Whereas other studies (Dawson, 1994, p. 72) on Java have found that rural women wishing to apply for credit must do so through their husbands, Bu Agus explained that the Sendang Biru cooperative lent money to both men and women to build houses or invest in businesses. This could perhaps be attributed to the high prevalence of women migrants who have come to Sendang Biru alone seeking work. Many of these women are divorcés or widows or have run away from neglectful or unemployed husbands. Although the co-operative lends money to women, Bu Agus said she was not prepared to borrow any money from the cooperative because she would have had to use her stand in the fish market as collateral and if the price of fish dropped, she stood to lose her means of making a living. In refusing these loans, Bu Agus was quite literally 'protecting' her 'project' by enacting an 'agency of intentions' (Ortner, 2001, p. 80). However, other women I spoke to in Sendang Biru had used the lending services on offer to buy boats. Bu Agus explained that she hoped to save enough money in the next few years to buy a boat. Eventually she wants to build a house in Banyuwangi for her children and parents with the money she has earned by working in the Sendang Biru fish trade.

In seeking to take a measured view of agency, however, it is important to remember that 'agency is mitigated and complicated by those larger conditions that subjects do not control' (Grosz, 2005, p. 5). In Sendang Biru, these 'larger conditions', or socioeconomic and political structures, have been underpinned by government investment over the last 30 years. This investment in the development of the fishing industry, while not solely responsible for the socioeconomic advancement of Sendang Biru women, has supported the work women have taken up. In 1987, the government built the weighing and auctioning station, extended the port and cleared an area for the fish market. Furthermore, at this time the fishing co-operative was set up. This co-operative supports the development of the Sendang Biru fishing industry by providing loans to people who often cannot access these services from banks and ensuring that work regulations are adhered to – fishermen are paid correctly, exported fish is taxed, and so on. In the post-New Order era, structural investment has continued. In 2010, a larger weighing and auctioning station was in the process of being built.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in Java, the social context and the role of reciprocal acts of agency in building harmony and broadening social networks has been emphasised. Retsikas (2010) points out the importance of agency in the attainment of social harmony (*rukun*). Clearly, agency is by definition a 'social act', made possible within a cultural context (Berman, 1998, p. 52; Parker, 2005b, p. 228). In Java, values such as *rukun* are instrumental in maintaining social stability as people from diverse backgrounds compete for resources in the drive towards socioeconomic advancement. Despite conflicts between locals and newcomers in the 1980s, in Sendang Biru, as in most of Java, *rukun* is an undeniably important social value. Participating in systems of formal and social reciprocity is a daily part of life. The social aspect of agency is emphasised in Berman's definition of 'agency in Java' which she claims is 'a social act of responsibility to one's community of others, not necessarily to oneself' (1998, p. 52).

Following Sullivan's identification of voluntary labour ('*rewang* labour') as a specifically female aspect of the Javanese communal meal (*slametan*) (1987, p. 265-266; 1994, p. 154-172), Retsikas locates the enactment of agency in East Java within '*rewang* networks' (Retsikas, 2010, p. 484). Anthropological literature on understandings of agency in Java seldom identifies agency purely as a form of individual action. Instead, the important Javanese value of *rukun* is invoked in understandings of agency. To some observers, *rukun* may suggest the dismantling of personal agency in favour of consensus. However, Retsikas argues that:

> *Rukun* is established and maintained through participation in the networks of reciprocity and exchange, both ritually marked and informal, that bring forth the neighbourhood (*kampung*) as an important category of thought and action. The agency involved in these exchanges rests with both parties; the incomer's willingness to settle, commitment to marry locally, and striving for the realization of that particular state of affairs encapsulated in the term *rukun* (Retsikas, 2008, p. 118).

I suggest that agency in Java, not only in its relationship to *rukun*, but as a broader social concept, is best regarded as a set of practical skills and abilities which are useful in a particular social, cultural and historical context, rather than as an ideological category (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210). Women's agency is thus realised as a set of methods for living in a certain way rather than as a political position.

POWER

Power in Indonesia has been closely aligned with 'refinement' 'sociability', 'desirability', '*halus*-ness' and 'fertility, prosperity, stability, and glory' (Sullivan, 1994, p. 142; Kang, 2003, p.165; Anderson, 1972, p. 18). Drawing on Benedict Anderson's seminal work, 'The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture', Parker (2005, p. 12) explains that in Indonesia, '[t]he truly powerful are agentic in their passivity'. Considering the heterogeneous settings in which power is enacted in Java, the development of multiple forms of power is to be expected. Far from diluting its efficacy, this illustrates the complexity and versatility of power in Javanese culture. In contrast to Western theories of power, Anderson (1972, p. 8) argues that the paramount concern in Java 'is not the exercise of Power but its accumulation'. Definitions of power in Indonesia generally depart from Western, Enlightenment-derived understandings of power which emphasise 'activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality, and effectiveness brought about through calculation of means to achieve goals' (Errington, 1990, p. 5). Since power is linked with action, it is the meanings which are assigned to the actions of individuals and groups that become the index of agency. These meanings are understood through comparison. Actions become more or less meaningful depending on who performs them, where and when they are performed, the manner in which they are performed, histories associated with these performances and so on. Here, social integrations of power, activity and mobility are articulated in vastly different ways. It is the disparities in cultural definitions that cause these articulations to be at variance with each other.

Over the last 30 years as their activities in the workplace have expanded, women in Sendang Biru have become increasingly empowered. The empowerment of Sendang Biru women as a result of their work in the fishing industry is shown in the improvement in their socioeconomic circumstances and in the importance of the daily decisions made by women in the workplace. Furthermore, this escalation in the empowerment of Sendang Biru women is linked to the ways in which these women have used their social capital. As a result of these processes, women's trade networks have expanded, a development which has had a positive effect on the outcomes of their work. By cultivating these networks, Sendang Biru women are engaging in Ortner's 'serious games' (1996, p. 12). In this concept, Ortner links 'power and inequality' with 'webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions' (1996, p. 12).

An example of the empowerment of women through their work in the Sendang Biru fishing industry is the case of Bu Haji Ria. Like Bu Agus, in the 1980s Bu Haji Ria and her husband became heavily indebted to big boat owners in Banyuwangi. To escape their debts, they migrated to Sendang Biru seeking employment. Initially, Bu Haji Ria sold fish. In the 1990s, having saved enough money, she began buying boats. Today, Bu Haji Ria works at the harbour inspecting her boats, supervising as fish from those boats are weighed, packed and auctioned off, overseeing the payment of fishermen she employs, trading with bulk buyers from Surabaya and Malang and performing a number of other tasks. People take notice of Bu Haji Ria and follow her orders because she, like Haji Umar, owns more boats than most people in Sendang Biru. The source of both her agency and empowerment in the workplace is her economic status. When I asked how many boats she owned, Bu Haji Ria's reply was, 'I own over 20. My husband owns about 15.' Interestingly, the boats were described as hers, rather than as the family business. Although in Indonesia boat ownership among women is less common than the trading work women perform in fish markets, women do become boat owners, both independently and jointly with other women or their husbands. In her study of South Sulawesi fishing towns, Volkman, for example, describes boat ownership among Mandar women (Volkman, 1994, p. 575, 576).

In focusing on the nature and consequences of power in the lives of Sendang Biru women, it is important to make a clear distinction between 'empowerment' and 'power'. Particularly where Javanese definitions of power apply, being empowered and being powerful are two different things. Despite becoming increasingly empowered, women in Sendang Biru have not become more powerful in an overall sense. These women, whether they are small-scale fish traders or owners of multiple boats, are too busy, too coarse (*kasar*) and too active to be powerful in the Javanese sense.

As shown in the *slametan*, spiritual and ancestral powers are potent forces which manifest themselves not only in the daily lives of the Javanese but also in rituals and ceremonies. In Sendang Biru, the *pethik laut*, is one such ritual. Each year on September 27th this ceremony, which is based on the myth of Nyai Roro Kidul, is performed. A *slametan* is held and offerings for Nyai Roro Kidul are thrown into the sea. Respondents in Sendang Biru explained that the *pethik laut* festival is a way of showing gratitude for the fish Nyai Roro Kidul has provided for them. This was described by Sendang Biru women specifically as 'giving back' and 'keeping balance'. Not only is the importance of harmony between people, nature and Javanese cosmology implied here, but the link between mythical and social forms of agency is also clear. Nyai Roro Kidul not only provides for Sendang Biru people but also protects fishermen at sea. In return she is honoured and given gifts at the *pethik laut* festival. It is only when harmony and balance are in place that this mythical queen provides for the Javanese. Agency here is enacted by an ancient, royal ancestor of the Javanese. The agential efficacy of Nyai Roro Kidul is realised in her ability to protect and provide for Sendang Biru people through nature. Furthermore, agency and power are linked here with female fertility. The principles of the *pethik laut* ceremony therefore concord with three of the prominent symbols of power in Java described by Anderson (1972, p. 18): fertility, prosperity and stability.

Javanese power relates to time in terms of cycles (Anderson, 1972, p. 20). During the *pethik laut*, enactments of historical events and particular types of power are repeated. Nyai Roro Kidul not only has the power to provide and protect, but also to destroy. To avoid such destruction, every year Nyai Roro Kidul must be thanked and appeased. In the *pethik laut*, the agency being enacted is strategic. This ritual builds on a social dialogue between Sendang Biru people, supernatural forces around them and

the past. Within this social dialogue, Nyai Roro Kidul represents the 'primordial oscillations of Power' which Anderson says 'continue' regardless of the actions of individuals (Anderson, 1972, p. 22). Here, it would appear that human agency is greatly diminished. However, the contextualisation of agency and power shows that as a way of enabling the influence of a society on supernatural forces which affect their livelihoods, the *pethik laut* is a salient element in the overall power-agency nexus. In Java, as in other parts of Indonesia, power is understood as a quality which may be embodied by people while originating from other sources, such as spirits, ancestors or gods (Hoskins, 1987, p. 140; Kuipers, 1988, p. 110; Kuipers, 1990, p. 71; Keane, 1997a, p. 684; Keane, 1997b, p. 119; Kang, 2003, p. 154; Geinaert, 2002, p. 33). Power is realised through spells, prayers, acquiring ancestral knowledge and repeating the words of the ancestors. Kang, for example, describes how, among the Petalangan people, an individual,

> acquires power by disclaiming one's own agency as well as by invoking the authority of the ancestors' voices embedded in a specific type of formula (Kang, 2003, p.154).

CLASS

In accepting the Gramscian notion that class is realised through enactments of culture (Crehan, 2002, p. 71), an investigation of what 'struggle' means in specific cultural contexts is warranted. In Indonesia and elsewhere, power and gender are cardinal elements in the 'cultural struggles' by which class systems are defined (Ong and Peletz, 1995, p. 9). In Sendang Biru, 'cultural struggles' against poverty are implicated in the collective striving by women towards greater empowerment. I suggest that the agency displayed by women who work in the Sendang Biru fish trade is closely related to their increased empowerment and has been deployed primarily as a method for escaping poverty. Women in Sendang Biru perform a variety of work not because of ideological convictions regarding women's power or because they are attempting to resist some form of male domination but because they need to support themselves and their families. Other studies on women's roles in rural parts of Indonesia have made similar findings (Dawson, 1994, p. 71; Ford and Parker, 2008, p. 13). It is therefore primarily in the workplace that Indonesian women engage in struggles defined by the constraints of class and culture. The tendency within the literature on agency to idealise the situation of Indonesian working class women as one where their work automatically gives them a greater degree of agency and power than middle or upper class women misses the point of these women's labour. As Wolf points out,

> [w]hile poorer women may control the returns from their labor thereby maintaining "high economic power," it is important to recognize that there may be little income to control (1988, p. 87).

If these women are fighting against 'domination' of some sort, it is the domination of poverty which afflicts so many in Indonesia. This perspective is closely aligned with the stances of Mahmood (2001) and Volkman (1994). Mahmood characterises agency as 'a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (2001, p. 203). Furthermore, as Volkman found in the Mandar fishing towns of South Sulawesi, poverty compels women,

> to spring into action and virtually to invent new roles, to create new ways of working and being in the world. The contingency of the historical moment is also crucial: women become "movers" in response to certain technological, economic, and social transformations (Volkman, 1994, p. 565).

In Sendang Biru, as in South Sulawesi, female migrants have literally and metaphorically become social 'movers' in the way Volkman describes. This has been achieved primarily through their work in the Sendang Biru fishing industry. However, although women have advanced in terms of their capacity to provide for their families, they remain working class. The persistence of working class status despite improvements in economic standing highlights the importance of including class analysis in

contemporary studies of Indonesian society. The agency found in the work which has brought these women economic advancement can be characterised as a 'creative aspect of human sociality' (Parker, 2005b, p. 228). Greater empowerment for these women is one result of their work in the Sendang Biru fish trade. As Crehan (2002, p. 195) argues, 'class is always gendered'. In this section, I have attempted to display how women in Sendang Biru negotiate acts of agency and engage in struggles as working class women.

STATUS

The way status is acted upon and received within a society is influenced not only by gender but also by factors such as class, family, ethnic background, wealth, social connections, behaviour, appearance, level of formal education and work. The behaviour of individuals may bring about changes in certain aspects of status, while other aspects remain beyond the influence of the individual.

My primary focus is the way women's status is influenced not simply by the work they perform, but by the meanings attributed to this work precisely because it is performed by these particular women, and the recognition women gain, or fail to gain, because of their work. Following this, I will look at how women's status is affected by their identities as migrants and religion.

In Indonesia, as in other Southeast Asian societies, status is not necessarily characterised as a sort of social power based on a linear form of hierarchy. In Java, status also takes on a centre-periphery quality. According to the principles underlying the centre-periphery model of power, it is not the poverty but the mobility of women such as those I encountered in Sendang Biru which relegates them to the lower levels of the status framework. Low status, impoverished people must move to other places in search of work when work in the place where they live is no longer available. A peripatetic lifestyle, uncertain sources of income and low status are therefore closely linked. Since sources of income are insecure, money becomes a central focus of low status people. The centre, which is occupied in an overall social sense by those of high status who are not forced to move around seeking work to subsist, is maintained by its periphery, or the vast numbers of low status people whose movement in search of work is focused solely on the need to survive and support their families, rather than as an attempt to challenge those of high status.

> A person could be read as more inner, as higher in status, (…) in part by that person's degree and kind of movement. Briefly put, the center is still, its periphery active. Any center (…) shows itself to be more important, more potent, than any other given center, in part by being more still than the other (…) [T]he higher the individual's place, the more seldom the individual moves (Errington, 1989, p. 134).

The association between 'a preoccupation with money' and 'low status' among the Javanese can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when 'trade among the Javanese was considered the proper domain only of women and low-status men, as well as members of "foreign" ethnic groups such as Chinese, Arabs, or Europeans' (Brenner, 1995, p. 26).

Related to ideas of stillness being associated with high status are the values said to be embodied by the old Javanese elite, the *priyayi*. The '*prijaji* ethic' has traditionally been characterised by an 'intense sense for status differences,' a 'calm assertion of spiritual authority' and a 'dual emphasis on the inner life of refined feeling and the external life of polite form' (Geertz, 1960, p. 231). In a discussion of how *priyayi* values affect contemporary Javanese understandings of status, social hierarchy and ideologies of gender, Brenner (1995, p. 20) argues that the 'spiritual potency' attributed to the *priyayi*, and the power this entails, sustains 'the ethical codes, behavioural norms, and linguistic styles that uphold *priyayi* claims to high status and cultural superiority'. Furthermore,

> these ideologies of spiritual potency reinforce the superiority of *priyayi* males in particular, while placing all females, regardless of social class, in a categorically inferior spiritual, moral, and social position (Brenner, 1995, p. 20).

An analysis of ideologies of status and power associated with the *priyayi* is warranted on the grounds that 'these ideologies are not confined to the ranks of the *priyayi* alone, but are also commonly voiced among other elements of the Javanese population' which 'indicates that their influence on gender relations and identities in Javanese society deserves some attention' (Brenner, 1995, p. 21).

A number of conflicting characterizations are made about the status of Javanese women as women. Many scholars claim that these women and Southeast Asian women in general, have 'high status' (Wolf, 1988, p. 103). Brenner, (1995, p. 26) however, asserts that in Java 'most women are lacking in the qualities that lead individuals to be designated as "high status" even when they control substantial economic resources and domestic authority'. Sullivan (1994, p. 143) goes a step further, positing a causal relationship between employment and low status:

> [M]oneymaking activities are framed in traditional discourse as among the crudest and most disruptive of the spiritual-psychological states required to absorb and exercise power. It would appear that this perception informs the general male willingness to leave the management of household finances to the senior females of the household.

A similar argument is made about rural women in Northern Thailand who, '[d]espite their traditionally lower status (…) had a relatively strong socio-economic position in the agricultural economy' (Fongkaew, 2002, p. 149).

On the other hand, Wolf's (1988, p. 101) argument that women's 'status is higher due to factory employment' counters those of Brenner (1995), Sullivan (1994) and Fongkaew (2002). In relation to the status of Sendang Biru women however, the arguments made by Brenner (1995), Sullivan (1994) and Fongkaew (2002) are most apposite. These views coincide with my contention that the substantial degree of efficacy displayed by women in the workplace empowers them in their day to day capacities yet precludes them from claiming powerful status in any comprehensive sense. This applies even to women who have become quite wealthy, such as Bu Haji Ria.

In Muslim societies, status is also measured by whether or not a person has been on the *umroh* or *hajj*. A number of women in Sendang Biru, such as Bu Haji Ria, had been on the *hajj*, and many more had plans to do so. Although the cost of going on the *hajj* is very high for most Indonesians, the status acquired from having made the pilgrimage is not based on its material cost but on the fact that the *hajj* represents the attainment of spiritual maturity and wisdom and a serious religious commitment to living according to principles laid out in the Qu'ran.

As migrants, many of the women interviewed had left their home towns in other parts of Java, Madura and Sulawesi with very little money and no assets. Years later, after making money in the Sendang Biru fishing industry, these women are able to return home for events such as circumcision ceremonies, weddings and funerals, bringing with them souvenirs or gifts (*oleh-oleh*) such as clothes, toys and jewellery. Bu Haji Ria, for example, returned to Banyuwangi for the circumcision of a relative during my fieldwork, taking with her the sorts of gifts she could never afford when she worked in Banyuwangi. Bugis fishermen and their wives generally return to South Sulawesi for three to four months in December when the sea off the south coast of Java becomes too rough to fish. The *oleh-oleh* taken back for friends and relatives is a sign of how much they have prospered that year. In both cases, the giving of *oleh-oleh* becomes a vehicle for the enhancement of social status in the eyes of extended family members.

CONCLUSION

It is through repeated patterns of action over time that social structures change (Yanagisako and Collier, 1987, p. 43). This analysis has shown how, as the repeated patterns of women's work in the Sendang Biru fishing industry have changed over the past 30 years, so too has Sendang Biru itself. Most of the work done by women in the Sendang Biru fish trade could no longer be described as 'supplementary to that of men' (Blackburn, 2004, p. 168), as women's work has long been described in Indonesia. This is a powerful indication of the degree of socioeconomic change which has occurred over the last 30 years in Sendang Biru. It is not ideological struggles over power between men and women which have produced such transformations, but the desire to escape poverty. These processes have been supported by development projects and investments in infrastructure by the government. Nevertheless, as I have endeavoured to illustrate in distinguishing between power and empowerment, '[e]conomic equality is not necessarily synonymous with overall social equality' (Branson and Miller, 1988, p. 4). While enactments of agency over the past 30 years have brought about negotiated forms of empowerment for women in Sendang Biru, parity with men in terms of broader social power has not resulted from these processes. Instead, the dynamics of socioeconomic power have produced subjects, women, who have in turn transformed their surroundings. Women's agency and values such as *rukun* and *rewang* have been an instrumental part of these processes. The socioeconomic successes of women in Sendang Biru echo the stories of migrants from some other parts of Indonesia, such as the Mandar women of South Sulawesi, who have moved to fishing towns in search of work (Volkman, 1994, p. 574).

As a contestatory discourse, I have argued in this paper that agency is best seen in its relational context, as the dynamic between women and their surrounding environments. The social order that emerges from gendered discourses of agency is useful insofar as it creates coherence, meaning and purpose within a cultural context. In the cases of the women presented in this paper, the enactment of agency shows us the contingency and transformability of what is given, whether that 'given' is patriarchy, poverty or something else.

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