Distinction, Communication and Mimicry in Indonesian Café and Angkringan

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ABSTRACT

Food and beverage are probably one of the most obvious fields of consumption, which produces and reproduces distinction. In the Indonesian context, especially in Yogyakarta Special Province and its surroundings, this argument is represented in the phenomena of angkringan and café. This paper discusses these phenomena with the perspective of habitus, practice and distinction as proposed by Bourdieu. I propose that angkringan is a cultural sphere representing the lower-class habitus, a place for lower-class practices. Meanwhile, the café is a cultural sphere that represents the upper-middle-class habitus, a place of distinction practices of upper middle-class. This distinction practice is performed in the notion of ‘mimicry’. In other words, to establish the distinctions to the lower class, the upper-middle class mimics some aspects of Western culture, namely going to and enjoying the café. Recently, a new style is spreaded, a mixture of angkringan and café: a half angkringan, a half café, usually visited by the upper-middle class. I argue that this new phenomenon confirms the thesis of ‘slumming’ activities of the upper-middle class to the lower class.

Keywords: Angkringan; Café; Communication; Distinction; Habitus; Mimicry; Slumming.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the café and angkringan phenomena in Indonesia, especially in Yogyakarta Special Province, a specific cultural area in Java Island, and its surroundings. It is based on a long participative observation as a local people of Yogyakarta Province. In the first section, I describe the object of this study, café and angkringan in Yogyakarta and surrounds. Then, in the next section I sequentially analyze the object with the concept of (1) habitus and distinction, as proposed by Bourdieu, (2) semiotics model of communication as suggested by Fiske, and (3) mimicry as offered by Bhabha. Finally, in the last section, I analyze the newest phenomenon called angkringan-café, basically with the same critical perspective I used in the previous sections.

2. Angkringan and Café in Yogyakarta, Indonesia:

Angkringan is a kind of sidewalk diner or a food stall that usually opens from afternoon to late night, some even to early morning. This diner occupies non-permanent space and uses an easy to assemble tarpaulin roof. The word ‘angkringan’ itself comes from the Javanese word ‘angkring’ or ‘nangkring’, which means ‘sitting relaxed’. Angkringan’s distinguishing features lay on three factors: its position is located on the roadside, its main device is a wooden cart, and its main dish is sego kucing. Angkringan can be found in cities and rural outposts, and always on the side of the road. In the cities, it usually occupies the sidewalk, while in the villages it often locates in the corner of intersection, or the side of main street [17-19,21].

The main device of angkringan is a rectangular wooden cart, completed with two wheels, designed to sell a variety of foods, covered by plastic tarps. On the front and the sides of the wagon, there are several long benches; each can fit three to five people. If the
benches are not enough for many buyers, then the owner will spread the mat where the buyers can sit on it (locally known as lesehan). The seller usually stands at the backside of the cart. Nearby there are two to four buckets of water used for washing glasses, plates, spoons and forks. The lighting is usually just one or two thithir or teplok (kerosene fuel), so it is dim and bit dark (Javanese call it as remang-remang).

On the top of wooden cart, at the right side, there is a coal stove, with two or three large kettles on it, each containing water, tea, and ginger extract. They are boiled continuously. The typical drinks in angkringan are tea, ginger, coffee, milk, and some combinations of them such as coffee milk, ginger milk, ginger tea, and so on. The left side of the cart is filled with variety of foods like rice; a wide range of Indonesian traditional side dishes such as tempe, tempe bacem, sate, or tofu; some kinds of crackers; and cigarettes sold at retail per stick. The special dish is sego kucing (rice cat). This special food got its name from the size, which is relatively small, as small as a cat portion food. Indeed, this food is only handgrip rice with anchovy sauce or fried tempe. The prices for food and beverages in angkringan are very cheap and affordable for all people, including the lower classes. For example, the price for a sego kucing is about 2,000 to 4,000 IDR, a cup of tea or coffe is also around 2,000 to 4,000 IDR.

In addition, transactions in angkringan are based on social trust. Customers are allowed to take any food they want by themselves (self-service). Seller only serves the drink ordered by customer. He would not pay attention to the foods taken by customers. Payment is made before customers want to leave the angkringan. The customers mention what foods and beverages they have been consumed, and the seller calculates how much they should pay.

Another characteristic of angkringan is its limited space that leads people to sit physically close one to another. Meanwhile, the dim lights make the buyers’s appearance is not considered important or even noticed. Dressing up is not required in angkringan. Often, customers come wearing sarong, a traditional Indonesian clothing generally use for informal events. Thus, there is no social status indicator in terms of fashion. The only signifier of social status is the vehicle as some buyers come by car while others arrive by motorcycle, bicycle, or even on foot.

Interestingly, people rarely do takeaway in angkringan. Instead, they usually stay in angkringan for hours, to chat to others as they come to angkringan not only for eating, but also for meeting and talking to other buyers. Even the seller often jumps into the conversations. The conversation currency could be anything. However, some of the most frequent topics are contemporary Indonesian political issues, the bad behavior of Indonesian politicians and celebrities, or daily events in their own environments. These informal discussions usually taking place in flexible setting, switching uncertainty from one topic to another, ranging from public to private issues. Egalitarianism or equality seems to be the basic principle in the conversation so everyone is free to express his or her opinions, regardless their backgrounds.

As the opposite of angkringan, the second object of this study is café, which can be easily found in the city center instead of rural areas. Some café occupies its place permanently, in one single building or a particular space in a larger complex of buildings, such as malls, supermarkets, hospitals, office complexes, movie theaters, or other [8].

A café usually has a service table, similar to the bar. The spaces for customers are designed to be comfortable for eating, drinking, and chatting. It consists of several sets of table-chair. A table is usually surrounded by two to five seats and is completed with number to ease the service and payment. There is a room between a set to another to maintain the privacy of the talks. The small cafés usually have three to five sets of table-chair, while the bigger ones have more than twenty sets. The room is usually equipped with music player and certain themes of decoration, adjusted with the segment of its customers. A café for 30 years old and over will have the 70’s or 80’s nuances in their paintings, music or furnitures. On the contrary, the young segment café, which is mostly visited by university students, plays Top 40 music, and has bright or festive wall color and contemporary decorations.

The foods served in one café to another are varied. However, the common feature is the Western-style foods and beverages, both in terms of the name, the process and the presentation. Actually, the basic ingredients for the beverages are quite similar to angkringan menu, i.e. coffee, tea, chocolate, or milk. However, buyers will find them in their foreign names, such as moccachino, caffelatte, espresso, cappuccino, macchiato, and others. Another difference also lies in the making process. The beverages are processed by modern machinery, presented in beautiful and attractive appearances. As for the foods, customers will find several types of Western foods such as pizza, burgers, french-fries, steak, spaghetti, and others. These foods will served in indulging ways, completed with western table manner. In café, the buyers are fully serviced. They only need to sit down, order food and drinks, and then the order will be served in front of them.

The prices in café are much higher than in angkringan. The price of a cup of coffee in café is approximately five to ten cups higher than its price in angkringan. With 15,000 IDR, a buyer could eat and drink many foods and beverages in angkringan. Meanwhile, to eat and drink in café, a customer should prepare at least 50,000 IDR. Some cafés employ prepaid payment model, in which the buyers
come, order foods and drinks, pay, go to the table, and then the order delivered to their table. In contrast, some other cafés apply postpaid payment, which the buyers make orders, then the orders are delivered to the table, and payment is made when the buyer wants to leave.

Similar to the angkringan, the buyers usually linger in the cafés. They are also usually involved in particular conversation. However, the talks in café are usually more planned and on purpose. They know the talk partners and usually they already have an appointment to meet and chat in café. It is extremely rare for a buyer in café to sit with other buyers who are completely strangers. Visitors usually come to café by car, or at least by motorcycle. Most of them are professionals, businessmen, students, or other upper-middle groups. For them, café is a place to discuss business cooperation, to hold meetings, to conduct lectures, and so forth. Almost all café are complemented with free Wi-Fi access. Thus, it becomes a natural scene to see visitors open the laptop and surf to the virtual world in café. In sum, café is a place to work, not to relax.

### 3. Distinction and Habitus:

Based on the explanations beforehand, we can assert the differences between angkringan and café:

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<th>Table 1: Differentiation between Angkringan and Café.</th>
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According to Bourdieu, these differences are not natural or just ‘multicultural’, but are practices of distinction, in which the upper-middle class distinct themselves to the lower class. In this case, the upper-middle class distinct themselves by coming to café and consuming foods and beverages there. We may consider café as a distinctive feature functioning as a part of differences’ system, which allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed [7]. Since every class has their own properties, we may also regard café as one of upper-middle class properties and angkringan is one of the properties belong to lower class. Bourdieu [5] states that habitus is an embodied capacity, learned from the earliest stages of the individual life.

In the synchronic level, habitus is a "matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” consisting of constant interconnection between an individual to its environment, placing the individual in relations to the other subjects and objects, social groups and cultures. In the diachronic level, habitus is a product of history, but also produces history. Bourdieu declares:

*The system of dispositions - a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate conjunctural constraints) - is the principle of the continuity and regularity. (p. 82)*

We may also say that habitus is the internalized values of human being, created through a process of socialization and internalization in the earliest childhood development, strengthened by the education processes, and settling the way of thinking and behaving [7]. In sum, we may emphasize that the nature of habitus is its embodiment, embodied and internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history, and spontaneity, without consciousness or will [6].

We can analyze these natures of habitus in the phenomena of café and angkringan. First, food itself is an integral part of the habitus, something
embodied and internalized from the early days of life, including the taste, the way of perceiving and categorizing food, the way of eating, and the way of serving the food itself. All of them, the practice of food, are directly related to the body, which is ‘the most indisputable materialization of class taste’ and ‘reveal the deepest dispositions of the habitus’ [4]. Angkringan therefore is the perfect place for the lower classes, to express their taste in eating and drinking. They have been accustomed to the taste of certain foods as served in angkringan; used to eat and drink in a certain way, which commonly practiced in angkringan; and internalized to self-serving in eating and drinking, as found in angkringan.

However, Indonesian scholars have different positions in regards to angkringan. Some of them suggest angkringan as the cultural place for the lower class, grassroots, or common people in Indonesia. Their arguments usually based on its location, the prices of its dishes, or its owner and their social network [18, 19]. Others consider angkringan as a public sphere for everyone, regardless their social classes, as can be seen from its costumers [15]. In this case, I agree with the first position.

In contrast to angkringan, café is a fit place for the upper middle class. They have been educated to distinguish the appetizers from main meals and dessert. They have been trained to eat in particular table manner. They have been conditioned to choose tasty, health giving, light and less fattening foods, and they prefer to be served when it comes to eating. All these habits are exactly performed in the café.

Second, one important nature of the lower classes in Indonesia is its personal space that are much narrower than the upper class. Personal space refers to an area with invisible boundaries surrounding a person’s body into which intruders may not come [20]. One example of this boundary is seating preference of individuals within a group. I argue that this space is embodied since we spontaneity move when unexpected others come to this space. This theory explains why the lower classes used to be physically close to the others, including strangers, as we may see in angkringan. Otherwise, the boundary of personal space of the upper middle classes is indeed represented in the café.

Nevertheless, the phenomena of the upper-middle classes who also come to angkringan can be a basis to refute this argument. In some cases, the upper-middle classes could freely eat and drink with the lower classes in this sidewalk diner. It is part of the argument that the upper-middle class can easily do slumming into the lower classes. Slumming may be defined as a kind of activities conducted by the upper class through visiting the lower class places and engaging in their daily activities, for pleasure, romanticism, or other purposes. These activities show a complex relation between social knowledge, class formation, and urban settlement patterns. The word itself is derived from the word slum, a term that emerged from the industrialization era, referring to a region commonly occupied by the lower classes, which is usually dirty, crowded, inadequate shelter, poor sanitation, pollution, social violence, and others [22]. However, a reverse question should be proposed, whether the lower classes can also access café? Normally, the answer will be no. The lower classes could not access or at least reluctant to access the upper-middle classes properties due to several reasons.

4. Café and Angkringan as Communication:

How the upper-middle classes distinct themselves from the lower ones by going to the café and dining there? What is the nature of this distinction?

At a glance, we may think that an individual, because he/she comes from the upper-middle class, then he/she will go to café to communicate his status. On the other hand, a person who comes from the lower class will go to angkringan to express his social status. The distinction is acted as a deliberative action. It means, someone go to a café or angkringan because he is part of a particular social class. Going to the café or angkringan is the act of communicating certain social status that already exists before the action itself. Angkringan and café are merely medium or channel used to express something to others. The view is fit with a model of communication commonly referred as the process model [9]. In this view, the intention of the sender, the efficiency of the transmission process, and its effect on the receiver, become extremely important. Thus, the intention of the individual who comes to a café or angkringan, how the message through this action could be accepted, and the effects of it, become very important.

However, there are some problems in this perspective. It is true that sometimes a person can go to the café and consciously aims to show their social status. The upper-middle class sometimes deliberately choose a particular café to communicate their classes. However, how often does it happen? More often, it is a semi-spontaneous action; go to a particular café because someone feels comfortable being there. Feeling comfortable is often not fully realized because it is embodied and internalized, as part of the habitus. Furthermore, it will be more difficult when we talk about the effectiveness of the message. When we see someone goes to a café, would we then think, “I wonder why he comes to a café?”

Therefore, I prefer to look at this phenomenon from the semiotics model of communication [9]. There is no meaning prior to communication processes, as understood by the process model of communication. Meaning is constructed through and
in the act of communication. Thus, not because of someone comes from the upper-middle class, then he goes to the café. Instead, someone goes to the café and then because of it she/he is a member of the upper-middle class. Communication makes the individual a member of a community. Hebdige [11] states that someone becomes a member of a certain subculture because he dressed as a member of this subculture; not a person becomes a member of a subculture at first, the he goes out with its clothes style. Barnard [3] supports that argument by saying that fashion communicates our social identities.

Thus, someone goes to the café, then he is a member of the upper-middle class. Also, someone goes to an angkringan, then he is a part of the lower class. The act of going to a café or angkringan, as an act of communication, raises meaning. This meaning generation, as I have argued beforehand, often just happen spontaneously, naturally, and unconsciously. Someone goes to a café or angkringan just because he/she feels comfortable being there. If we also regard going to the café as an act of distinction, it is not necessarily mean an intentional or deliberative action. As I have pointed out, a distinction could also occur as a daily spontaneous and unconscious action.

5. Indonesian Café as Mimicry:

How café distinguish itself from angkringan? The distinction is created by trying to imitate some aspect of the Western culture. This, at the same time, affirms the binary opposition: ‘we - upper classes – the Western’ versus ‘they - the lower classes – the Eastern’.

In postcolonial perspective, this practice can be considered as one side of mimicry. Bhabha [4] explains:

At the intersection of European learning and colonial power, Macaulay can conceive of nothing other than “a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” – in other words a mimic man raised “through our English School,” as a missionary educationist wrote in 1819, “to form a corps of translators and be employed in different departments of Labour. (p. 128)

I have to notice that mimicry actually has double articulations. Mimicry, on one side, can be seen as the colonial strategies for normalizing the colonial subject, as Bhabha [4] states, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (p. 126). In order to establish its Self, the Western needs the Other, to which the Self should regulate it to be more civilized. In this way, only when the Other recognizes the Self and admits the superiority of the Self, the Self confirms its superiority to the Other. In the historical fact, the Western educated the Oriental people. Unfortunately, this education produced ‘mimic man’, ‘which to be Anglicized, is emphatically not to be English’ [4].

The mimic man is the other side of mimicry. Thus, in this paper, I refer more to the second articulation of mimicry, as the effect and irony of colonial discourse itself.

In this notion of mimicry, I propose that the birth and the development of café were closely related to the birth of mimic men in Indonesia. The mimic men need the appropriate environment that suits their habitus; that is ‘Western tastes, opinions, morals and intellect’. The café itself mimics the Western café. This argument can be found in the history and characteristics of café in Indonesia. From the historical aspect, there have been no academic studies that specifically discuss the emergence and the development of café in Indonesia, but it could be expected to emerge and develop since the early of 1990’s [1]. Meanwhile, the café or coffeehouse in the West have a very long history, dating back to the late 17th century, or even in the 16th century in Turkey [12,13].

The practice of mimicry can be seen in some basic characteristics of Indonesian cafés, especially in their naming, processing and presenting the dishes. Obviously, the names of foods and beverages, as mentioned above, imitate the names of food and drink in Western cafes. In the coffee processing techniques, Indonesian cafés mimic the use of Western modern machinery; while the traditional processes mainly rely on human labor. As for the food presentation, Indonesian cafés introduces Western table manner and initiates the categorization of appetizers, main menu and desserts, which is strange for common Indonesian people. Café also introduces the technique of using knife to eat, which was not previously known in Indonesia. Besides, the most important point, a person from the upper-middle class who comes and eats in café, is actually mimicking the West.

As the nature of mimicry, Indonesian café is not completely similar to Western café. In fact, it seems that some certain aspects of Western café have similarities with angkringan instead. Café in the West is a public spaces where people are sitting relaxed, doing personal socialization, watching the world, talking to their friends, holding business meetings, commenting on public events, or avoiding loneliness. Western café is also a place where a new or stranger people come and get acquainted with the locals [14,12]. Thus, western café has resemblances to angkringan in the notion of ‘sitting relaxed for adaptation and chatting’; differ from Indonesian café that is usually occupied for serious works. Gumpert and Drucker [10] notes:

In a coffee house sit people who wish to make visual if not verbal contact with strangers, who appreciate the possibility of unexpected conversation, who want the chance to converse with acquaintances or friends without the responsibilities attendant with hosting or visiting one’s private
6. New Angkringan-Café: Resistance or Cooptation?

Recent development occurred in the last five years is a mixture of angkringan and café: a half angkringan, a half café. In Yogyakarta, I could mention some of them, such as Pendopo Ndalem, Angkringane JAC, House of Raminten, Angkringan Mbah Darso, and so on. These angkringan-café serve angkringan menus such as sego kucing, tempe, tempe bacem, mendoum, sate, wedang uwuh, and so forth. However, the place, the arrangement of room, the chairs, the tables, the price, and the way of serving foods and drinks, follow the style of café. In this place, visitors hold business meetings or simply meet clients or business partners.

From the postcolonial perspective, this phenomenon may be related to the concept of hybridity. In this case, I refer hybridity more as the condition of being, which is characterized by mixing elements of different cultures and identities, and therefore producing new meanings or identities [2]. In the post-colonial condition, the mimic man often becomes the main performer of the mixing cultures. In other words, once the mimic man has done their mimicry, she/he then generates the hybrid culture.

Following the notion of postcolonial perspective, the mimicry practice or hybrid condition has a positive connotation for the Orient: showing of the resistance, creativity, and independence to the West. The colonized (the East) creatively takes certain aspects of the colonizer’s culture (the West), then interpret and re-create them according to local needs and contexts. In short, the appropriation is one form of colonialism resistance.

But, this position seems irrelevant to analyze the angkringan-café phenomenon in Yogyakarta. It is true that there is a creative process of remaking some aspects of Western culture in accordance with the local context. However, is it really a form of resistance? What kind of local contexts become the bases of this appropriation?

If we observe carefully the visitors who come to this angkringan-café style, we may find that almost all of them are the upper-middle class, such as local businessman, professionals, or at least university students. This makes this place inaccessible for the lower classes, not only because of the prices, which are very expensive for them, but also because of their habits. How could they come to this place on foot and in informal clothes, while all around them, people come by car, or at least motorcycle, and dress in fancy clothes? How would they feel comfortable in a kind of place where people talk about sophisticated theories of culture, the national education system reform, or business projects instead of simple daily topics?

Again, this confirms the thesis of ‘slumming’ activities of the upper-middle class to the lower class while the lower class can only stay in their places, could never access the upper-middle class properties.

In sum, I should clearly posit that this is a real example of cooptation. As the subculture of lower class becomes more popular, then the big business comes in, takes the subculture elements, combines them, and sells them [11]. In other words, as the angkringan becomes more and more popular, especially as tourist destination or attraction, then the upper-middle businessmen set up and combine it with the café style, in order to fit with the upper-middle class habitus.

References