

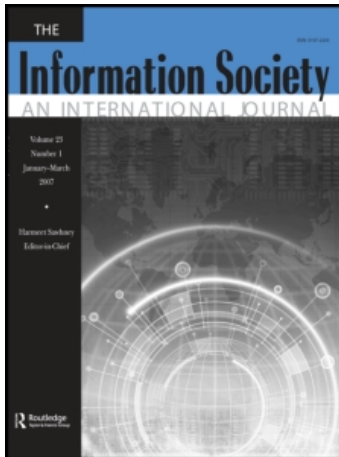
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Sex, Cannibals, and the Language of Cool: Indonesian Tales of the Phone and Modernity

Bart Barendregt ^a

^a Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

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Sex, Cannibals, and the Language of Cool: Indonesian Tales of the Phone and Modernity

Bart Barendregt

Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

In Indonesia mobile technology has come at the end of 35 years of the Suharto regime, and in its aftermath an era of new openness. Not surprisingly mobile phones are by many Indonesians associated with the new freedoms of this post-1998 period, facilitating newly emergent youth cultures, a hip mobile lifestyle as well as experiments with novel sexual identities. In a country characterized by stark contrasts—between center and periphery, city and countryside, and the rich and the poor—this has at the same time resulted in an uneven spread of technology, and thus in the coexistence of very diverse cellular markets. Through deliberating the pros and cons of mobile technology, new possibilities the phone seems to offer, and the often creative solutions people find in gaining access to mobility, it is shown how Indonesians try coming to terms with the otherwise abstract notion of (post)modernity.

Keywords Alternative modernities, mobile literature, pornography, Southeast Asia, subversion, use of technology, youth culture

BEING MODERN, MOBILE, AND MUSLIM IN INDONESIA

Today many social scientists accept that modernity occurs at a global scale, as something that is often multiple in character and without the prevalence of governing centers or master narratives to accompany it. This does not imply one should entirely neglect the Western discourse on moder-

nity, but at the same time by thinking through and against its self understandings and while studying alternatives, as Gaonkar (1999, p. 13) has suggested, one can provincialize such a Western modernity. In this contribution I consider one such an alternative reading of modernity by specifically focusing on the ways Indonesian people “make themselves modern” by creatively adapting, appropriating and sometimes subverting mobile media and practices.

The new millennium in Indonesia coincided with, on the one hand, the fall of the dictator Suharto, which triggered a national political reformation, and on the other a worldwide digital revolution that soon spread throughout the larger urban centers of the archipelago. Although Suharto’s New Order regime consistently stressed development as a marker of progress and modernity, the subsequent post-1998 period was initially seen as one of social justice, new opportunities, and openness, the latter being marked by Indonesians enthusiastically turning to all sorts of new small grass-roots media. A new era seemed to dawn, albeit very fragmentary in character, with many Indonesians clearly struggling between the certainty traditional structures have to provide, and the lure of new and the modern. Not surprisingly, late modernity in an Indonesian context increasingly has become defined in terms of technological innovation. For many urban Indonesians, modernity has also become equivalent to mobility, and this includes physical and social mobility but especially the eye-catching use of mobile media. Hence, in Indonesia one cannot overstate the representational value of mobile media. Rafael (2003), among others, has pointed out the often remarkable paradox that many developing countries are awash with the latest communication technologies but simultaneously continue to suffer with a poor infrastructure. The Indonesian case might well hold the key to further research on what are called Asian Modernities, as Indonesia is one of the countries that up to now has been least penetrated by information technology (IT) infrastructure. However, at the turn of the 21st century Indonesia is also a country that in the near future promises to be one of the fastest growing markets for the new and mobile media, not

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Address correspondence to Bart Barendregt, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9555, Leiden, The Netherlands. E-mail: barendregt@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

only within Asia, but worldwide. The image of the mobile phone is all-pervading in Indonesian everyday life. It is nowadays promoted in a wide range of glossy lifestyle magazines that are exclusively devoted to the phone and in reality TV and SMS (Short Message Service) phone-in shows, and the mobile is ubiquitously visible in advertisements and billboards that depict it as the ultimate form of Consumutopia (cf. McVeigh, 2000). But how has the enormous success of the mobile phone come into being in the Indonesian case?

In Indonesia, computer-mediated and mobile technologies specifically target the middle class as they are simply too expensive for the average person. It is important to realize that while burgeoning, the Indonesian middle class in early 2000 merely numbered an estimated 20 million people. This is only a very small portion of the country's population of 220 million people, of which almost 20% officially live below the national poverty line. Most of this middle class is urban and restricted to Jakarta and other provincial capitals. At the same time, its members increasingly serve as role models for Indonesians generally, dominating the media, advertising, and entertainment industry, which mostly feature a middle-class lifestyle that is aspired to by many. However, the term "middle class" should be carefully used. The newly wealthy of Southeast Asia's metropolises do not necessarily display the features of the middle class in the West: e.g., rationality, democracy, individualization, and secularism. Indeed, the newly rich are in many respects more orthodox and religious. Indonesia stands out in this regard as since the late 1980s there has been a considerable growth of what Murray (1991) calls "Islamic chic." This growth, accelerated by the consumer boom of the mid 1990s, has resulted in a contemporary form of Islamization and emergence of the so-called New Muslim (also evident in, for example, neighboring Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Brunei and Singapore). This latter term suggests not so much the simple reemergence of something old and familiar. Rather, it relates Islam to a modern world of lifestyle, talk shows, and fashion. The emphasis on modernity in the new Southeast Asian Muslim culture distances itself from older traditional cultural practices while at the same time clearly challenging the notion that the only way to be modern is through a Western model (cf. Barendregt, 2006a). A further contribution to our knowledge of Asian Modernities would be to study these mobile Middle Class Muslims, as such study provides a glimpse of a particular rather large segment of Indonesian and neighboring societies to which modernity and especially its symbolical aspects have become a key issue. Since a large part of the world's Muslims reside in this part of Southeast Asia, a study of this region might also afford an opportunity, as Hefner (1997, p. 6) suggests, to reconsider the varied potentialities of Islam in the modern era: an era in which Islam is continuously

reinterpreted in the altered circumstances of the nation-state, national "publics," and, not least, the (mobile) media that sustain them.

Indeed, there are many ways in which otherwise global mobile phone practices become domesticated, Indonesianized, and Islamized, as some examples may show. One phenomenon that stands out and has been commented on by various Indonesian newspapers over the past few years is Idul Fitr messaging. Idul Fitr is the annual Islamic holiday after the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Following tradition, people all over Indonesia return home at this time to restore social relations with their relatives and ask forgiveness for slights and misunderstandings. Idul Fitr is foremost a time for reconciliation. In November 2004, however, the cartoon Sukribo, which is published weekly in the national newspaper Kompas, commented on the annoying habit of many Muslims of paying more attention to the Idul Fitr SMS messages they received rather than to their friends and neighbors. The cartoon did not exaggerate the annoyance this "absent presence" caused (cf. Gergen 2002, p. 227). At the same time, one should be careful not to overstress the novelty of such phenomena, but try to separate what is new from older and thus continuous patterns and practices. Postal services in Indonesia generally *are* losing ground to texting services. Nevertheless, even though these services exist, singly or in combination, people still tend to go home during Idul Fitr holidays, even more so because networks tend to be down for days during these holidays. At the same time, the use of SMS texting has led to new literary forms, such as the *Lebaran SMS Pantun*, to which I will briefly return later in this paper.

There are numerous other examples of mobile media practices being Islamized, many of which have been reported in the international press, sometimes because they are trend-setting, such as a streaming voice-message service called *Al Quran Seluler*, consisting of divine verses of the Koran, or *Mobile Syariah Banking*, and at other times because they are hilarious or simply shocking, such as a Malaysian Islamic court's ruling that a mobile phone text message was a legitimate form of divorce. Although mobile practices are increasingly domesticated, such developments can never be seen as isolated from a wider global context. But again, the West is not the sole role model. A recent example shows how, in the absence of national brands, Middle Eastern telco companies are now targeting the Southeast Asian market with products aimed at a cosmopolitan Muslim audience and thus further complicating the global-local interrelationship. In 2004, the Dubai-based IltoneTel Corporation announced the Ilkone i800, its first GSM handset designed for the Muslim community, complete with a *kiblah* indicator giving the devout Muslim the proper direction to Mecca, as well as the full text of the Koran in both Arabic and English, complete with a search engine. And as yet another example, the

latest craze in some Yogyakarta Muslim shops at the moment is a digital Quran. This is a multimedia player that is popularly promoted as the “pocket Muslim” and even dubbed the “first Muslim I-Pod.” Eccentric as some of these examples are, they clearly stress a newly evolving Islamic consciousness: a mobility that is at once modern and distinctively Muslim (see also Barendregt, 2007a).

In the rest of this contribution I will only briefly turn to some of the explicit religious uses of mobile media, and at this stage I am more interested in the wider sentiments this mobile religiosity seems to tap into in an Indonesian context. This is often nothing less than the positing of an alternative to, let’s say, Western ideas on modernity. Hence, and related to the overall theme of this issue, I am especially concerned here with the ways the mobile phone in Indonesian society is presently being embedded in debates on modernity, and the change in habits and values it is so often thought to trigger by the majority of Indonesians. The present essay then presents a threefold approach to the ways the use of a mobile phone is instrumental in acting as a modern subject in contemporary Indonesia. This is, first, the stunning existence of parallel cellular markets that each address their own clientele, in their aspiration for a modern lifestyle. Second, I will briefly address the regular association of phone, language, and modernity, by taking a closer look at how and what young Javanese users prefer to text. Finally, I will turn to one of the darker sides of mobile modernity in an Indonesian context, which is the sudden emergence of mobile pornographic contents and the seeming urge for a more open and free lifestyle. However, before turning to these three alternative takes on mobile modernity, I will briefly deal with the official history of the mobile phone in Indonesia.

OFFICIAL HISTORIES . . . AND ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

Not surprisingly, most publications on mobile phones provide historical overviews of its development, from the early discovery of electromagnetic waves to the present third-generation cell-phones and possibilities yet to come. Budi Putra (2004) is one Indonesian author who likewise contemplates a future of fourth-generation mobile phones, whose introduction he anticipates in about 2010. He furthermore expects the holo-phone to appear by 2020, making possible the communication of three-dimensional images. In 2030, he concludes, mobile phones will be directly connected to the human brain, making telepathic communication possible. The story of mobile phones is often presented as entirely one of successes (McGuigan, 2005, p. 46). In that aspect it may be worthwhile to have a brief look at what is considered to be the official history of mobile media in Indonesia, before turning to some alternative scenarios and unforeseen effects.

In 1884, the Dutch colonial government established a private company to provide postal services and domestic and, later, international telegraph services. Telephone services were first available in the Dutch East Indies in 1882 and until 1906 were provided by privately owned companies under a 25-year government license. In 1961, most of these services were transferred to a newly established state-owned company, the later PT Telkom Company.¹ Since 1989 private businesses have been permitted to provide (then) secondary communications services, such as fax and cellular phone operations. Cell phones have in Indonesia actually been in use since the early 1980s, using then available older technologies like AMPS. At the time, car phones and pagers still seemed to be better alternatives, and even now, in spite of having lost much of their initial aura, these are still used by many Indonesians in the larger cities. When speaking about mobile phones, Indonesians say *HP* or *hape* (hand phone), although the word *ponsel* (cell phone) is also used, mainly in advertising. The cell phone only became important in Indonesia after 1994, the year that the Telkom Company started a GSM project in Batam’s growth triangle (Budi Putra, 2004, p. 96). That same year Satelindo became Indonesia’s first national provider of cellular services, although initially this was restricted to Jakarta. The next years two other national players entered the stage, with others following in subsequent years. By the late 1990s GSM phones also had reached Yogyakarta, the Central Javanese city where most of the data for this article were obtained (see later discussion). At present Indonesia has the most telco licenses of any nation in the world, although not all of them are used (Budi Putra, 2004, p. 100), and many companies have failed in the aftermath of the Asian monetary crisis of the late 1990s. In combination with Indonesia’s political instability and the eventual stepping down of Suharto in 1998, cell-phone infrastructure clearly was a far less risky enterprise than the further extension of a network of landlines. As a result, the various providers are at present involved in a “tower war” in which they are rapidly dividing the Indonesian hinterland among themselves. In the late 1990s mobile phone numbers were still very expensive, costing more than a million rupiah,² and like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, one normally had to wait quiet a while for the availability of new phone numbers. Two things saved the Indonesian mobile phone project. The first, which parallels neighboring countries, was the provision of prepaid cards (*kartu Prabayar*).³ In 1997 Telkomsel Company’s cellular branch introduced the first of these, *Simpati*. Others soon followed. At the end of 1997 there were officially 2 million mobile phones users in Indonesia, but as teenagers and students were targeted this number quickly grew. The second thing, which especially helped reach the latter groups, was the unexpected popularity of texting. An intra-operator SMS service was

introduced in 2001 and became a real hype. Particularly the low price of SMS compared to voice calls was a key factor in its success. This resulted not only in the growth of existing operators and the emergence of new ones, but also in a mushrooming of small shops, retailers, and distribution networks that sold new models, accessories, and especially vouchers. Sales of phone numbers were, moreover, boosted by selling so-called “beautiful numbers” (*nomor cantik*), which for a time became quite popular in Indonesia as well as neighboring countries. These were primarily numbers that were easy to remember, with for example the last four digits referring to the date of one’s birth or wedding. There is also a special category of alleged lucky numbers (*nomor hoki*). Although the popularity of such numbers is sometimes explained with reference to older Javanese traditions of numerological systems or *primbon*, these latter numbers are most popular among people of East Asian descent. These are often willing to pay a lot of money for *hoki* numbers, which they base on *Hong Shui* or *Feng Shui* (Matra, February 2000). These numbers are apparently not distributed through the usual channels, but are used by providers to speculate. In the early 2000s, newspapers and specialized web portals regularly advertised such numbers, sometimes at incredible rates.⁴

At present many vendors complain that prepaid cards these days have no more value than the pulses they contain. Due to the low price, consumers now seem to easily switch between cards and providers, with many people using different cards for different purposes (cf. Ling, 2004, p. 11, for some Norwegian parallels). Although statistics on active numbers are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that in 2005 there were between 20 and 30 million Indonesians mobile phone users—a number that at that stage was believed to double within a year’s time. While telecommunication services are no doubt the fastest growing industry in the country, it is significant that Indonesia still has one of the lowest penetration rates in the Asia-Pacific region, especially compared to neighboring Malaysia and Thailand, and especially Singapore. And yet Indonesia promises to be one of the future markets for mobile phone companies. The next step in the cellular boom is the long-awaited switch to a new technology, broadband CDMA, making possible entertainment, Internet, and video games, and likely at some stage to replace GSM. But with almost all Indonesian providers now offering cheap CDMA handsets and corresponding services, most of the people I talked to were still using a GSM phone. The reason for this was the complaint that the coverage of the CDMA services in some areas is still far from steady and a sent SMS message could take up to one day to arrive. An even more significant complaint was the generally dull outward appearance of most of the CDMA handsets. Especially young users stress the credo that increasingly “one is what one phones with” and many of these young people feared to be seen

with outdated mobiles. At the same time, it is not the latest technologies or models that at present should be held responsible for the enormous growth of the mobile market in Indonesian society, but rather the participation of hitherto digitally less well off groups: market women, pedicab drivers, but also school children and the older generation. Such leapfrogging in Indonesia made possible by the vast supply of secondhand phones, shops selling phones through intricate credit deals, and indeed more recently through inexpensive CDMA packages.

It is well worth taking a look at some of these stories at the other side of the digital divide, as they confirm that rather than mobile modernity being one, one should speak of “multiple mobilities.” By focusing on some of the local readings of mobile modernity in an Indonesian context I hope to add a focus on subaltern and complementary histories, much in line with earlier work on the telegraph or landline phone (Fisher, 1992; Marvin, 1988). The focus in mobile society studies hitherto has been on ruptures rather than on continuities, on the new possibilities of the device rather than its cultural adoption. We know little of the ways in which these technologies are successfully domesticated to realize its benefits and to minimize its disadvantages (cf. Green, 2001, p. 43). Few publications have looked at the historical diffusion of mobiles (but see Agar, 2003), let alone their (non)acceptance and local transformations in Indonesia. Goggin (2006) has recently stressed the need for such alternative histories to help us understand the success or failure of technologies, user-led innovation, and the sometimes-illegal strategies of less well off participants. Indonesian mobile modernity has produced its own forms of resistance, ranging from its association with terrorism, (political) subversion, and piracy to, as will be shown later, other moral anxieties along the seamy side of the information society. While there is generally a fascination with the novelty, there are also accounts that link mobiles to the world of the supernatural (Barendregt & Pertierra, 2008). Many are puzzled by the technology behind cell phones (cf. Burgess, 2004), and there have been reports of phones haunted by ghosts. These and other alternative readings provide us with condensed presentations of the ways in which many Indonesians today encounter the obscure entity called modernity through the prism of the mobile phone. Let us now turn to some of the initial findings.

MOBILE MODERNITIES IN A JAVANESE STUDENT TOWN

To place the initial fieldwork observations in their geographical context, one must realize that in an archipelago covering 1,905,443 square kilometers and consisting of about 7,000 inhabited islands, there is obviously much variety both in the distribution of phones and in existing

practices. Fieldwork for this essay was carried out during two visits of 3 months each to the Special Region Yogyakarta in 2004/2005 and 2006. While generally not as hi-tech as Jakarta, the Yogyakarta Region seems more representative for what is happening in other parts of Java, but to a certain extent also for the nation as a whole. Yogyakarta is, with 3 million mostly ethnic Javanese inhabitants, the second smallest of the 33 provinces of Indonesia. The region, with the similar named city of Yogyakarta as its capital, is reputed to be the cradle of High Javanese culture. Once the headquarters of the Republican army that fought the Dutch colonial forces, Yogyakarta still captures the mind of Indonesians as the City of Struggle. However, the city is also known as the City of the Arts and Culture, and is therefore an important pilgrimage destination of especially domestic tourists. Finally, and more important to this contribution, Yogyakarta is celebrated as the City of Education, housing 5 state and more than 50 private universities. A large part of Yogya's population consequently consists of students who come from all parts of the archipelago. One will not be surprised that mobile phones are tremendously popular among this student population, both as a means for them to keep in touch with what is happening back home, and very important also to stress their participation in a hip and modern youth culture that is everywhere visible throughout the city.

Much of the initial research focused on the area between the campuses of Sanatha Dharma, Universitas Negeri, and Gajah Mada University. At the heart of this area is Mozes Street, where one can find specialized shops that sell anything from software and hardware to various prepaid cards and all sorts of gadgets. Additional observations were made in the typical Yogya youth hangouts, including Internet cafés where manuals, ring tones, and pornography are regularly exchanged, but also places like the Ramai and Jogja shopping malls, where especially teenagers and students come to buy or simply spot the latest mobile trends.⁵ Although many people were asked about particular topics, I had the opportunity to interview about 90 people more extensively. This is of course hardly representative of what is happening in Yogya, let alone Indonesia, but at least it gives us a clue of what the main issues are. Most of the interviewees were students, others were teachers, shop owners, or civil servants, and one complete family was included as a sort of case study. Intentionally, few telco experts were included in this sample, as the focus is here on the actual use by ordinary people rather than the top-down strategies of multinational companies. Besides this survey, additional data were obtained during interviews with spokespeople of providers and owners of cellular shops. An analysis of media such as newspapers, cell-phone magazines, TV advertisements, SMS manuals, and online forums provided more data on some of the debates in which the mobile is currently embedded in Indonesia. Finally, observation of

users and personal subscription to SMS services were a supplementary source of information. The main research question in all of this was the extent to which users perceive the use of mobile media as being modern, and more specifically what it means to different users in different contexts, e.g., the subjective experience of mobile modernity.

Starting with the second question, if mobile modernity means different things to different users, it is striking that at first sight there is not much difference between male and female use of mobile phones, except that girls have a slight preference for Nokia phones while boys tend to choose Samsung or Siemens models. The reason for this difference lies in the fact that compared to boys, girls spend more money on gadgets such as small dolls and key holders and often change the casing of their phones.⁶ For many respondents, the Nokia N-series especially stood for a hip and funky lifestyle, or *gaul* as young Indonesians like to phrase it. On the other hand, choosing the wrong model easily leads to the suspicion of being *gaptek*, "one without any knowledge of IT." The one case study of a middle-class family, not surprisingly, showed that generational differences are far more relevant than those between genders. The mother of the house just used the phone because it was prestigious (*gengsi*) and every now and then made voice calls. Her daughter of 23 sometimes used its texting functions, but was mainly interested in having the latest and most fashionable model. Another daughter of 16 was very much into texting and used the latest and most hip version of street slang, sometimes using dictionaries and inserting Japanese, Korean, and English words in her conversations with friends (on language, see later discussion). However, she hardly understood the techniques being used. The youngest son, who was 11 years old, just used his father's phone to exchange text messages with his friends, although he had completely modified this phone with a new screen saver and different ring tones. He had a fairly accurate idea of the latest technological possibilities.

However, the most noticeable difference in use of mobile media is according to class background of its users. This brings me to the first recurrent issue when talking about mobile modernity in an Indonesian context, which is the salient existence of parallel cellular markets.

CANNIBALS, CELL PHONE CRASH COURSES, AND THE RISE OF SHADOW MARKETS

As mentioned earlier, Indonesia still lags behind neighboring Asian societies: A mobile phone is a desired, but for many it is a too expensive item. One of the defining features of the Indonesian mobile phone market therefore is that there are various submarkets within it. While the nouveau riche prefer to be seen hanging around in shopping malls to buy the latest mobile gadgets directly from

official distribution centers, the less well off or students prefer to buy an *HP BM*, a mobile phone from the black market, which is, of course, much cheaper. In the buying of phones one furthermore can distinguish some genuine local practices. Many young users, among which are students, use typically more than one handset, thereby reselling an old mobile every 3 months or so, to be able to purchase the latest model. Form here is more important than function, and young Javanese would rather be seen with a fancy secondhand model than a brand new although too “simple phone.”

Local laws presently do not consider mobile phones to be luxury items, and Indonesians therefore do not pay the luxury tax (*pajak barang mewah*) that is levied on things like DVD players or personal computers (PCs). Several sources, however, suggested that many firms sell their products through often obscure illegal distribution channels to avoid paying other taxes, thus enabling them to reach the lower segments of the market. The existence of this semilegal circuit turns the Indonesian mobile phone market into a far from transparent industry. Black-market mobile phones come in all sorts, ranging from stolen phones still containing messages and address lists to *HP Rekon*. *Rekon* (from reconditioned) differ from secondhand phones (*HP bekas*) in that reconditioned phones are made from cannibalized parts of broken phones. One vendor explaining the success of such “cannibal phones” literally spoke of one phone (the better, more prestigious and often more “modern” one) eating the other more inferior one. In Yogyakarta it has become a regular business to substitute for some of the original components (batteries and LCD displays being the most popular) fake ones, then selling the original parts to the highest bidder. In the worst cases, only the casing of such phones is new. For this reason the official agents warn consumers to buy only authentic products, but since few people understand the technology, the reconditioning business remains quite profitable: Spare components are relatively cheap and most of the *Rekon* phones function long enough to sell them to someone willing to cheaply purchase a fashionable model. Phones are not only cannibalized to produce new ones, but also to turn them into hitherto not yet existing models. A good example is a mobile phone equipped with a modified Sony chip that serves as an x-ray camera (*Tren Digital*, 20 December 2004), for purposes that will become clear later in this paper, when we turn to mobile voyeurism. Not only are cannibal phones, cheap imitations, and outright “fakes” are typical for the Indonesian cellular market and a large part of an aspiring lifestyle of many less well off Indonesians, but similar mechanisms can also be found in other domains of the local economy, ranging from clothing and the automobile industry to pirated software. However, lately mobile technology has proven to be one of the most lucrative businesses. As a consequence, many people are

willing to learn cellular technology, not only so they won't be cheated, but also because it is a good business. This interest has led many, especially the young, to take courses, something that is fed by Yogya's secondhand stores as well as the popularity of illegal software to boost and hack the most popular functions of the brands available in the market.

Then again, buying a phone is one thing but to own one is far more expensive. For those who want to be mobile without having sufficient funds, there is a wide range of cost-saving strategies, some of which are genuinely Indonesian in nature. Although, considering its popularity in other domains, one would expect to find it, I did not come across examples of resource pooling like those mentioned by Pertierra (2005, p. 30) for the Philippines. Although it is not unusual for younger children to use their parents' mobile phones for texting with their friends, this is generally seen as annoying, especially considering the personal character of much of the SMS correspondence. The expense of operating a mobile phone has led Indonesians to devise special tactics, similar to those known in the Philippines (Pertierra et al., 2002; Pertierra, 2005, p. 29). One of the ways people economize on mobile phone use, as mentioned earlier, is through prepaid cards rather than monthly or annual subscriptions (*pascabayar*), although the cards are actually more expensive per voice call or SMS. Also, increasingly greater numbers of people visibly carry around a mobile phone without having the money to buy pulses. Thus they can only be reached but cannot call out. If they want to make a call they go to a public phone, using their mobile to look up their friends' numbers. This again illustrates the extent to which the mobile phone is seen as social makeup. In most of the world, texting is cheaper than making a voice call. The average Filipino mobile phone user sends about 10 texts daily, in contrast to, for example, Norwegians, who send about 2 texts per day (Ling, 2004, p. 145). Although the Norwegian materials indicate that women and teens/young people were the most intense users of text messages (Ling, 2004, p. 148), Filipino men seem to have more time for texting (Pertierra et al., 2002, p. 94) but do not necessarily send more messages. Even more variety was found among my Yogya informants, depending on sex, age, and also the season of the year or even within the course of a month. Taking a closer look at some of these practices, it would be good to return to our initial question on the ways mobile phone technology leads one to participate in that abstract phenomenon called modernity.

TEXTING THE LANGUAGE OF MODERNITY AND NEW LITERARY GENRES

Silverstone and Hirsch (1994, p. 5) state how the use of communication technologies may result in a process of

double articulation: The technology is “an object of consumption and it facilitates consumption in its circulation of public meanings.” To understand the ways mobile media leads its users to play with the notion of modernity, it is worthwhile to further scrutinize the use and contents of mobile communication technology in present-day Java, especially what I call “the languages of modernity.” Mobile phones are in Central Java both used for voice calls as well as texting. The choice depends on whom one is communicating with: There exists a slight preference for using SMS among friends, while voice calls are still the standard in more formal conversations. The language used in Yogyakarta SMS messages is a mix of Javanese, Indonesian, and English, and the use of each of these languages deserves some further attention.

In Indonesia everyone uses more than one language. People use *bahasa Indonesia* as a lingua franca, but often this is not their mother tongue. At home they will use one of Indonesia’s many regional languages, such as Javanese (*basa Jawa*) in the Yogyakarta Region.⁷ Many informants were amused when their friends or relatives texted them in Javanese, as most people seem not to be used to writing in a regional language. Javanese, for example, is also rarely used on the Internet (Arps and Supriyanto 2002).⁸ Although the polite *kromo* level is generally used in Javanese classic literature, the use of the more informal *ngoko* level in contemporary text messages is an obvious choice: SMS is an intimate practice and text messages are mostly exchanged between friends. The frequency of texting, however, does result in a slow marginalization of the other language levels, with the *ngoko* one being increasingly used as a written form of Javanese. Although Javanese stands out in its use of speech hierarchies, it might be interesting to see what texting is doing to other regional languages.

Hence, it is important to point out that at first glance regional languages are little used in text messages, with users seemingly preferring national and even international languages.⁹ The latter will not come as a surprise. Today, 350 million people are native English speakers, but by some counts more than a billion, mostly in Asia, speak at least some English as a second language. As with Western music, fashion, food, and politics, Asians are appropriating the language and indigenizing it. According to National University of Singapore professor Wang Gungwu, “Today, fewer and fewer people think of English in terms of either England or America. In a funny way, it is part of the identity of a new Asian middle class” (*New York Times*, July 1, 2001).

However, especially the *Bahasa Indonesia* used in text messages deserves some attention. Fifteen years ago Dede Oetomo (1990) noticed a trend among Indonesian middle-class families to increasingly prefer Malay or *Bahasa Indonesia* at the cost of regional languages. Especially a Jakarta form of Malay, spread by the mass media, gradually

more became the standard. Such preferences seem to be reflected in texting practices. There seems to especially be a taboo on using regional languages in contexts that were hip and modern, such as shopping malls. It is not strange that these preferences are also reflected in a modern practice as texting. Moreover, young people are increasingly expected to use a form of slang or street language known as *bahasa gaul*. The verb *gaul* means socializing, which includes conversing and making use of wordplay. New forms and vocabulary are constantly added to this *bahasa gaul*, forms that often allude to contemporary events or current politics and developments in mass culture.¹⁰ *Gaul* also means talking about the right things, having your own opinion and lifestyle, but also being interested in modern technology and gadgets, including the mobile phone. For those economically less well off, interestingly language is the cheapest way of marking oneself as trendy and modern, which explains its popularity among students. Not surprisingly, *bahasa gaul* is the language of chatting, e-mail, and SMS. Texting in this sense is not just exchanging chitchat, but chitchatting in a very modern way, through both the technology and the language that are used.

But not all is new, and here, following Raymond Williams, attention should be paid to the very coexistence of new technologies and older social forms and practices! Quite a few of the texts being sent by Indonesian mobile phone users stand out because they echo older literary traditions, especially four-line Malay poems or *pantun*. Respondents regularly showed me *pantun* they had received by SMS, often unable to tell who had actually composed the quatrains. Recently compilations of such *pantun* have been published, both online and as small booklets.¹¹ These booklets come complete with a glossary and an overview of emotional icons [emoticons] to be added to texts, and are normally categorized as politics, poetry, humor, friendship, and more recently religion. In 2006, for example, *SMS Muslim* (Zulyana, 2006) was published, under an additional title that promises “a collection of SMS that opens the eyes, calms the heart, and enlightens the spirit.” This SMS manual offers ready-to-forward messages or a collection of what Ellwood-Clayton (2003, p. 256) has defined as “Hallmark religious texts.” Among these texts are those that teach good Muslim behavior, elicit ways of worship, or provide good-luck wishes to forward. They also contain regular greetings that are adapted to a religious context, as the following message (in the English language) illustrates:

Whatever you cross, whatever your pain. There will always be sunshine after the rain. Perhaps you may stumble, perhaps even fall. God is always ready to answer your call. Happy Ramadhan! (Zulyana, 2006, p. 79)

The example just shown is about 184 characters (the spaces in between are not taken into this count) and thus

exceeds the 161 characters an ordinary text message allows for. It proves that most entries in such SMS manuals hardly stem from practice and are even difficult to use in forwarding messages. Most of the respondents, regardless of their religion, denied ever having used such manuals, suggesting that rather than a functional use the SMS manuals increasingly serve as a literary genre in itself. This brings us to the question, to what extent are such services truly designed for the mobile era or rather “mobile interpretations” of practices long existent? What is clear is that both manuals and text messages do much to promote an ideal of modernity while providing the language to express such ideas.

Not surprisingly, the language of texting also finds its way in new forms of pop literature, especially the genre that is known as *cyber* or *E-sastra* (literally, electronic literature). A good recent example of the latter is the Indonesian novel *Subject: Re* (2004) by Novita Estiti. *Subject: Re* is the first example of an e-mail novel, consisting of the e-mail correspondence and chat logs of two persons, “superpurple” (Nina in Jakarta) and “magneticfields” (Yudha in Australia), and shows us the unfolding and subsequently declining relationship between the two characters.¹² One of the striking things of this e-novel, aside from its direct and very informal language, is its openness about sex, which brings me to the third and final issue I would like to raise here in relation to the ways modernity and mobility are often seen as synonymous. In this case, for the mobile phone, its use and contents, and especially its impact on prevailing ideas of sexuality, it becomes clear that not everyone agrees on the course mobile modernity should take.

SUBVERTED MOBILITIES? SEX ON THE PHONE AND MOBILE PORNOGRAPHY

The already mentioned SMS *pantun* are written in English or *bahasa gaul*, the languages of modernity, and thus seem to be a departure from a tradition of four-line verses that have been written in the vernacular since as long as anyone remembers. However, there is again more continuity than one might expect here. Many Indonesian vernaculars know traditions of lovers enjoying erotic or naughty conversations, an art of seduction that consists of flirting and allusions mixed with lines that deal with more mundane topics.¹³ Such verses can be exchanged through voice calls and SMS texts, or MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) complete with images. Further research will have to show the extent to which one can connect the present sexually charged SMS *pantun* with older regional traditions, and whether this interrelation is only a matter of form or whether there are other parallels as well. For the time being I will here briefly focus on what seems the overt association of modernity, technology,

and the possibility of more openly expressing new sexual identities.

At the Asian Modernities conference in Hong Kong, Angel Lin (2005) explained how migrant workers in southern China made extensive use of texting, not only to gain the most updated information about the job market but also to create an alternative social space in which (sometimes radically) different sexuality and romance norms and practices can be tried out. Similar things are happening in neighboring Asian societies such as the Philippines. Pertierra (2002, p. 90) explains that part of the popularity of the mobile phone is that you can text things that you cannot easily say: It is more anonymous and there is a disjunction between the meaning and the intention of what is being conveyed. Pertierra briefly talks about sex texting, the sending of sexually implicit jokes or pictures as well as virtual affairs. In the Philippines, Pertierra argues, one sees nothing more than the rise of a new sexualized subject and the mobile phone is instrumental in this. Such developments might be related to wider discussions in these countries on the course of society and especially a more democratic drive for an open and civil society, as many of the developments in China or the Philippines have their equivalents in post-Suharto Indonesia.

In Indonesia, mobile practices and the new possibilities they offer came into being within a wider climate of political and cultural reform. In late 2004 a study by Andre Syahreza appeared, entitled *Sex on the Phone*. The book is subtitled *sensasi, fantasi, rahasia* (sensation, fantasy, and secrets) and deals in the style of both a novel and a more scholarly study with the phenomenon of party line services and the girls behind these hot lines. The book fits into a recent trend that can mainly be seen as reacting against the 35 preceding years of New Order development ideology. This trend shows a growing interest in the lives and voices of the marginal in society, including prostitutes and call girls. Moreover, many especially young and female authors have profited from the new open cultural climate after 1998, in which leftist literature flourishes and people dare to speak openly about their sexuality.¹⁴ Examples of the rise of this new sexual subject are the novels written by people like Ayu Utami and Fira Basuki. But also Novita Estiti's *Subject: Re* novel fits into this new trend using the format of cyber literature.

In a brief sketch of the telephone, Katz (2001) distinguishes three kinds of sexually oriented telephone calls, hinting first of all at the universal phenomenon of what he calls “commercial remote interactive sex.” In recent years, as is shown by books like *Sex on the Phone*, Indonesian society has become more familiar with the pink services industry. Although some Indonesian newspapers regularly contain advertising for these services, some more explicit than others, by Indonesian standards this is something quite new. Another class of sexually charged phone

calls is one that (mostly) occurs by mutual consent, and in the Indonesian context, as already mentioned, can be traced to much older forms such as the Malay *pantun* described earlier. A last category mentioned by Katz is that of unwanted obscene calls. In Indonesia such calls have a text variant known as “SMS terror,” harassing calls or messages that come at any time of the day, often containing obscene contents. The newspaper *Kompas* on 4 April 2005 commented on several cases of people who were turned down by their lovers, husbands, or wives due to harassing text messages they had received inviting them to *em-el*, e.g., making love. A female politician and former beauty queen said that she received such messages not only from friends but also from respected fellow politicians and members of parliament. In one case the woman threatened to forward the messages to the wife of the person who harassed her.¹⁵

Most of such harassment is still text-based. An Indonesian psychologist commented on the phone-sex craze in the national men’s magazine *Matra* (April 2005), saying that women are more likely to focus on aural stimulants whereas men are more stimulated by a visual component. This is something often commented on in scholarly studies, but has as yet to be proven for Indonesia. New forms of harassment are increasingly made possible now by mobile phones that come with a camera and have led to a form of mobile voyeurism that is known to many Asian societies.¹⁶ In at least one case in Indonesia this has led to a national scandal when a mobile phone was stolen containing pictures of the Indonesian celebrity Sokma Ayu making love with the bass guitarist of a well-known band. In no time the photos were on the net, and while it might not be the reason, many respondents believe this to have led to the girl’s untimely death. In another well-known case in late 2006 a national politician got involved in a sex scandal when a cell-phone-produced movie of him and his secret lover, a then fairly unknown pop singer, started circulating on the Net and was being copied from one phone to the other. Interestingly, the singer clearly profited from Indonesia’s best known mobile porn scandal up to now when a mobile entertainment firm recently decided to sell ring tones, wallpapers, and sexy video clips based on the scandal, turning her into a celebrity.¹⁷ However, these new forms of mobile pornography are by no means the exclusive domain of national celebrities. For the last 2 years the national media have regularly been reporting cases of cell phone porn, especially the distribution of so-called *pilem bokep*: these are brief video clips, of students engaged in any form of sex, and captured in the act by the cell-phone cameras of their peers. Such clips are next distributed to other phone users and are widely available at cell phone counters, where they are a favorite among especially a young mostly male audience. Sukendar et al. (2005) describe how many young people are not even surprised or shocked by the emergence of cell-phone porn but see it

as part of a wider trend in which it becomes increasingly acceptable for Indonesian youth, especially Jakartan students and school kids, to engage in free sex. The girls who are up to this are even known by the name of “Pulse Girls” (*cewek pulsa*): For 200,000 rupiah (about 20 euros) they sell their body in order to buy either credit for their prepaid phones or other fashionable items. Sex they see as “*gaul*,” which means talking about the right things, having your own opinion and a modern and exciting lifestyle. As can be expected, such constructions of new sexual identities are not without controversy, and especially religious spokesmen often condemn such novelties for what they see as Western perversities. In this sense neither the term “mobile modernity” nor the term “mobile middle-class Muslim” is without problems, and it might be more correct to speak of a present-day restyling of Indonesian and Islamic culture that has led to multiple interpretations of modernity (Hefner, 1998; cf. Barendregt, 2006a). In regard to such new interpretations it is not surprising that the mobile phone is at present so often included in debates on Indonesian modernity, and such modernity is not equally viewed as positive. This brings us again to our main question.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

This article has dealt with some of the ways the mobile phone is presently used in Indonesian society, paying thereby special attention to its symbolic value. In consuming the mobile phone one clearly consumes modernity. At the same time, the phone also facilitates the circulation of what modernity lately has come to stand for to many Indonesians. In making use of a modern and hip language, preferably the media Malay as it is spoken in the capital city, the phone extends the world of lifestyle, pop novels, and shopping mall into all domains of daily life. The mobile phone is foremost an embodiment of the desire for the new, and as such a standard attribute of the urban middle-class Muslim’s identity kit. For other segments of Indonesian society, who simply lack this luxury item, the mobile phone is much aspired to. However, this contribution has highlighted some of the Indonesian alternatives that at present contribute to the further trickling down of mobile technology to the lower strata of society, in its aftermath enabling more and more people to share in the modernity it is associated with. Such alternative strategies include secondhand and black cellular markets, and crash courses for so-called “cellular doctors” that teach how to “cannibalize” phones by using components of older and no longer used mobiles.

In exploring these and other matters, it would be good to constantly question the presumed association between mobility and modernity, as well as the often very diverse subjective experience of mobile modernity, e.g., “multiple

mobilities.” Gaonkar (1999, p. 15) argues that cultural modernity does not invariably take the form of an adversary culture that privileges the individual’s need for self-expression and self-realization over the claims of community, as it has done in the West. Still, many cultural forms, social practices, and institutional arrangements do in the wake of modernity surface in other places as well. It is striking how the introduction of new mobile technologies in many Asian (but also Western) societies has led to the expression of new, more individual, sexual identities. One should, however, be wary of going as far as to blame these technologies for such transformations. Of course one must bear in mind that these services did not spring up due to the new cellular possibilities, but specifically fit into the new atmosphere of anonymity and the “cool” it provides, an atmosphere that in Indonesia has been further accentuated by the new open climate of the post-Suharto era. Therefore, such seemingly novel practices often enhance tendencies already prevalent in society, and, importantly, the same technology might lead to a different outcome and new differences again from one society to the other.

NOTES

1. For a brief history of Indonesia’s state-owned telecommunication services, see <http://www.telkom.co.id> (last accessed May 2005).

2. About 80 euros in 2006.

3. For a broader argument on the importance of the prepaid card for mobile telephony and its diffusion in newly developing countries, see Fortunati (2006).

4. The lucky number hype was not unique to mobile phones. It was preceded by a similar trend among Jakarta celebrities, who bought special number plates for their cars, sometimes containing a personal message or their name. The lucky number craze was also not a unique Indonesian phenomenon. From the Middle East to China, worldwide accounts can be found of alleged lucky numbers being sold at enormous prices, with people paying as much as US\$215,000 per number. For the Chinese case, see Dan Su (2005).

5. Some of these observations have recently been used in the DVD documentary *Generasi Jempol (the Finger Top generation): Mobile Modernities in Contemporary Java*, which the author has co-produced with the Yogya-based Sorot Collective (Barendregt 2007b). For more information please contact barendregt@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

6. For Italian parallels see the study of Leopoldina Fortunati (2005, p. 6), in which she emphasizes a similar symbiosis of technology and fashion. Among the children and teenagers she interviewed, ornamental/aesthetic reasons were more often given than functional ones in explaining the popularity of particular models of mobile phones.

7. Javanese has nine different speech levels and one cannot speak Javanese without making statements about one’s hierarchical position. One uses the *kromo* level with seniors and parents and the *ngoko* level among friends or towards children. Some have even argued that the “Javanese think *ngoko*” (cf. Siegel, 1986, p. 15–33).

8. Arps and Supriyanto (2002) argue that part of this absence is due to the general underrepresentation of Indonesian and regional languages on the Net because of a poor technological infrastructure: “Technologi-

cal limitations are not the sole factor that holds down the use of Javanese on the internet. Cultural limitations play a role as well. Although there is sound on the Internet, it is a space for written text in particular. Now as it happens Javanese is not a language that Javanese speakers are used to reading, and undoubtedly the number of writers is smaller still than that of readers.”

9. Here it might be interesting to refer to a yet unpublished study by Fortunati (nd), who argues that “modes of expression on the phone are more limited, because the invisibility of callers and their environment make the relation linguistically more difficult. For example, it is true that on the phone we can use, according to circumstances, the national language or a dialect. But actually the telephone’s greater formality makes people speak more in the national language and less in dialect, as compared to the case of body-to-body communication.”

10. For comparisons see Rafael (1995) on the use of Taglish in the Philippines. For more on the history of such language use in Indonesia, see Chambert-Loir (1984).

11. Interestingly, most of these booklets are sold as being representative of the new middle-class speech preferred by Jakarta’s young and hip. The SMS compilations thus “try to give an introduction to this mysterious language, which, if not mastered, makes one feel like an ignorant villager (*kampung*),” as one of the booklets comments in its introduction.

12. See also Estiti’s web log, <http://verypurpleperson.blogspot.com>, where she comments on the fact that to her annoyance her book is being sold as an “Originally Made in Indonesia Chicklit,” e.g., popular fiction written for and marketed to young women.

13. One might argue that the tradition of Malay *pantun* is predominantly an oral tradition, and as such is different from the written SMS text format. In many Sumatran cultures it was common to have lovers’ verses, written on bark cloth or bamboo, that were recited at special occasions. Like the present-day SMS *pantun*, these were often standard prefabricated constructions that could be taken up by others, in this era forwarded to others, with poems for different moods and occasions.

14. This interest is, of course, part of the history of telephony itself; see, for example, McLuhan (2003 [1964], p. 357) story on the phone and its creation of the call-girl or James Katz’s observations mentioned later.

15. Terror SMS are not just obscene, but also include so called “fake messages” (SMS *tipu*), promising the recipient a monetary reward after the disclosure of their personal data and bank account. Newspapers report individual losses of 9 million *rupiah* and more. The new possibility of caller ID on most recent GSM models has only temporarily halted these harassing calls, as most Indonesian operators now also provide ID blockers.

16. *Mobile Society*, a Malaysian cell phone journal, in January 2005 published an interesting interview with a self-confessed phone voyeur, who roamed the Singapore MRT in search of victims, afterward putting the pictures on a membership web site. The magazine mentioned how “dozens of Singapore women unknowingly are displaying their legs, bosoms and other parts to the admiration of tens and thousands in web hits.”

17. For a further analysis of mobile forms of pornography, see Barendregt (2006c).

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