

AFTERLIVES AND ALTER-LIVES

How Competitions Produce (Neoliberal?) Subjects in Indonesia

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Abstract: Indonesia has long employed competitions as means of improving ‘human resource quality,’ believing competitions to elicit fantasies of achievement that, even if unrealized, motivate participants to self-cultivate in ways generative for the nation. Meanwhile, scholarly critics argue that such policies encourage a counterproductive competitive individualism that serves the interests of neoliberal capitalism. This article complicates both of these understandings of what competition does. I show that Indonesians may participate in competitions out of a desire to provide for, and receive recognition from, family, mentors, and the state. When the afterlives of competition fail to live up to this ideal, competitors can become alienated from the relations and institutions they blame for thwarting the ‘alter-life’ that could have been, subsequently embracing individualism and the market.

Keywords: achievement, competition, education, recognition, Riau Islands, sport

When I began researching Indonesia’s borderland Riau Islands Province in the mid-2000s, I was struck by the number of competitions being staged. They encompassed everything from children’s coloring contests and sports tournaments to prestigious academic Olympiads and Qur’anic recitation contests. Competitions, it became clear, were a key feature of the province’s educational and recreational landscapes.

Competitions are popular in Indonesia because of what they do. They entertain. They showcase political leaders’ administrative capacities. They can generate interest in particular topics, practices, or performance traditions. More fundamentally, however, they are embraced because of ideas about the kinds



of *subjects* they create: motivated, achievement-oriented citizens, who stand out as high-quality human resources capable of thriving in a globalized knowledge economy. By affording opportunities to engage in self-conscious practices of competing—and here I follow Kajanus’s (2019: 68) definition of competition as involving “individuals or groups pursuing an objective (such as doing well or winning) through trying to surpass others”—competitions are thought to help make individuals (and by extension Indonesia’s population) globally competitive.

Indonesians who advocate competitions as a technology of ‘human resource development’ ground such claims in a motivational psychology influenced by the modernization theorist David McClelland. Entering competitions, they argue, will help Indonesians foster an innate ‘need for Achievement’ (*nAch*), propelling them to ever greater things. Similar notions of subjectification underpin many anthropological accounts of competitions, in which their presumed efficacy at cultivating achievement-oriented competitive individuals regularly inspires critique. In this article, however, I aim to complicate such ideas about the kinds of subjects competitions generate, and the mechanisms by which they do so.

Ethnography from the Riau Islands, gathered over 34 months of fieldwork between 2005 and 2018, shows that Indonesians do not always embrace the rugged individualism with which competitions and the principle of ‘competition’ are sometimes associated. They often see achievement in competitions as a way of deepening relations with, and providing for, others. Their stories thus appear to support an alternative school of anthropological thought regarding competition, which underscores how it can be grounded within, and vital to, group identifications and moral commitments (Bayly 2013; Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002; Kajanus 2019). Such a conclusion, however, would itself be premature, since a number of my interlocutors eventually abandoned their mutualistic visions in favor of a more individualistic embracing of market logics.

My materials thus required me to move beyond prevailing approaches in the anthropology of competitions, which ultimately posit their consequences for subjectification as a reflection of preexisting systems of value and meaning. I needed an alternative approach: one focused on *the course events take*, to borrow Dresch’s (1986) felicitous phrase, and thereby able to account for processes of subjectification that did not follow stable or predetermined trajectories but were dynamic and non-linear (Urry 2003). Although it has been developed with specific reference to Riau Island ethnography, I believe this to be a valuable approach for the anthropological study of competitions in general. Before any competition even takes place, entrants typically spend considerable time and energy anticipating it, preparing for it, and imagining what its various possible outcomes might mean for them. As a consequence there is usually some degree of disconnect between a competition’s *afterlife*

(the actual events that ensue in its wake) and its *alter-life* (the subjunctive, imagined afterlife that could or should have been). As the Riau Island material shows, when such a disconnect is especially pronounced or painful, it can lead entrants to renounce the very precepts and moralities that underpinned their involvement in the competition, sparking new trajectories of ethical self-cultivation. A broader theoretical implication of this argument is that the capacity of locally salient sociopolitical structures to minimize the extent of the disconnect between afterlife and alter-life—or to enable competitors to successfully mediate that disconnect—is a crucial variable in determining what competition does.

This article thus advances the agenda of this Special Issue on a number of fronts. As Hopkinson and Zidaru (this issue) argue, public and scholarly discourse about what competition does often conflates knowledge about competition with knowledge about capitalism, particularly its neoliberal variant. The Indonesian ethnography shows the limits of such an analytic maneuver even in a context where competitions have been deliberately staged as a strategy of neoliberal governance. Rather than competition's outcomes being straightforward or predictable in advance, the case supports Hopkinson and Zidaru's argument for a theoretical approach to competition that understands it as "always generat[ing] affordances and changes that exceed its prescriptions, conventions, rules, and intended outcomes" and thus as a process through which meaning, subjectivity, and relationships can be dynamically (re)made. My specific contribution lies in identifying the disconnect between afterlife and alter-life as central to the generation of such unexpected affordances and changes, and in identifying key factors that affect the way this disconnect is experienced. These include: the degree of 'should-ness' attached to an unrealized alter-life; the prevailing cultural politics of trust and suspicion; and the ways in which structures of privilege and inequality affect both the stakes of competitions and one's vulnerability to their unexpected outcomes.

Conceptualizing Competitions in Indonesia

Politicians and intellectuals in Indonesia have long worried that the nation's population—the fourth largest in the world—lacks the skills and attitudes necessary for prosperity. This is a nationwide concern. It stems from the very limited access Indonesians had to formal education during the colonial period, but it also reflects anxieties around the persistence of the 'feudal mindset' fostered within precolonial kingdoms and during centuries of colonial rule. Such a 'mindset' is seen as incompatible with the self-starting, adaptable, and entrepreneurial outlooks needed for capitalist development or success in a global capitalist knowledge economy. Ever since Suharto's New Order government

(1966–1998) embraced and promoted neoliberal market reforms, it has thus been considered imperative to improve Indonesia’s ‘human resource quality’ (*kualitas sumber daya manusia*).¹ This impetus and rhetoric continues to suffuse the nation’s public life today (see Indrawati and Kuncoro 2021), and has particular resonance in the Riau Islands, where human resource quality is widely perceived as having been ‘held back’ by systemic underinvestment during the region’s administrative annexation to mainland Sumatra from 1959 to 2004 (Long 2013a: 7–8, 44–54).

Competitions feature prominently in Indonesian human development strategies. Their centrality can be partly traced to the influence of social psychologist David McClelland, whose *The Achieving Society* (1961) graced the reading lists of many postcolonial technocrats during modernization theory’s heyday (Nandy 1987: 51–52). McClelland had argued that economic development was closely linked to the prevalence of the psychological drive ‘need for Achievement (*nAch*)’—a thesis that had a strong impact on New Order intellectuals and policymakers, guiding their efforts to foster ‘development-mindedness’ (Budiman 1979: 213–214). As a result, the term ‘*prestasi*’—typically glossed as ‘achievement’—has been a prominent keyword in Indonesian public culture since the 1970s, serving as an important identity marker and a much-valued form of cultural capital (Long 2013a; Parker and Nilan 2013). Deriving from *prestatie*, the Dutch term for a feat, accomplishment, or achievement, the Indonesian *prestasi* typically references publicly recognized attainments in the realms of education, work, sports, the arts, and community service.² Moreover, as Parker and Nilan (2013: 95) emphasize, “*prestasi* requires competitors since these are very public performances – just achieving a good mark in an exam is not sufficient . . . *Prestasi* requires a culture of competition and acknowledgement.”

By virtue of generating winners, runners-up, and losers, competitions necessarily generate *prestasi*. However, in the McClelland model, contests do more than simply create *opportunities* to achieve. They also inculcate achievement motivation. A key concern for McClelland—and his technocratic readers—was how achievement psychology might be used to accelerate economic growth. One possibility was to encourage “achievement-related fantasies” that might then “instigate activities aimed at producing achievement” (McClelland 1961: 418). In Indonesia, the excited hubbub surrounding competitions—and the public veneration of their winners—could certainly contribute to such a dynamic (see, e.g., Long 2013a: 180–4). McClelland had also argued that the achievement motive was strengthened by the pleasure of meeting ambient “standards of excellence,” or the shame of failing to do so (McClelland et al. 1953: 275). Similar causal logics were articulated by many Indonesians that I met during fieldwork. For example, a Tourism Department official overseeing a ‘tourism ambassador’ competition explained that “champions become models

for their classmates. Their classmates will see that they have won the prize, and that will give them motivation to be more disciplined so that they can win a prize in the competition next year.”

In this understanding, what competition does is foster a national ‘capacity to aspire’ (*pace* Appadurai 2004), generating a population of disciplined, achievement-oriented citizens motivated to develop their knowledge and skills. Indonesian educationalist Guntur (n.d.: 3–4) elaborates on the forms of self-development that Indonesian children undergo by competing with others in sports. Sport, he argues, inculcates values such as “cooperation,” “understanding the rules,” “problem solving,” and “self-confidence,” and forges a “strongly competitive spirit”—and is thus vital for Indonesia’s human resource development. Similar ideas underpin nonsporting competitions. Strassler (2006: 59) cites an Education Department official who explained how by “participating in [a painting contest for kids from ASEAN nations], children are trained from the start to form a character that is strong (*tangguh*). Thus, later, the products produced by these children will be able to compete with the products of other countries, in this global era.” In short, by producing particular kinds of persons, competitions are thought to bring about particular kinds of individual and collective futures.

Conceptualizing Competitions in Critical Social Science

Ironically, very similar ideas can be seen in the work of scholars adopting a critical stance toward competition’s prominence in educational and human development settings, both in Indonesia and beyond.

One important strand of Indonesianist research highlights the way that students’ preoccupation with meeting the criteria necessary to *win* may actually preclude mastery of the skills or knowledge that competitions are intended to promote (Parker and Nilan 2013; Prabawa-Sear 2018). Moreover, because ‘winning’ is, in many fields, tantamount to securing recognition from a panel of judges, such a dynamic may inhibit the realization of the self-starting, entrepreneurial subject with which competition is conventionally associated, instead training entrants to “conform their expression to official expectation and to submit to external judgements of value” (Strassler 2006: 60). This work accepts the idea that competition has both a motivational and a disciplining effect, but questions whether the ‘competitive,’ ‘achievement-oriented’ subjects to which it gives rise actually have the attributes necessary to ensure prosperous futures.

Additional work interrogates the very framing of development and prosperity as matters of individual mindset. Gellert (2015: 387) suggests that the individualist emphasis on ‘inspiration’ and ‘optimism’—and, we might add,

‘(achievement) motivation’—within Indonesian ideologies of education and development “suppresses analysis of the causes of [pupils’] everyday conditions and of relevant political and social action that might lead to real changes in these conditions.” Most Indonesians, he notes, are structurally disempowered from accessing the resources and opportunities necessary to realize their potential—a point concealed within discourses of ‘mindset’ and ostensibly meritocratic competitions. Moreover, the individualist and competitive ethos of contemporary development ideology risks inhibiting the formation of solidaristic youth movements capable of responding to Indonesia’s contemporary challenges in more effective ways (ibid.: 389).

Though Gellert writes of Indonesian educational policies in general, rather than competitions in particular, a more explicitly competition-focused version of this argument is found in Keddie’s (2016: 116–118) study of an English primary school where pupils showed a “strong investment in competition.” Kids “organised themselves in relation to targets, indicators and evaluations within the external measures of success at school that count, i.e. classroom ability setting/streaming and standardised academic tests and competitions,” and their rankings in these tests and competitions became central to their identities and senses of self-worth. Moreover, they viewed responsibility for success and failure as matters of individual choice, looking harshly upon less successful peers, and experiencing guilt, dissatisfaction, and perfectionism regarding their own accomplishments. Keddie (ibid.: 119) concludes that they are “children of the market, . . . crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives that seem, to them, natural or normal,” but at considerable social and personal cost.

Such arguments reflect wider skepticism within the human sciences regarding the desirability of competitive, achievement-oriented, ‘neoliberal’ selves. These selves have been characterized (caricatured?) as suffering from the vulnerabilities, grandiosities, and impaired empathetic capacities of narcissism (Layton 2014), reflecting the way that “[the principle of] competition has framed social relations as a zero-sum game” such that “one person’s success and standing appear at the expense of another’s” and actors have “strategic advantages in denying the agency and limiting the autonomy of others” (Asen 2017: 339). In such portraits of ‘the neoliberal subject,’ relationships with others are “disavowed” (ibid.: 340), or conceptualized as strategic “alliances” between selves—envisioned primarily as like businesses, or as accumulations of skills and traits—in ways that Gershon (2011: 537) deems “morally lacking.”

Although diametrically opposed to technocratic modernization theory in their *political* visions, scholars writing in this vein often accept the premise that “heightened competition, individualism and individual responsabilization” in educational settings do indeed “work along with the reduction in

social responsibility to produce the entrepreneurial subjects best fitted for the neoliberal workplace” (Davies and Bansel 2007: 254). However, a growing body of work has suggested that such heavily drawn portraits of ‘the neoliberal self’ underplay the ongoing importance of relational moralities in contemporary capitalist societies (see, e.g., Hookway 2018; Trnka and Trundle 2014). Ethnographies of competitive practices offer some support for such a view, showing how achievements may be envisaged as something done *for* others, such as one’s family, community, or nation (Bayly 2013). Anthropologists have also shown that, rather than necessarily involving ‘dog-eat-dog’ or ‘winner-takes-all’ individualism, competition can be about positioning oneself in particular ways within a group (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002) or “the excitement of working together while trying to outdo each other, and the actual improvement this extra motivation can bring to . . . all participants” (Kajanus 2019: 72). Clearly, although competing *can* generate the kinds of zero-sum competitive individualism stereotypically associated with neoliberalism (as Keddie’s study demonstrates), such an outcome is not inevitable. So why should competitive practices give rise to one type of subject, rather than another, in any given case?

Kajanus (2019) addresses this question when comparing two Chinese schools, characterized by an ethos of “zero-sum” and “mutualistic” competition respectively. Their differences, she concludes, reflect contrasting “orientations to the individual and the group” among the demographics at each school, orientations that “vary along geographical, generational, and class lines” (ibid.: 80). Such prevailing ‘orientations’ are certainly important for anthropologists of competitions to understand. However, by according them such analytic significance, Kajanus’s contextually driven explanation risks reducing ‘what competition does’ to the expression and intensification of preexisting systems of value and meaning. In such an account, competition’s consequences for subjectivity are automatic and predetermined. The generative potential of competitions as social occasions is thereby underplayed—an analytic foreclosure that sits at odds with the emic views of competitors, who often identify specific competitions as decisive ‘turning points’ in their lives. In the remainder of this article, I thus outline an alternative approach, foregrounding *the course events take* in an understanding of what competition does—including its capacity to generate the very ‘neoliberal subjects’ with which it is so frequently associated.

Afterlives and Alter-Lives: Reconceptualizing Competitions

To truly understand competitions’ consequences for subjectivity, we must foreground the affective, emotional, and existential implications of the almost

inevitable disconnect between a competition's afterlife (the actual events that transpire as a result of the competition) and its alter-life (the events that *could* or *should* have occurred). In formulating my distinction between 'afterlife' and 'alter-life,' I take inspiration from recent work on 'the alter-', which characterizes it as an imagined, subjunctive domain, suffused with desire for something better and thus serving as a site from which both critiques and alternative possibilities can emerge (Appleton et al. 2020; Hage 2015).³ One's precise relationship to an alter-life (and, by extension, the consequences of its nonrealization) will vary depending on how realistic a prospect it is understood to be (its 'could-ness'), and the extent to which it fulfills one's own, or others', normative expectations (its 'should-ness'). Nevertheless, in all cases the subject is confronted with, and must somehow respond to, a disconnect between 'the alter-' and reality.

A latent notion of the disconnect between a competition's afterlife and its alter-life is already evident in both Indonesian officials' and modernization theorists' explanations of how competitions engender motivated subjects. When Tourism Department officials argue that someone becoming a champion will give their classmates "motivation to be more disciplined so that they can win a prize in the competition next year," they are invoking the motivational power of this disconnect. Rather than being a loser (the afterlife), the classmate *could* have become a champion (the alter-life). If only they had been more disciplined! Similarly, when McClelland et al. (1953) describe the motivational force of shame felt after failing to meet a "standard of excellence," they too invoke the affective power of the disconnect between what is and what could (and perhaps *should*) have been. If an alternative scenario were not present in one's mind, there would be nothing to feel ashamed about.

These motivational psychologies err, however, in presuming that responsibility for such disconnects will be assumed by the competitor rather than ascribed to third parties—a presumption also implicit in the claim that a "strong investment in competition" within neoliberal educational settings generates "responsibilized" subjects who understand achievements and failures as a result of personal choices (e.g., Keddie 2016). The Riau Islands example demonstrates that this need not be the case. A postcolonial history of neglect and underinvestment has entrenched perceptions that the region suffers from 'low human resource quality'; as such, disappointing competition outcomes are often blamed on the incompetence or inexperience of competition organizers or judges rather than an individual competitor's shortcomings (Long 2013b). Such dynamics are compounded by a broader "crisis of credibility" in post-Suharto Indonesia (Strassler 2009: 40), which can foster suspicions that a competition's outcome has been influenced by corruption, nepotism, or the intrusion of other private 'interests' (*kepentingan*). It is important to pay

close ethnographic attention to these different possible ways of accounting for a competition's outcomes. For instance, if the disconnect between a competition's afterlife and its alter-life is attributed not to an entrant's personal deficiencies but to the incompetence or immorality of a third party, that disconnect may be a source not only of disappointment but also of moral outrage, the alter-life being imbued with a much higher degree of 'should-ness' than in a competition viewed as fairly and professionally run. Far from being motivated to strive harder next time, competitors may be overwhelmed with resentment, or feel that there is little point in competing again.

A further misstep within McClellandian and technocratic motivational psychologies lies in assuming that those who succeed in competitions will experience unadulterated pleasure, as if they could not also find the afterlife of victory to fall painfully short of their envisaged alter-life. To be sure, the immediate moment of winning is often enjoyable. Yet to actualize a fully fleshed-out alter-life requires such complex choreographing of different actors that even victorious competitors are likely to be faced with some degree of disconnect between the reality of a competition's afterlife and that which they would have anticipated.

While motivational psychologists and Indonesian officials formalize their understanding of disjunctures between afterlives and alter-lives to generate a fully-fledged but overstated theory of motivation, it is sufficient for an anthropological approach to proceed from the foundational claim that disconnects between the afterlives and alter-lives of competition have affective and experiential consequences that prove essential to determining what competition does. The nature and extent of those disconnects, the ideas that are used to make sense of them, and the forms of self-cultivation and sociality to which those understandings give rise must all be matters for ethnographic investigation. Such an approach moves analysis beyond the reductive ways in which the principle and practice of competition have typically been understood (see Hopkinson and Zidaru, this issue), valuably diversifying our understandings of what competition might do, and of how and why it might do the things with which it is conventionally associated.

To demonstrate this, I turn to two case studies in which a concerted investment in competition seemingly gave rise to a stereotypically 'neoliberal' subject. However, this outcome did not occur straightforwardly as a result of competition's disciplining force. Rather it stemmed from the painful disconnects between subjects' envisaged alter-lives and the afterlives that resulted from entering competitions. Thinking across two quite different types of competition (vocational education and sports) helps to provide proof of concept for the approach advocated in this article, while highlighting several pervasive institutional and structural dynamics that warrant greater consideration in critical scholarship on competitions within Indonesia—and beyond.

Grand Designs: Sarwadi's Story

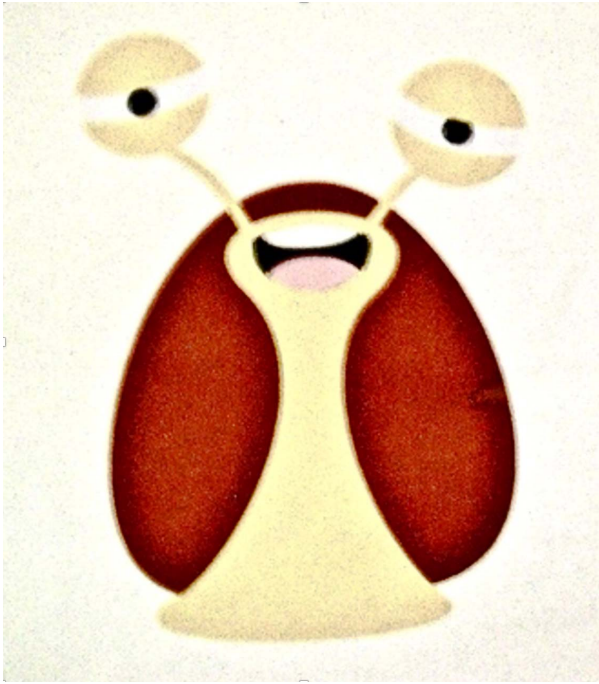


FIGURE 1: Sarwadi's image of Snaly (credit: Author).

Snaly is the son of the Snail King and is in the process of finding his identity (*jati diri*). Having been exiled after failing his 'Sticking to Branches' exam, he has gone to the forest, overcoming all obstacles, and is practicing sticking to branches there. Finally, he will return with pride in an extraordinary *prestasi*: he will be able to stick to a branch for five whole seconds. (Caption for "Snaly", as displayed in an exhibition at Kepri College).

Snaly is the creation of someone who was himself no stranger to 'extraordinary *prestasi*': Sarwadi, a young man with a passion for design.⁴ Growing up in Java, Sarwadi never anticipated living in the Riau Islands. His route to the region had been complex. As a high school student, he had become a national champion in the field of graphic design, even earning Indonesia an Honorable Mention at international level. Education Department officials had assured him that he could have his pick of scholarships to enroll in prestigious Indonesian and overseas universities—a fitting reward for his *prestasi*. Feeling that he would gain more by studying abroad, Sarwadi declined his domestic scholarship offers. Yet as time went on, and deadlines for registration with Indonesian HEIs expired, there was no sign of his scholarship money, nor was he advised on how to

enroll for studies overseas. Even when he publicized his plight in the media, no scholarship was forthcoming. He began to feel overwhelmed with sadness and anger. Then, one day, after an interview on a TV news program, a producer informed him that a caller wanted to speak to him. The caller introduced himself as the rector of an HEI in the Riau Islands (which I will refer to as ‘Kepri College’) and offered Sarwadi a lectureship in design. Sarwadi accepted and moved to the Riau Islands to start his unexpected new life as a college educator.

I was surprised to discover that Sarwadi was a lecturer, because the exhibition in which I had first seen his graphic designs identified him as a Kepri College *student*. But, as Sarwadi explained, his job required him not only to teach but also to represent Kepri College in public events, exhibitions, and contests. Invariably ranking highly in such contests, he could thereby bolster his own list of *prestasi* while helping, somewhat deceitfully, to build the reputation of Kepri College as a place where high-quality human resources were made.

Eight months later, Sarwadi decided to leave. Kepri College had been smaller than he had envisaged, the wages were low, and the workplace culture was poor. Moreover, despite—indeed, *because of*—his being the poster boy of Kepri College’s achievements, Sarwadi was unhappy about his relationship with the institution. “I don’t feel valued (*dihargai*),” he explained, “I feel taken advantage of (*dimanfaatkan*).” This was a pattern that Sarwadi had encountered before. Unlike his cartoon characters, to whom *prestasi* and competitive victories often afforded opportunities to achieve recognition and reintegration with previously rejecting father figures, Sarwadi found that his *prestasi* had heightened his feelings of disconnection.

He had left his high school in Java on distinctly ambivalent terms. He was grateful to the school for providing him with the knowledge and opportunities that enabled him to become national champion. However, following his victory, the school had displayed his picture above its gates, explaining that this would attract new enrolments. Sarwadi saw this as the school acting in its own “interests,” and “taking advantage of him because of his *prestasi*,” rather than truly valuing him as a high-potential achiever. Then, no sooner had he arrived at Kepri College than his photo had been similarly displayed, using his accomplishments as a recruitment tool. He was, he felt, only valued because of his *prestasi*: he had become an asset in others’ pursuits of their “interests,” rather than the central actor in his own life.

When interviewing high-achieving young Indonesian men and women about their experiences of success, I asked them what recommendations I should make to the Indonesian government. The most common reply was that high achievers should be “valued more.” Interviewees whose living rooms were festooned with trophies, and who had sometimes been profiled as inspirational figures in local newspapers, wanted bigger trophies, more prize money, and, most of all, scholarships to study overseas. They spoke in

wounded tones as they outlined how “little” they had received. Yet what could seem like entitled narcissism had more complex, relational dimensions. For my interlocutors, their *prestasi* indicated a “self-potential” (*potensi diri*) that could be used to help others and yet could only be fully realized by spending time in regions deemed ‘more developed,’ ideally places outside Indonesia (see also Long 2023). Existing reward structures, while recognizing them as extraordinary, did not recognize just how much more extraordinary they had the potential to become. For the vast majority of these interviewees, who, even when relatively well-off, came nowhere close to being able to afford the costs of an international undergraduate education, the divergence between their own afterlives of competition and the alter-lives they sensed could have been possible hinged on how much the state was prepared to value their potential.

For Sarwadi, these issues felt especially raw. He was, after all, literally entitled to a scholarship that had never materialized. He had not, he felt, been valued by the state—and the people at Kepri College did not really value him either. Thoughts of an alter-life where he was studying overseas continued to smolder—perhaps leading many of his cartoon characters to also experience being cast out of their rightful place. But, like Snaly, Sarwadi had settled on a plan to return triumphant. He would move to Jakarta, get a job, and develop his skills in a series of “short courses.” He had initially planned to save up his wages until he could study abroad, but was now having doubts. “I’m not sure formal educational institutions are suitable for me,” he reflected, “I don’t like being *terikat* (bound, committed, tied down by obligations).”

A kind, generous, and caring young man, Sarwadi was by no means the ruthlessly self-interested figure depicted in some portraits of neoliberal subjectivity. He did understand his personhood as an accumulation of traits, skills, and “potentials” (*pace* Gershon 2011), but was willing, even eager, to nurture these in relational matrices of mutual support and be useful to his community and nation: an aspiration observed more widely across Indonesia (Schut 2019). Ultimately, though, he eschewed the intense relationalities and obligations associated with belonging to an educational institution, bound to each other in a relation of “mutual possession” (Long 2011), in favor of the relationalities of the free market (both as wage laborer and as consumer of “short courses”). He did so because the afterlife of his victories felt expropriative, stressfully dependent on unreliable conduits of support, and affectively unsatisfying.

This outcome was not inevitable, nor intrinsic to competing per se. It stemmed, firstly, from the institutional failings that led to his promised scholarship disappearing (Sarwadi suspected it had been corrupted away). It also resulted from the intense marketization of education in Indonesia—which prompted the authorities at his school and at Kepri College to use him as a ‘selling point’, but which led Sarwadi himself to feel he had been “taken advantage of” to further others’ “interests.” Painfully aware of what his life

after the competition could and should have been, Sarwadi decided to change course, rejecting the problematic ways that his *prestasi* “bound” him to the entities he was expected to represent in favor of the more fully alienated satisfactions of work and wage.

For his friends, Sarwadi’s story offered a cautionary tale about getting ahead in Indonesia. “I feel depressed about the state of education in this country,” explained Yasin, one of Sarwadi’s students at the college. “What prospects are there for us when we do well? Look at Sarwadi—he’s a great guy. He was a national champion. He’s represented Indonesia [overseas]. And now what has he become?” Sarwadi’s story—alongside those of countless educational and sporting champions who “came to nothing” (see also Long 2023: 263-73)—had convinced Yasin that he had to rely on himself to get ahead. It was precisely because a competition’s relational afterlife could not be depended upon, relying as it did on the support of unreliable allies, that people like Sarwadi and Yasin ultimately embraced a life of individualized self-propulsion.

Ring-Fenced: Aksel’s Story

A Protestant Toba Batak living with his parents and brother in the provincial capital of Tanjung Pinang, Aksel was a man in his early twenties with a burly body and a bad reputation. Working as ‘muscle for hire’ for various shady employers, he seemed to embody the amorality of both the free market (Bone 2012) and the Southeast Asian ‘man of prowess,’ whose status derives not from the legitimacy of his actions, but his capacity to get things done (Anderson 1990). In his neighborhood, he was a figure of both fear and fun—not least for his habit of breaking off conversations to flex his muscles or boast about the size of his body. “Aksel’s hard to be around,” complained Husor, a neighbor of similar age. “He likes fighting and causing trouble. I don’t like the way he deals with problems—always resorting to violence. His way of thinking is still primitive. I prefer talking, trying to find solutions peacefully. But Aksel—he’s more interested in making his body big and in *jago-jagoan*.”

An extensive literature on the *jago*, or local strongman, describes a figure associated with criminality, extortion, and violence but sometimes romanticized as a people’s champion, motivated by honor and justice (Wilson 2012). However, while the term *kejagoan* is used to evoke and describe forms of strongman masculinity, *jago-jagoan* carries more negative connotations, signaling someone motivated not by “noble values” but a base desire for power (de Grave 2014: 79), and whose behavior involves “acting like a champion when one really isn’t” (Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2004: 401).

Aksel did fit some aspects of Husor’s unflattering profile, being hot-tempered, callous toward his girlfriends, and openly willing to work “for anyone.”

Yet I came to know him as a more complex figure: someone determined to protect those close to him, who cared deeply about his younger brother's education, worried he was ugly, railed against discrimination toward minorities, and whose life story came closer to "acting like a champion when one really isn't" than Husor might have realized.

Aksel's parents had always wanted him to be a boxer, although he only began the sport in senior high school, when his body began "getting big." He recalled with pride that he was barred from sparring with his peers for fear he might hurt them. Even against adults, Aksel could hold his own: his upper body was strong and his hands very fast. He soon acquired a reputation for knocking opponents out cold with a blow to the jaw. Aksel believed himself good enough to fight at the national level, perhaps even becoming a national champion and competing internationally. "I don't know if I'd have managed to see the world," he reflected, "but at the very least, we [Tanjung Pinang's boxers] would have gotten some funds provided by the mayor's office." The municipal government was ill disposed to boxing, Aksel explained, considering it unrefined (*kasar*), and was consequently unlikely to provide much funding unless this was an area in which Tanjung Pinang was seen to excel above other districts in the province. Given this, Aksel did not envisage his prospective victory as an achievement for himself alone. He would, in the traditions of the classic *jago*, be a champion *for* the municipal boxing community, securing funds for them via his accomplishments.

His big chance had come in 2006, when he was given a month's notice that the island of Batam would be hosting a provincial-level qualifying heat for a national championship organized by a nongovernmental boxing federation. Aksel's coach signed him up. To participate, he needed to lose at least 5 kg, while maintaining strength and fitness. This was an onerous undertaking, but Aksel accepted it as a necessary requirement for competing, commenting that he "didn't want to do too much damage to those boys from Batam." He undertook a grueling program of weight loss. Every noon, when most people stayed indoors to avoid the heat, Aksel would put on a jacket, gloves, and tracksuit bottoms, and run from his home to the town center and back (approx. 8 km). It was "almost unbearable," but the best way to burn off his body fat. Then, a day before the competition, with his body shrunk down to size, his coach was notified that the contest had been indefinitely postponed. Several weeks later Aksel heard that the regional qualifier would not be held at all. A boxer from Batam would represent the Riau Islands at national level. The only afterlife of the championship that Aksel would get to experience would be hearing how other boxers had done.

This was a knockout blow. His tortuous efforts to shed weight had been for nothing. It was clear to him that the people on Batam had been looking out for their own "interests"—and would continue to do so. He struggled to see any

credible pathway toward becoming a national champion. His rage led him to lash out and get involved in violent brawls. Having shrunk himself needlessly, he now reveled in making his body as big as possible. Estranged from his alter-life of beneficent *prestasi*, he became cynical. If people in Batam were looking out for themselves, why shouldn't he—even if that meant working for political gangsters, or supporting environmentally destructive practices like trawl fishing and open-strip mining? There was good money in it; the employers valued his strength and skill. It was only when his trawl nets caught a dolphin—a sign of misfortune—that he had doubts about the path he had taken.

Competition had offered Aksel the prospect of a life in which he could fulfill his parents' aspirations for him and provide beneficent care by virtue of his *prestasi*. Yet the disconnect between that alter-life and what he had actually experienced propelled him on a career path where he was available to the highest bidder, including in some of the most predatory and unethical branches of contemporary capitalism. He knew the work was “bad”—yet when his boss offered him compliments, or an advance on wages to help him upgrade his motorbike, he felt more valued and recognized than in the world of Indonesian boxing. Like Sarwadi, then, Aksel had come to express several characteristics of the calculating, self-interested, self-optimizing, and amoral ‘neoliberal subject’ following his experiences of competition. One could, perhaps, see such attributes as being foreshadowed in the habits that preparing for the boxing competition had inculcated—such as his intensive training regime (cf. Keddie 2016). Yet for Aksel himself, far more decisive was the bitterly disappointing cancellation of the provincial boxing competition. This course of events had led him to conclude that the only way to get ahead in Indonesia was to look out for oneself.

Aksel's life as a ‘tough’ was not one that he followed unreflexively. Shortly after finding the dolphin in his nets, he encountered his old boxing coach who encouraged him to come back as a sparring partner for the next generation of Tanjung Pinang's schoolkid boxers. He planned to do so—hoping to discover that he had not lost his touch and that there might still be a chance to become a national boxing champion after all. Though the afterlife of his first championship entry had led to him pursuing the amoral life of a muscle-for-hire, he held out hope that future competitions might engender the alter-life he had initially envisaged, including the relational moralities by which it was characterized.

Conclusion

Widespread competitions are staged in Indonesia in order to foster an achieving mindset that will drive citizens to seek out opportunities, compete effectively with other countries, and contribute to both personal and national development.

In practice, competitions risk cultivating feelings of thwarted extraordinariness among victors and losers alike, alienating achievement-oriented citizens from their governments and leaving them feeling estranged from an alter-life that was rightfully theirs. As the cases presented in this article reveal, such estrangement could have consequences for innumerable aspects of one's subjectivity, from the stories Sarwadi felt compelled to tell in his graphic designs to Aksel's short temper and obsession with his beefy body. It can also lead some Indonesians to abandon relational visions of themselves as beneficent community 'achievers' in favor of an individualized life on the labor market.⁵

Previous research has shown how competition can indeed lead to the highly individualized, 'dog-eat-dog' forms of sociality lamented by critics of neoliberalism, but has tended to see this outcome either as an automatic 'product' of strong investment in competition (Asen 2017; Davies and Bansel 2007; Keddie 2016) or a reflection of prevailing 'zero-sum' orientations within a particular sociocultural context (Kajanus 2019). The cases of Aksel and Sarwadi (and others, like Yasin, who learned from their stories) confound both such explanations. Initially, these men were oriented toward a more mutualistic, group-based vision of competition and success. It was only because of the specific course events took during and after specific competitions that they turned away from such conceptions of self and embraced the moralities of the market. Moreover, as highlighted by Aksel's story in particular, such emergent selfhood and moralities were by no means a stable endpoint of subjectification, but amenable to subsequent transformation, including via participation in further competitions.

To appreciate the full theoretical significance of this point, it is helpful to return to the definition of 'competition' with which this article began—Kajanus's (2019: 68) suggestion that it involves "individuals or groups pursuing an objective . . . through trying to surpass others." Clearly, if one follows this definition, competition raises important anthropological questions about what it means to be engaged in a sociality of "trying to surpass others." These questions have, quite rightly, been addressed at length in existing anthropological commentaries on competition. Yet Kajanus's definition also makes it clear that questions of whether the objective being pursued is attained or not, and how such outcomes are interpreted and experienced, are no less foundational to competition's study, at least in cases where competing is openly acknowledged as such, rather than being implicit, ambiguous, or disavowed. A focus on 'the course events take' should thus be no less central to the anthropological analysis of what competition does—and it is this point, I suggest, that has not always been fully appreciated in the existing literature. Such an approach may seem like an analytic surrender to contingency, but this need not be so if one identifies key principles influencing *how* events unfold (Dresch 1986: 313–314). The material presented in this article highlights two such principles

that were already recognized, albeit in imperfect fashion, by modernization theory psychologists—namely that competition and achievement are not just matters of fact, but matters of fantasy and imagination, and that any disconnects between the afterlife that one experiences and the alter-life that one had envisaged can have marked consequences for affective experience and future behavior. Having recognized this latter principle, one must also ask what factors influence the experience of that disconnect—a consideration that identifies some possible axes for a comparative anthropological analysis of competitions and their consequences.

The degree of ‘should-ness’ with which an alter-life is imbued is one such factor. Indeed, a key reason that the afterlives of competition proved so deeply painful for both Sarwadi and Aksel was that they both felt rightfully entitled to an alter-life that had not materialized. Sarwadi had been promised a scholarship. Convinced he had the talent to win at provincial level and secure resources for his municipality, Aksel had not only been estranged from this alter-life of success, but also from the further alter-lives of either becoming national champion or experiencing rightful defeat at the national level. For both men, the ‘should-ness’ of their alter-lives was heightened by what appear to be clear failings (intentional or unintentional) on the part of the institutions administering the competitions. What a competition does is thus to some degree a matter of governance, and determined by the actions of third parties as well as those who are actively competing.

However, the issue of ‘should-ness’ and righteous grievance concerns more than the shortcomings of specific institutions. Aksel and Sarwadi saw the problems they encountered as symptomatic of the broader crisis of credibility within Indonesian society. Both believed their situations to result from corruption and self-interest (as opposed to, say, incompetence, or honest mistakes)—a diagnosis that influenced both the emotional shading of their grievances and their ultimate decisions to look out for themselves. Moreover, as noted earlier, such analyses reflect an outlook that has become so common within post-Suharto Indonesia that it may even be applied to competitions that have been conducted with absolute sincerity and probity (Long 2013b). What a competition does, then, must always be understood with reference to the prevailing cultural politics of trust and suspicion. When a competition is fully trusted, and its outcome viewed as fair, any disconnect between afterlife and alter-life that takes place need not be any less existentially significant, nor indeed any less painful, than those I documented in Indonesia. However, it is liable to be understood, experienced, and responded to differently than a disconnect believed to stem from nefarious actions.

A final factor that may have made such disconnects especially challenging for my Indonesian interlocutors is how integral *prestasi* has become to both status acquisition and social mobility within contemporary Indonesia. While

competition victories offer valuable forms of social and cultural capital in many parts of the world, for most Riau Islanders they were the *only* credible pathway toward securing the funding, opportunities, and cosmopolitan lives they believed would enable them to help others. In Indonesia, to lose a competition, to be excluded from it, or to receive an underwhelming prize is thus to become estranged from an alter-life filled not just with pleasures but also moral worth, and to be confronted with a disconnect that is difficult to mediate.

Such dynamics are best offset by structural reforms, and point to the ongoing relevance of arguments that critique (Indonesian) social policies for failing to attend adequately to the roots of inequality (e.g. Gellert 2015). Those arguments often highlight how opportunities ostensibly available to all (such as competition victories) remain disproportionately available to “a privileged and transnationalised segment of the population” (ibid.: 389). The material outlined here affords some further, final insights. Discussions of privilege and inequality in relation to competitions should, I suggest, be extended beyond consideration of who stands the best chances of ‘winning’ to encompass the question of how one’s social and global positionality affects how much is at stake in competitions, and consequently determines one’s vulnerability to their administrative and existential ambiguities. By addressing such matters, it will be possible for anthropologists to develop more nuanced, contextual, and differentiated understandings of what competition does, and how.

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Notes

1. Whether New Order Indonesia can be considered ‘neoliberal’ is nevertheless a complex question, because these reforms were used to consolidate an authoritarian system of state capitalism (Hadiz and Robison 2005).
2. There are cases of alternative usages. For example, gender and sexual minorities in Indonesia sometimes describe their “morally worthy good deeds” as *prestasi*. Importantly, though, they do so as a “clai[m] for national citizenship and belonging” (Hegarty 2018: 357), a detail that highlights that the primary audience for *prestasi* is the Indonesian state and public—not God or other spiritual arbiters, for whom ‘good deeds’ would be described in other ways (e.g., *kebaikan*, *pahala*).
3. My conception of ‘alter-life’ thus differs markedly from Murphy’s (2017), which is a life *already altered* (in her case, by exposure to chemicals).
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. The two cases presented here were selected because they demonstrate this dynamic especially clearly. That clarity partly results from gender norms that give young unmarried Indonesian men considerable freedom to determine their own life trajectories and place less pressure on them to be attuned to the relational needs of others. For young women, becoming a ‘career woman’ can carry negative stigma (Adamson 2007), while cultural expectations that young women defer to the judgments of their parents meant that, for many, the response to a competition’s outcome was negotiated at a familial level. Disconnects between a competition’s afterlife and alter-life could be no less significant for women’s subjectivity as a result of this, however, and I met several women in the Riau Islands whose stories bore a strong resemblance to those of Aksel and Sarwadi.

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