

## **Revisiting *Merti Kali* Code in Yogyakarta as a Production of Cultural Space, Citizen Aesthetic Practice, and Collective Awareness**

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### **Abstract**

*Merti Kali* Code (MKC) in Yogyakarta is a cultural practice deeply rooted in ecological and social awareness within an urban context. This qualitative-descriptive case study explores the significance of MKC for riverside communities and its broader implications for Yogyakarta's urban landscape, with particular attention to the formation of cultural spaces, citizens' aesthetic expressions, and the cultivation of collective environmental consciousness. Through visual documentation, experiential observation, literary analysis, and media-based sources, the study reveals that MKC not only strengthens community engagement but also fosters shared ecological reflection and a sense of place. These characteristics position MKC as a promising educational model for community-driven cultural initiatives and environmentally responsive urban practices.

Keywords: *Merti Kali*; space production; citizen aesthetic practices; collective awareness raising

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The *Merti Kali* Code was an annual tradition from 2001 to 2019 in Yogyakarta but was halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The festival is held by residents along the Code River, which cuts through the heart of Yogyakarta and is surrounded by densely populated residential areas. *Merti Kali* is a celebration of art and culture, as well as a manifestation of collective participation in environmental protection. Gotong-royong is the principal value of this festival, reflecting social solidarity and ecological care. The festival combines tradition, spirituality, and ecological awareness, especially in maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and the river as part of the living space. The annual *Merti Kali* Code cultural ritual involves seven villages along the northern Code River, namely Jetisharjo, Terban, Cokrokusuman, Pogung, Sendowo, Karangjati, and Gemawang, as well as Blunyah. This tradition has been observed 15 times since its inception in 2001.

In cultural anthropology, the tradition of *Merti Sungai* or *Merti Dusun* is seen as a ritual to show gratitude to God, respect for nature, and appreciation for ancestors. This ritual is closely related to gotong-royong, environmental sustainability, and social harmony. *Merti Kali* in Yogyakarta, different from the usual *Merti* organised in villages, can be understood as a process of cultural space production, allowing citizens to participate actively in art and cultural expression. *Merti Kali* is also a collective awareness mechanism integrated into everyday culture. This awareness includes spiritual, social, and ecological relationships that continue to be maintained by the local community. This research aims to examine the role of the *Merti Kali* Code as a means of creating a cultural space that involves the

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active participation of the community in art and culture, both as designers, actors, and audiences. More than a ritual, the *Merti Kali* Code functions as a collective medium to build collective awareness of the environment. This process is ongoing in the Code Riverbank area. Therefore, it is important to discuss it in urban cultural studies, which views culture as an expression of identity and a social mechanism that shapes how people think, behave, and act towards their living space.

This research also shows the urgency of strengthening the position of local culture in sustainable urban planning and development. As argued by Claire Bishop, participatory art has political power because it can build the affective engagement of citizens in public space issues, including the environment and urban planning (Bishop, 2014). The concept of *aesthetic citizenship* emerges through socially and ecologically conscious approaches to artistic and design practices. Building on this idea, this research documents local traditions and proposes an alternative framework for urban planning that is inclusive, equitable, and rooted in community-based cultural knowledge (Legino et al., 2024).

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 *Merti Kali*

In Javanese tradition, *Merti Sungai* or *Merti Dusun* is not just a symbolic ritual to express gratitude to God and respect for nature and ancestors. It is a complex and meaningful cultural practice, reflecting the harmony between humans, nature, and spirituality. Clifford Geertz interpreted *Merti* as a symbolic ritual that serves to maintain cosmic and social order, making it a means to stabilise community life through symbolic expressions rooted in tradition (Clifford & Sudbury, 1973). This view is reinforced by Koentjaraningrat, who emphasises that *Merti* plays an important role in strengthening the collective values of Javanese society, particularly the spirit of *gotong royong* and social cohesion (Hawkins, 1996). Furthermore, *Merti* can be understood as a form of symbolic communication that voices the collective aspirations of the community in an implicit yet powerful way, making it both a ceremony and a medium for social dialogue (Whitehead, 2021). From an ecological and anthropological perspective, local environmental practices are shaped not only by inherited traditions but also by dynamic, context-specific configurations of knowledge, power, and identity (Li, 2007). In this light, *Merti* is not a single ritual event but an ongoing practice of local ecological governance, performed through lived experience rather than formal instruction. It embodies a system of actions interweaving spirituality, ecological care, and cultural meaning.

### 2.2 Production of Space

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre states that space is a social product produced through social, economic, political, and cultural relations, not just a physical container. He emphasises that space results from social practices within the capitalist system, enabling capital accumulation, for example, through infrastructure development or gentrification (Lefebvre, 1991). David Harvey develops Lefebvre's idea by seeing space as an arena of class conflict, where the dominance of the ruling class is manifested in the hegemonic organisation of space (Harvey, 2019). Meanwhile, Doreen Massey rejects the view of space as a homogeneous entity. She sees it as a product of evolving social relations formed from interactions between people, places, and power at various scales (Massey et al., 2009). According to Nugroho et al., producing creative public spaces through participatory and collaborative practices is important to sustain cultural values and strengthen social cohesion (Nugroho & Nurcahyo, 2023). Thus, through the trajectory of thought from Lefebvre (1991), Harvey (2001), and Massey (2009) to Nugroho and Nurcahyo (2023), it is clear that space is a complex and interest-laden social construction. The production of space not only represents the world but also actively shapes and contests the meaning of the world itself in both local and global domains (Lufiani et al., 2024).

### 2.3 *Aesthetic Citizen Practices*

The concept of *aesthetic citizenship* refers to how aesthetic expressions such as art, performances, shows, and visuality become a means of citizen participation in social and political life. Amanda Meskimon states *aesthetic citizenship* is how individuals and communities negotiate identity and agency through aesthetic practices. She asserts that art represents reality and creates a shared world where we can "become citizens" through creative processes and symbolic activities (Meskimon, 2010). Reinforcing this idea, Suwahyunto et al. argue that culturally performative attractions create spaces for dialogue among citizens, spark ecological reflection, and strengthen collective imagination about the future of inclusive cities (Suwahyunto & Nurcahyo, 2025). Thus, *aesthetic citizenship* shifts the understanding of citizenship from formal legal mechanisms to affective, performative, and symbolic spaces, where citizens voice their existence through aesthetics filled with meaning and resistance.

### 2.4 Collective Awareness

Conscientisation, or critical awareness, is a key concept introduced by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a process of critical awareness in which individuals begin to understand the social, political, and ecological conditions that shape their lives and act to change them. In the context of living space and the environment, Freire emphasised that education should be liberating, encouraging people to realise that their relationship with nature is historical and changeable and, therefore, must be addressed through collective action (Bhattacharya, 2020). Building on Freire's work, David Gruenewald introduced the concept of critical pedagogy of place, which actively integrates social conscientization with ecological sustainability, positioning "place" as a central dimension of critical environmental education (Gruenewald, 2003). Similarly, Vandana Shiva links awareness with local practices and ecological spirituality, emphasising the importance of women's and indigenous knowledge in maintaining sustainability (Shiva, 2009). Meanwhile, within the framework of Design for Social Innovation (DSI), Suastiwi (2023) emphasizes that local resources, including natural assets, community-

based skills, and place-specific technologies, can be mobilized more effectively through interdisciplinary collaboration, not only to address ecological challenges autonomously but also to nurture collective awareness and strengthen *guyub*, a Javanese ethos of communal solidarity and mutual care.

### 3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to revisit *Merti Kali* Code, a community-based cultural event held along the banks of Kali Code in Yogyakarta in 2019, as an instance of cultural space production, citizens' aesthetic practice, and collective ecological awareness. The research is motivated by the current deterioration of the riverbanks, which appear significantly less clean and cared for compared to the pre-pandemic period, despite past initiatives like *Merti Kali* Code that once mobilized art, ritual, and communal action to foster environmental consciousness. Data were collected through visual documentation (including personal photographs taken during the researcher's active participation in planning and implementing the event, as well as media-published images), in-depth interviews with cultural actors and residents, and reflective field notes based on embodied memories of the event. These photographs serve not only as archival records but also as analytical material, examined through visual and contextual interpretation to reconstruct the spatial, affective, and symbolic dimensions of the practice. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and interpretively, drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Freire's concept of conscientization (1970), Gruenewald's critical pedagogy of place (2003), and Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (1991), to understand how the event temporarily transformed the riverside into a site of collective care, ecological reflection, and socio-spatial meaning, and why such practices have since faded from public life.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Built Space on the Code Riverbanks

Amid modernisation and urbanisation pressures that continue to erode living space, the community along the Code River in Yogyakarta revives a form of cultural practice called *Merti Kali* Code. This tradition is a form of representation of built space that connects culture with the social ecosystem on the riverbanks. More than just an annual traditional ceremony, the *Merti Kali* Code reflects a collective consciousness that grows out of a shared ecological experience, where the river is not just a flow of water but also a flow of meaning, history, and social relations intertwined with the body of the community. Since it was first formulated in 2002, the *Merti Kali* Code has reconstructed traditional values and past interactions with the river in a built space that retains local Javanese roots. The procession involves various actors, such as village leaders, local artists, youth, and school children, actively participating in the procession, performances, and rituals. These activities reflect how residents are not only the organisers of the event but also the creators of the meaning of their space. *Merti Kali* Code negotiates the existence of residents amid an urban ecological crisis, showing how communities visualise ecological and social values through collectively designed rituals and artefacts. As Marsudi Raharjo said, the *Merti Kali* Code is not just a preserved tradition but a practice that continues to be redesigned, animating a built space rooted in social and ecological dynamics on the riverbanks. The built environment along the Code River is shaped not only by physical structures, such as houses, pedestrian paths, or community gardens, but also by the social relationships that emerge within them. This spatial structure develops organically through community participation, reflecting an adaptive response to the river's dynamic and fragile landscape. Through this practice, residents engage with space not only materially but also symbolically and culturally, where each spatial element becomes part of a shared narrative. In this way, the *Merti Kali* Code serves as a strategy for communities to design resilient spaces (culturally, ecologically, and socially) in the face of an ever-changing urban context.



Fig. 1. (a) Flow map of Code River, Yogyakarta; (b) Aerial photo of Brontokusuman area  
(Source: Faculty of Geography UGM and Google Earth)

### 4.2 *Merti Kali* Code Procession in Brontokusuman, Yogyakarta



Fig. 2. (a) The king advised on stage; (b) the king symbolically released the fish.  
 (c) The king was carried down the river. (d) Children played in the Code River after the *Merti Sungai* ceremony  
 (Source: <https://www.gudeg.net/read/14502/merti-kali-code>)

In 2019, the *Merti Kali* Code ritual was held in the Brontokusuman area, as illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b. Within this setting, the *Merti Kali* Code functions as a performative platform that integrates rites, collective memory, and communal space. According to Marsudi Raharjo, Chair of the Brontokusuman Alternative Tourism Village (Dewa Bronto), the ceremonial procession carried out by the community is based on the concept of *Raja Melawan Arus* (The King walked against the Code River Current), with the village head (*Lurah*) portraying the role of the king. In this enactment, the role of the *Raja* was performed by Mr Lurah. The term '*Raja*' can also be understood metaphorically as representing the people of Jogja, while 'against the current' signifies resisting the tide of globalisation by safeguarding indigenous cultural privileges, traditions, and local wisdom. Before the *Raja Against the Current* procession, the event opened with a performance by two dancers enacting *Golek Ayun-Ayun*, a traditional dance embodying themes of honour and respect, symbolically inviting the river spirits to attend and observe. Subsequently, six members of the organising committee, clad in traditional surjan attire, were seen carrying five trays of fish, which were then released into the Code River as part of the ritual.

In Figure 2a, the king is brought to the stage, where he will deliver a speech to the people. In this speech, the king conveys strong moral messages about preserving the Code River. The river water provides life for residents and is considered a natural element that must be respected and cared for together. This advice is not delivered as ordinary advice but as part of a symbolic narrative reviving traditional leadership values, local spirituality, and human-nature relations. In Figure 2b, after delivering the message, the king releases fish into the river to symbolize hope and abundance. This action becomes an important part of the procession, which contains ecological meaning and implies a form of community sovereignty over their living space. Fish stocking represents the community's collective attitude towards the sustainability of the river ecosystem while emphasising the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature.

In Figure 2c, we see a traditional procession with *Lurah* Brontokusuman carried on a palanquin against the current of the Code River, symbolising a return to traditional values that respect nature. This ritual involves the active participation of residents of all ages, not just as spectators but as actors who animate the space with collective symbols and narratives. In Figure 2d, children play in the water after the *Merti* ceremony, illustrating the community's embodied connection with the surrounding environment. These activities are related to village tourism development in Brontokusuman, such as guided village tours and batik-making workshops at Ndalem Brontokusuman, which prioritises local cultural preservation and visitor education. Thus, the *Merti Kali* ritual functions not only as a living cultural expression but also as a practical platform for sustainable development that actively integrates local cultural values, environmental stewardship, and community-based tourism, thereby shaping new trajectories for Brontokusuman's lived space and local economy.

#### 4.3 Reflection of many Parties from the *Merti Kali* Code Event

For several parties, the *Merti Kali* Code has succeeded in igniting awareness among the people of Yogyakarta. *Merti Kali* Code is understood not only as a cultural ritual but also as a reflective practice that nurtures both ecological consciousness and social cohesion. Participants, regardless of age, status, or role, engage collectively as bearers, performers, and spectators, temporarily dissolving conventional social hierarchies. In this shared space, distinctions between leaders and citizens, young and old, or performers and audience fade away. This collective participation embodies the Javanese principle of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and demonstrates how *Merti Kali* Code functions as an inclusive social space grounded in communal experience and ecological care (Raharjo, 2019). Such unity reflects a deeper local philosophy that humans and nature exist as an inseparable whole. Consequently, the Code River is valued not merely as a physical water source but as a living cultural space embedded with community memory, belief, and identity. Far beyond symbolic cleansing, the *Merti Kali* tradition reactivates the spiritual and historical bond between people and the

river. In this framework, the *Merti* Code becomes a celebration of life that affirms love and harmony between humans and the river through tangible collective action (Sonobudoyo, n.d.).

## 5.0 Discussion

*Merti Kali* Code (MKC) is not merely an annual ritual but a form of collective awareness among communities living along the Code River, expressing their right to inhabit and protect their living environment. The festival symbolizes resistance against social exclusion and marginalisation, particularly affecting peripheral urban communities. MKC reinforces values of inclusivity, solidarity, and diversity through interactions between citizens, artists, and cultural actors, becoming a civic expression that expands the meaning of democracy. At the same time, it promotes ecological consciousness, highlighting the importance of protecting the river as a living ecosystem and ensuring the right to a just and sustainable city.

MKC also functions as a space for collective learning in reclaiming urban space from the dominance of capitalist development, which often results in exclusion and inequality. The challenge, however, is to maintain MKC's critical and participatory values so that it does not become trapped in political co-optation or mass tourism. MKC should be understood as an ongoing process toward a more just and ecological urban space. The five years postponement of MKC implementation reveals the fragility of grassroots cultural movements that lack support from a strong socio-political ecosystem. It reflects the weakening of citizen consolidation and local leadership. This phenomenon can be compared to similar cultural practices in other provinces, such as the clean village tradition in Java and the Ma'Nene Festival in Toraja, which have experienced commercialisation and loss of meaning.

To ensure MKC's sustainability, citizen participation-based action plans are necessary, including intergenerational revitalisation, critical education, and strategic partnerships with government and NGOs. Diversified formats and mutual aid-based funding models should be developed. Further ethnographic field research is needed to reassess these initial findings and ensure MKC remains relevant and empowering for its communities.

## 6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

*Merti Kali* Code (MKC) is more than just an annual festival, but an important awareness-raising medium for residents along the Code River. The festival strengthens collective awareness of the right to living space and becomes a form of resistance to social exclusion and marginalisation. MKC also acts as a civic practice that expands the meaning of democracy and ecological awareness of the importance of protecting rivers as living ecosystems. However, the biggest challenge lies in keeping MKC from being trapped in political co-optation or mass tourism. The phenomenon of MKC's "suspended animation" shows the vulnerability of grassroots cultural movements that require a strong socio-political ecosystem support to remain relevant and thrive.

To ensure the sustainability of MKC, several steps need to be taken. First, the cross-generational activist community must be revitalised to maintain continuity and relevance. Second, critical education through workshops and training to raise ecological awareness and regenerate local knowledge. Third, we are building strategic alliances with the government, NGOs, and the media to support policies and recognition of MKC as a cultural heritage. Fourth, event formats and mutual aid funding schemes must be diversified to ensure equitable financial sustainability. Finally, further ethnographic field-based research is needed to delve deeper into the current dynamics and strengthen the preliminary findings.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research contributes to understanding the role of community-driven cultural practices in enhancing ecological awareness and urban social inclusion.

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