

“Even Salmon Go Upstream, Back to Their Birthplace”: A Psychogeography of *Mudik*, the Indonesian-Muslim Mass Seasonal Migration*

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Abstract

Every year, millions of Indonesian Muslims travel across the country to their places of origin to celebrate Lebaran (Eid al-Fitr) with their relatives. The seasonal mass migration is a disruptive, resource-consuming, and sometimes dangerous undertaking. Besides being a real drain on the travelers' time, finances, and energy, the annual exodus turns major cities, for a while, into ghost towns, puts enormous strain on the infrastructure, and causes traffic accidents. To understand the *mudik* tradition, the current study investigates what it means for Indonesia's urban Muslims to undertake it. A thematic analysis was performed on a mixed dataset, which comprised web-based interview transcripts and survey data, as well as Lebaran-themed short stories, a feature film, a YouTube video, a

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song, cartoons, and blog narratives. The study discovers and throws into relief a set of meanings that contemporary Indonesian Muslims attach to the act of *mudik* and which give an indication of why the tradition continues at all costs.

Key Words: *mudik*, seasonal migration, Eid al-Fitr, Islam, Indonesia, psychogeography

I. Introduction

The movement of people across space is the hand that turns the wheel of everyday life. In Indonesia today, one of the forms that human mobility takes is *mudik*, which literally means “to go upstream” but actually refers to the homecoming practices in which people leave their places of employment, education, or residence to visit their places of origin.

Indonesians differ in the frequency with which they undertake *mudik*. The individual differences result from several factors, including the nature of the holiday for whose celebration the *mudik* is performed, the distance between the point of departure and that of destination, and the traveler’s marital status, finances, and preferences. *Mudik* occurs with greater frequency among married individuals whose cities of employment and places of family residence are located within the same province than it does among university students whose hometowns and cities of study are a thousand kilometers apart.

Mudik varies in magnitude, too, from the minor variants such as out-of-town students’ monthly visits to their parental homes all the

way to the most colossal of all: the homecoming for Lebaran (Eid al-Fitr), the most popular of all Muslim holidays in Indonesia. Every year, during last days of the fasting month of Ramadan, to celebrate Lebaran with their relatives, millions of Indonesian Muslims undertake arduous journeys across the country to their cities, towns, and villages of origin. The enormity of the Lebaran-motivated *mudik* is evident in the high numbers of the participants over the last decade prior to the Covid-19 pandemic: 13.9 million in 2010, 23.4 million in 2015, and 18.3 million in 2019 (Kementerian Perhubungan Republik Indonesia 2010; Hayashi and Habibi 2022).

Since the 1970s, Lebaran-driven *mudik* has continued to plunge the country into crisis. This type of *mudik* is disruptive, costly, and life-threatening. Every year, for about a week, the *mudik* for Lebaran turns big cities into ghost towns, clogs the country's highways with motor vehicles, and transforms bus terminals, railroad stations, seaports, and airports into tin cans full of human sardines.

Lebaran-driven *mudik* has a complex set of consequences. These range from festive moods, economic dynamism, and exciting journeys all the way to exhaustion and a huge drain on the country's resources. It makes sense that in 2022, to help manage the challenges of *mudik* in the time of Covid-19, the government of Indonesia issued a small guidebook (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika 2022).

In 2022, Java—home to more than half of Indonesia's population—remained the center of the *mudik* mobility. Java was the site of more than 55 percent of the *mudik* journeys that Indonesians performed for the Lebaran celebration. In the same year, four administrative regions stood out as Indonesia's top senders of *mudik*

travelers: East Java (14.6 million), the Greater Jakarta metropolitan area (14 million), Central Java (12.1 million), and West Java (9.2 million) (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika 2022).

Traffic congestion during the Lebaran holidays has gained notoriety. In 2022, 40 million Indonesians—2.1 millions of whom departed from the Greater Jakarta metropolitan area—undertook *mudik* with private vehicles, which included 23 million cars and 17 million motorbikes (Jabar Digital Service 2022; Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika 2022; Nanda 2022). In April that year, *mudik* travelers were caught up in a 42-kilometer traffic jam along the Jakarta-Cikampek segment of the Trans-Java Expressway (Meilikhah 2022). The worst *mudik*-driven traffic jam in recent memory was that which occurred on the Brebes-Pejagan section in 2016. It increased the travel time between Cirebon and Semarang from three to 35 hours. A dozen of travelers died from exhaustion, carbon dioxide poisoning, and other causes (Rasyid 2022; Ahmad and Sarwanto 2016).

Traffic accidents are another cause of death among *mudik* travelers. The accidents stem from fatigue, speeding, distractions, and reckless driving. Road accidents of all kinds increased from 62,960 in 2009 to 116,441 in 2019 (Badan Pusat Statistik 2022a and 2022b). A proportion of these accidents occurred during the mass exodus for the Lebaran celebration. The figures were 3,168 for 2017, 2,234 for 2018 and 563 for 2019 (Nasution 2017; Pratama 2019).

Over the years, Indonesia's Lebaran exodus has attracted the attention of scholars of various disciplines. These include economics (Purwakananta and Abilawa 2011; Andaka 2020; Ubaidillah and Aji 2020), sociology (Soebyakto 2011; Mayangsari 2011), political

economy (Habibi 2019), cultural anthropology (Möller 2007; Yulianto 2011; Iriyanto 2012; Iriany et al. 2019), religious studies (Arribathi and Aini 2018), communication science (Andi 2021), and psychology (Nuzuli 2020; Rahmadiana et al. 2021). The studies have generated useful insights into how *mudik* has interacted with a wide variety of social phenomena, which range from merrymaking, social cohesion, religious tradition, and redemption from the suffering of everyday life to rural-urban economic divide, labor migration, and the circulation of goods and money. The psychological part of recent literature on the Lebaran-driven *mudik* focuses on the impact on it of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Andi (2021) investigates people's perceptions of the government's ban on *mudik*. Nuzuli (2020) and Rahmadiana et al. (2021) look into the psychological problems that stemmed from the failure to make the trip home for Lebaran.

Lebaran-driven *mudik* has yet to receive scholarly attention comparable to that devoted to its sister phenomenon of transnational labor migration. The problem with current scholarship on *mudik* is that it has, for the most part, approached the phenomenon from a mono-disciplinary perspective. Our paper aims to fill this gap in the existing literature. To do so, it approaches *mudik* using “psychogeography,” which—to borrow from the formulation of psychoanalytic anthropologist Howard F. Stein and geographer Gary L. Thompson (1991:63)—refers to a psychoanalytic study of “how people fell about, experience, [interpret] themselves into the [physical and social] world, and [use the resulting interpretations] as [key] parts of their [identities] and [...] their well-being.” We apply psychogeography because it may allow us to use the psychological

world and the geographical reality to shine a light on each other. To our knowledge, this approach has never been used in the social-science study of the *mudik* for Lebaran.

Psychogeography has two intertwining goals. Firstly it may add an interdisciplinary component (both psychological and geographical) to the existing academic literature on Lebaran-driven *mudik*. Secondly by using *mudik* as an empirical lens, we aim to contribute an Indonesian perspective on one of the central problems in Western, Neo-Freudian, humanistic psychology: the dialectic between social circumstances and the human being's attempt to satisfy what Erich Fromm (1975: 226-267) sees as its "existential needs."

This article addresses three inter-related research questions. What existential needs do Indonesian Muslims aim to satisfy by performing *mudik* for Lebaran? Under what social conditions does the annual mass exodus play out? And what does the migratory experience reveal about the interplay between place and mental life and that between social change and the human condition? In its attempt to answer the questions, this psychogeographical study places *mudik* in the interplay between geographical environment on one hand and people's ideas, emotions, and behavior on the other (Richardson 2015).

We intend this psychogeographical research not as a mixed-methods investigation but as a qualitative study in social psychology. As such, it employed, as its primary data, several mass media artifacts, including short stories, cartoons, a feature film, a song, a YouTube video, and blog narratives. As commonly done in psychoanalytic studies, we have analyzed the cultural artifacts for their meanings, overt and covert. However, in this paper, we will

insert, where relevant, part of the supplementary, quantitative data that we happened to have collected through online interviews with—and an online survey of—102 adult Indonesian *mudik* travelers. Of these subjects, 59 were females and 43 males; in 2022, to celebrate Lebaran with family, 99 visited towns or cities in the islands of Java, Madura, and Bali; only three traveled to Padang in West Sumatra. However, since the quantitative data is meant to play a minimum role in this qualitative study, our processing of it did not go beyond looking at its central tendency.

The paper has three parts. The first of these, “Introduction,” locates the study in the existing literature and identifies the problem we investigate, the theoretical framework we adopt, the questions we tackle, the analytical strategy we apply to answer them, and the methods we use in gathering and analyzing the data. The second part, “A Psychogeographical Perspective on *Mudik*,” is the article’s main body and comes in two sections, which give different but mutually supporting ways of exploring one central issue: What does it mean for Muslims in contemporary Indonesia to use Lebaran-driven *mudik* to try to meet their existential needs? The article’s main body probes the issue from two psychogeographical angles: a) the physical and socio-psychological troubles surrounding *mudik*; and b) the existential motivations behind *mudik*, namely the attempts at overcoming the fundamental contradictions of human life—attempts that include the quests for unity, rootedness, relatedness, a frame of orientation, and an object of devotion. Finally, the paper’s third part, “Conclusion,” discusses if, and to what extent, our study succeeds in answering its research questions and in reaching its interpretive goals.

II. A Psychogeographical Perspective on Mudik

1. Physical and Socio-Psychological Troubles Surrounding Mudik

Many Indonesian Muslims undertake a long distance *mudik* journey on a motorcycle. The trip is so dangerous that *mudikers* must do their best to prepare it. This was why on April 25, 2018, three weeks before Ramadan was to begin, in his statement to the press in Tegal, Central Java, Indonesia's Minister of Transportation, Budi Karya Sumadi, said, "I would recommend that people not go on a long-distance *mudik* on a motorcycle. It is just not safe" (Kementerian Perhubungan Republik Indonesia 2018). Later, on June 12, 2018, two days before Lebaran, the duo artist Benny Rachmadi and Muhammad Misrad published "Para Pejuang Mudik" ("*mudik*-fighters," see Figure 1), a cartoon that expressed their middle-of-the-road stance on the issue, which we can sum up as follows: "You may *mudik*, provided that..." The relevance of both the Minister's statement and the artists' cartoon cannot be overstated because the Ramadan of 2018 saw no less than 1.58 million motorcycles involved in the *mudik* for Lebaran (Safutra 2019). This, however, should come as no surprise, considering that in 2017-2018 Indonesia was the third largest motorcycle market in the world (Susilo and Joewono 2017: 108).

Benny and Misrad's text-laden cartoon is worth a close look, if only because it gives an idea of what it means for working-class Indonesians to make the journey home for Lebaran. Reiterating the popular idea that *mudik* is about keeping one's social roots alive, the



Figure 1. Benny Rachmadi and Muhammad Misrad, *Para Pejuang Mudik*, June 12, 2018. Courtesy of the artists.

artists characterize the pair of *mudikers* in the cartoon as “people who do *not* forget their *origins*” (emphasis in the original). The first character (the letter “B”) in the motorcycle’s license plate suggests that the *mudikers* are Jakartans. It is, however, the caption in the cartoon’s lower left-hand corner that conveys the artists’ overall message: “[This is] the positive way of performing *mudik*,” “positive *mudik* behavior,” they insist, “is a must,” adding that the *mudikers* in their audience should “keep the roads safe for everyone.”

Preparation, the duo artists argue, is key to survival in long-distance motorcycle road trips for Lebaran. They go to great lengths to provide

their audience with detailed safety tips. The journey itself, they maintain, should be of an “ideal” (that is, reasonable) distance. This is because the greater the distance, the greater the danger. As the road trip is sure to expose the two-wheeled travelers to the elements and the risk of traffic accident, the artists suggest that the riders’ bodies and motorcycles be in good shape. So, “prior to the trip,” the motorbike “should be serviced,” “the oil changed,” and the body’s muscular endurance brought to that level which will stand the *mudikers* in good stead. In order that they are safe from head to toe and well-provisioned, the *mudikers* are to wear safety gears (including a full-face helmet, a thick jacket, a pair of jeans, a pair of athletic shoes), as well as a backpack, in which to keep their valuables and supplies. With their “minds and bodies in harmony,” so the advice goes, the *mudikers* are “ready to ride [their] way back home, braving the sun and rain.”

Still, no matter how well-prepared and cautious they themselves may be, two-wheeled *mudikers* can only hope to minimize—never totally eliminate—the possibility of accident during their journey. A case in point is the rather “traumatic” *mudik* experience of Dian Kusumawardani, a Surabaya-based educator and blogger, and her family of four. In the space of three years, Dian, her husband, and their two small children had two motorcycle accidents during *mudik*. The first, which caused them manageable injuries, occurred in 2017 on their road trip between Bojonegoro and Surabaya (Kusumawardani 2019a). The second one, which happened to them in 2019 on their way from Surabaya to Mojokerto, was serious enough to put the whole family in the hospital for three days (Kusumawardani 2019b).

The event was such a shock that it drove Dian and her husband into a momentous decision: “[...W]e promised to ourselves never to go on a long-distance motorcycle road trip again. It’s just too dangerous, especially for the kids. Hopefully, we’ll soon have the money to buy a car, so we can have a safe and comfortable *mudik* journey.” This they finally did in 2020 (Kusumawardani 2019b).

In addition to physical dangers, *mudik* also exposes Indonesian Muslims to great stress, both interpersonal and intrapersonal. This point is well explored in *Maaf, Lebaran Ini Kami Tidak Pulang* (Sorry We Won’t Be Home for Lebaran, hereafter cited as *MLI*), a 2012 film directed by Guntur Soeharjanto from a story and script by Imam Tantowi. The story is told of an elderly couple, Ratmana and Tatiek, who, blessed with mental and physical health and financial independence, spend the rest of their lives comfortably in their own home in Sumedang, West Java. Together they have five children, all grown up and living far away. These include three sons (Kosasih, Cecep Sukarya, and Husni Ahmad) and two daughters (Neneng Insani and Nonon). All Ratmana and Tatiek expect from them is that every single one of them, along with their spouses and kids, come home once a year for Lebaran. Ratmana, in particular, refuses to settle for less.

A statement by Ratmana gives us an idea of how strong his psychological need is for the yearly family reunion. “*Mudik*,” he claims, “is part of human nature. It is the essence of all creatures. Even salmon swim upstream, back to their birthplace.” Ratmana goes on to say, “It is the children’s duty to make their parents happy by visiting them once a year.”

The rigid mindset has damaging consequences, not only for Ratmana himself but for his wife and their children. As they tell him apologetically over the phone, this year they all will not be home for Lebaran. Their engineer son, Kosasih, and his family—along with Kosasih’s younger sister, Nonon, a university student—will go for a company-paid vacation in Kuala Lumpur. To be fair to his wife, this time around Cecep has to celebrate Lebaran with his parents-in-law in Cirebon. Husni Ahmad, a filmmaker, is up to his neck in work. There is a small chance for Neneng, a nurse in Lampung, to take a leave from her work to spend Lebaran with her parents.

That really none of the children show up at his door during Ramadan’s last three days comes as a severe blow to Ratmana that he falls ill with asthma and a fever. In one of his self-pitying rants, he wails that he is living in “a heartless, soulless age,” where the Lebaran ritual of asking each other for forgiveness has become something some Muslims take too lightly, doing it in a perfunctory manner by sending out Happy Eid al-Fitr text messages to their loved ones. Ratmana argues against the practice by maintaining that the only meaningful way to conduct the ritual is to do it face-to-face with your loved ones, “touching each other’s hands” and “giving each other a hug.” Tatiek tries, but fails, to reason with Ratmana, who uses her as a punchbag to give vent to his anger and frustration at their physically absent children.

Many real-life Muslim adult children in contemporary Indonesia share Ratmana’s view that nothing beats the feeling of seeing one’s family face-to-face on Lebaran. As one of our research subjects put it:

I recall the first time I went home for Lebaran. I was happy and nervous. I was so excited anticipating the reunion with my family that I couldn't sleep a wink all through the train journey. Once I arrived home, I hugged my mom and dad. And I could hardly hold back my tears.

Right after telling their father that they will not come round for a family reunion on Lebaran day, all the five siblings find themselves guilt-ridden. The guilt springs from the feeling of having sacrificed one's love for one's parents in favor of (in Kosasih's case) privileging the interests of one's own nuclear family, (in Cecep's case) fairness to one's parents-in-law, (in the case of Neneng and Husni) loyalty to one's profession, or (in Nonon's case) self-interest and solidarity with one's brother.

The guilt proves corrosive, ruining their mood, upsetting their days, straining their relationships. It throws siblings and in-laws into a blame game that pits them against one another and in which they accuse one another of selfishness. These siblings are not blowing things out of proportion. Failure to come home for Lebaran is not something to take lightly. Indeed, unbeknownst to them, Ratmana alleges that they are "pursuing their own happiness," and that "wealth has made them forget their parents." To make matters worse, the children's failure to *mudik* is not going to sit well with Ratmana's neighbors. Torn by conflicting loyalties, and crumbling under the weight of guilt, Kosasih, in the presence of his wife and Nonon, rails against what appears to him as the "irrationality" of the whole idea of Lebaran:

Why does everybody always have to come home for Lebaran? Different people have different plans. They have their own ways of living their lives. [*Mudik*] is a waste of resources. The *upacara* [ritual] repeats itself year after year. It's always the same. The whole thing doesn't make any sense.

Such a social-constructivist attack on Lebaran does nothing to bail Kosasih, his wife, and Nonon out of the predicament they are in. It further poisons their home and minds with additional negative vibes. This is unfortunate because in the fasting month Muslims like them are supposed to do good to fellow human beings.

Things come to a head when the longing for his children consumes Ratmana so much that he collapses and has to be rushed to the hospital. The film argues that the only way out of the crisis is for all the children to come home on Lebaran eve or day. This they finally do, with the result that Ratmana, to everyone's relief, suddenly gets well and the whole family is now all smiles and hugs.

This incident in *MLI* throws into relief the contradictory character of familial bonds. While they make life meaningful, they also saddle it with all kinds of burdens. True, many of the respondents in the present study said it was a great pleasure for them to have a family reunion on Lebaran day. However, one of them reported being "nervous about having to pass days under the same roof with [her] relatives." Another said something to the effect that he went *mudik* because he could not stand the image of his parents waiting in vain for him to come home for Lebaran. Several drew attention to the price people have to pay for the *mudik* journey they make to maintain familial bonds. *Mudik*, they pointed out, "pollutes the air," "causes

Internet blackouts,” “adds an extra burden to the government and society at large,” and “brings more disorder into life.” They went on to remark that *mudik* also “makes [people] spend more money.” This brings us to the recurring problem of “consumerism” surrounding *mudik* for the celebration of Lebaran.

Islam, in and of itself, sees nothing inherently evil in wealth; what makes material possessions good or evil is the ways people acquire, treat, and use them (Qur’an: 2:188 and 262). One cannot help but notice the intertwining of religion and what critics call “consumerism” in the *mudik* phenomenon. At once spiritual and material, the *mudik* practice provides Indonesian Muslims with the means to meet their existential and physiological needs. Material incentives, indeed, are one of the driving forces behind this breathtaking form of seasonal migration. As one of our respondents observed:

We go on *mudik* not only for emotional reasons, such as revisiting childhood places, reuniting with elders and relatives, and the like. Some of us also do it for, well, economic reasons. We go and check out the properties we own in the countryside—a house, a plot of farmland, and the crops we grow on it.

As it happens, a section of Indonesia’s urban middle-class population plans to move to a rural community at retirement. This is among the reasons why there are city dwellers in Indonesia who, through either purchase or inheritance, have acquired real estate in the countryside, which they must visit and inspect from time to time.

On Lebaran day, the “consumerism,” or—to use a non-judgmental term—the material culture, which accompanies the practice of *mudik*,

shows itself in several forms. These include, among the most striking, people's newly-painted houses; the sweets and special dishes they share with one another; the gold jewelry and new clothes they wear; the great flow of money gifts from older to younger members of the extended family; the huge amount of alms that upper- and middle-class Muslims give to the poor. In 2010, for example, 14 million *mudikers* spent an estimated total of IDR 84.9 trillion on transportation, accommodation, and food and drinks, as well as on philanthropy, investments, and local tourism (Ferdianto 2011; Purwakananta and Abilawa 2011: iii-iv). Phenomena such as these draw our attention to two key ideas. The first is the centrality in Islam of collective worship; the second point is that acts of collective worship require the acquisition and consumption of resources (e.g., labor, money, goods, and services).

The few days before and after Lebaran see two economic activities that cast the materiality of *mudik* into sharp relief. We see the first in the pre-Lebaran shopping rush at jewelry stores, traditional markets, and shopping malls. We see the second in the rural-urban labor migration that villagers undertake after Lebaran, inspired as they are by what they view as the worldly success of their *mudiker* relatives. Out of familial solidarity, some *mudikers* take their relatives with them on their journeys back to the country's big cities, where they will help the newcomers to find a job or better employment opportunities. In 2017 and 2019, for example, this post-*mudik* practice was responsible for an increase of, respectively, 70,000 and 40,000 in Jakarta's population (Angreni 2018; Agustian 2022). The cycle continues year after year, further intensifying the struggle for the

city's resources.

2. *Mudik*: A Cultural Attempt to Satisfy Existential Needs

Naturally, the foregoing examination of the many troubles surrounding the practice of *mudik* leads to a question: Why is it that Indonesian Muslims keep on undertaking *mudik*? We argue that the big answer is because they feel, to varying degrees, the basic contradictions of human life—ones that threaten to drive them, literally, crazy. To prevent such a scenario from happening, they must fulfill their existential need for a sense of unity.

To live a human life—characterized as it is by the clash between minimal instincts on one hand and self-consciousness, reason, and imagination on the other—is to find oneself constantly embroiled in an existential tug-of-war. Human beings belong to nature and transcend it. They inhabit the earth as a home and a place of exile. They experience themselves as individuals and as members of a community. Human beings are original, intelligent, and dynamic creators, and yet they are also frail, ignorant, and mortal creatures. They are both the master—and the slave—of those things, ideas, practices, and organizations which they have created (Fromm 1973: 225-226).

To cope with the burden of these fundamental contradictions, and thus to keep themselves sane, people have no choice but to try to build “a sense of unity”—with nature, with the rest of the humankind, and within themselves (Fromm 1973: 233-235). There are what

Fromm (1973: 234; 2002: 26) calls “regressive” ways for human beings to meet their existential need for unity. These include self-anaesthetization through drugs and orgies, a mythic return to animality, and devoting one’s life to a single passion (e.g., the personality cult of the “Great Leader,” or the quest for power, prestige, wealth, and fame) (Fromm 1973: 233; 2002: 29). People can also identify themselves with—and lose themselves in—their jobs, companies, political parties, ethnic groups, social classes, countries, and religions (Fromm 2002: 60). The problem with these strategies, however, is that they lead to all kinds of psychosocial disorders. So, if people want to establish a “progressive” (that is, healthy) sense of unity, their best bet, argues Fromm (1973: 234), would be to make a combined use of “reason and love” in the handling of their interaction with themselves, fellow human beings, and the natural world.

If Indonesian popular culture is any indication, the country’s big cities do not (or not yet) provide a fertile soil for the inhabitants to cultivate progressive types of oneness. One of the consequences of Indonesia’s capitalist economic development since 1966 is that life and work in the country’s urban centers estrange people from themselves, from each other, and from the natural world (see, e.g., Karsono 2016). In Jakarta and Surabaya, for instance, work as the means for self-actualization remains the privilege of the few, whereas working just to stay alive is what the masses do. When city dwellers objectify one another as a means to an end, relationships fall apart. Urban Indonesia appears to be a world where people have difficulty developing a healthy individual identity.

A recent articulation of urban alienation in contemporary Indonesia can be found in “Pulang” (Going Home), a 2018 song by Iksan Skuter where he addresses the listener with these words: “Have you ever been away from home / Crumbling under the weight / Of the raging homesickness within you? // Have you ever been away from home / Waking up in the middle of the night / Cold and hungry?” Then, taking a poignant turn, the lyrics go like this: “Have you ever been away from home? / Having suffered so many defeats / You have no tears left to cry.”

The song’s video clip, which shows Indonesians leaving Jakarta for their home towns, has gained almost one million views on YouTube.¹⁾ This suggests that many Indonesians might have found a bit of themselves in the song. One viewer, going by the nickname of Rakyat Biasa (literally, “ordinary citizen”), commented: “[···Y]ou see, you’re not the only one who has to endure a bitter struggle in a city not your own.” Along similar lines, one of our respondents alluded to the estranging character of urban existence: “I’m fed up with the daily stress of big-city life. *Mudik* keeps me in touch with my extended family. The reunion gives me a welcome break from all the stress.” The singer Ivan Skuter, too, sees *mudik* (not necessarily for Lebaran) as a solution, albeit temporary, to the problem of urban alienation. Consider, for example, the feelings that these lines in “Pulang” attempt to evoke:

I often feel like I want to go home, my friends

1) Iksan Skuter, “Pulang,” YouTube video, January 2, 2018, 5:18, posted by Iksan Skuter Official, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3fkCzdTfEQ>. (2022/12/02)

Laying myself down on that soft bed
Being tucked in by my dad
Oh, how I miss my mom's spinach soup!

I often feel like I want to go home, my friends
Sitting with Dad on the verandah
Sipping on the hot tea Mom made for us

As the lines above suggest, the parental home serves as the site of one's sense of individual identity. This, too, is among the things that we learned in research for the present paper, as one respondent remarked:

Stories about Dad's childhood, the good advice that my uncles gave me, all those humorous tales that they told me, the prayers that my uncles and aunts said for me, and the graves of our relatives—all these things have made me who I am.

When visiting relatives in their hometowns or villages, some *mudikers*—perhaps as a “reaction formation” to the absence in them of an authentic selfhood—take pleasure in displaying all kinds of status symbols. Discreetly or otherwise, some flaunt their wealth, education, or positions in the bureaucracy or the corporate sector. Such things appear to serve them as substitute identities. On April 27, 2022, Abdul Mu'ti, the general secretary of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Islamic mass organization, cautioned against Muslims using *mudik* as an opportunity for showing off their material success (Hestyarini 2022). We come across an acknowledgement of this problem in the film *MLI*, which refers to

Eid al-Fitr as the best time for parents to display, with relish, the worldly success of their children.

However, as a means for contemporary Indonesians to fulfill their existential needs for an individual identity, and for a sense of unity with nature and with the rest of the humankind, few things can compete with religion. But as is the case with other cultural artifacts, religion, too, allows people to use it in both regressive and progressive ways.

One regressive way to use Islam, or any religion for that matter, is to use it primarily as a provider of a conformist rather than an authentic identity. The former arises, ironically, from de-individuation, that is, from losing oneself in the religious herd. By contrast, guided by reason and moved by love, the latter revolves around a sense of oneself as “the center and active subject of [one’s] powers” (Fromm 2002: 60).

To some extent, what appears to be at play in the *mudik* phenomenon is that some Muslims use their religion as a source of a herd identity rather than as a guide for developing an authentic sense of selfhood. For instance, explaining why they made their *mudik* journey for Lebaran, several of our respondents revealed that they did so out of conformity to what they saw as a “tradition” in Indonesian Islam. One of them remarked, “[*Mudik*] has become deeply entrenched in the tradition of the country.” Another said, “I am doing my best to adhere to the [*mudik*] tradition.” Still another offered a nuanced answer, “*Mudik*, I know, is not required in Islam, but I keep doing it anyway, because it has become part of our tradition.” These people wanted to feel and be seen as “normal” by their fellow

Muslims. Had they not performed *mudik*, they would have set themselves apart from the majority of Indonesia's Muslim community, risking feeling lost, adrift in the sea of life.

There is more to *mudik* than a story about the quest for a sense of unity. For to undertake *mudik* is also to try and experience what Erich Fromm calls a sense of "rootedness." If we want to see how the existential need for rootedness plays out in the context of Muslim Indonesia, we need to pay attention to the aura of sacredness that envelops the destinations of *mudik* journeys. Such places derive the aura from their emotionally charged associations, in the mind of the *mudiker*, with parental figures, whom Islam holds in such high esteem that children should continue to treat them with respect, justice, and compassion, even when the parents tell them to disobey God's commands. The Qur'an (31:15) puts it this way:

[...]If they [the parents] strive to make you join in worship with Me things of which you have no knowledge, obey them not; yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration).

On top of this, indigenous beliefs and practices of ancestor veneration, which survive among Indonesian Muslims today (Chambert-Loir 2002), lend additional aura of sanctity to parents and grandparents, dead or alive, and, by extension, also to the places where they live or are buried.

Indonesian Muslims refer to the *mudik* destinations as "*kampung*" or "*kampung halaman*." Literally, the former signifies "village" or "urban quarter," depending on the context, while the latter denotes "home village" or "hometown," where a person was born and spent

their youth and which their living parents and grandparents inhabit. In reality, however, the *mudik* destinations are not necessarily the *mudikers*' actual places of birth and childhood but are, in some cases, ones where their parents, parents-in-law, or grandparents currently live or are buried. It is not the mere fact that an Indonesian Muslim was born and grew up in a particular village or town that makes it worthy of a visit on Lebaran day, but the presence in it of their or their spouse's parents and grandparents, or, alternatively, the existence of these people's graves.

It is natural that one of the key items for *mudikers* to check off their Lebaran to-do list is *ziarah kubur*, which means the ritual visit to the graves of deceased parents, parents-in-law, and other family members. In reply to the question of why they undertook *mudik* in 2022, many participants in this study said something along these lines: "I wanted to visit my grandma's house and my mom's grave." Or, "I had to visit my father's grave and see my grandparents." Or, "we wanted to see our kinfolks again and visit the graves of my paternal grandparents." The same theme is reported in the 1994 short story "Ziarah Lebaran" (A Visit to the Graves) by the writer and sociologist Umar Kayam, in which he writes:

The things [Yusuf does] on Lebaran day are always the same: attending the Eid prayer in the open field in the housing complex [where his mother-in-law lives]; paying respect to her by kneeling, bowing, and kissing her knees; asking each other for forgiveness; eating breakfast together; and visiting the grave of his father-in-law and that of his wife Siti.

(Kayam 1994)

Year after year, many Muslim cemeteries in rural and urban Indonesia become as crowded with people on Lebaran day as shopping malls on weekends. Visitors sprinkle the graves of their relatives with flowers and water, pray for their spirits, and recite chapters from the *Qur'an*. Those who live within a manageable distance from the cemeteries where their relatives are buried also perform the ritual on the eve of Ramadan (see Figure 2). The emotions that the ritual triggers in the visitors can be so overwhelming that some of them break into tears.



Figure 2. An Indonesian family visited the grave of a relative on the eve of Ramadan in one of the villages in the district of Kediri, East Java. Photo by Nurchayati, June 28, 2014.

The *ziarah kubur* strikes purists as an un-Islamic custom, that is, a carryover from indigenous ancestor worship (Nadjib 2015). The

purist view, however, does not hold sway in Muslim Indonesia. On the eve of Ramadan and on Lebaran day hundreds of thousands of Muslims perform the ritual, not to worship their dead relatives, but to express their love, longing, and respect for them, as well as to remind themselves of the transience of earthly life and the eternity of the hereafter.

Viewed from the humanistic-psychological perspective (Fromm 1973: 232-233), the ritual visit to ancestral graves during the Lebaran holidays constitutes the attempt of Indonesian Muslims to satisfy their need for “rootedness.” By doing the ritual, they hope to experience a sense of origin, made up of an assemblage of space, time, individual biography, family history, and blood ties. The grave visits—indeed the entire undertaking of *mudik*—create moments in which Indonesian Muslims remind themselves that no matter how far they have gone in their life journeys, and no matter how much the world has changed, they still have their roots in their genealogy and society.

Mudik, we must point out, is the way for Indonesian Muslims to experience not only a sense of rootedness but also a sense of relatedness. It is part of human nature that Indonesian Muslims seek out a sense of creative union with their fellow humans (Fromm 2002: 28-31) and especially with their relatives. To bond and re-bond with close relatives is their way of meeting their existential need for “relatedness,” thereby maintaining their sanity. Relatedness is what Indonesian Muslims mean when they refer to *silaturahmi* (close ties of affection). It makes a lot of sense that around Lebaran day, loved ones and relatives become the social magnet that attracts Indonesian Muslims to the places they call “home.”

This was one of the points that our research subjects made in our interviews. One of them said, “[...B]y going on *mudik*, by visiting relatives and friends in their hometowns and home villages, people keep the *silaturahmi* tradition alive.” Another said, “You just have to meet your relatives face to face; this is the only way you can ease the pain of missing them.” Still another added, “What drives the *mudikers* is the emotional need to renew their ties of *silaturahmi* with the people they care about. All through the year those ties have been eroded by time, distance, and interpersonal conflict.”

Most of our research subjects concurred that Lebaran day is the best time of the year for them to go on *mudik* and rebuild the ties of *silaturahmi*. For one thing, it is the day Indonesian Muslims have the highest chance to get together with most of their relatives. For another, it is also the perfect time for Muslims to re-affirm their love for one another and heal heartbreak by asking one another for forgiveness.

It is worth noting that many Indonesian Muslims do not seem to feel rooted in the big cities where they study, live, and work. They have their psychological roots elsewhere, that is, in those places where their ancestral homes and graves are. There is a sense in which contemporary urban Indonesia is an alienating world. To re-encounter mother and father is—to borrow Fromm’s words—is “to be alive, to be rooted, to be at home [again]” (Fromm 2002: 37). One can, with Fromm, argue that the act of *mudik* is symptomatic of the unconscious longing for primordial “oneness with nature.” *Mudik* promises a remedy for the pains of living a modern life.



“Maafkan saya saudara-sodara. Masih banyak lupa dan khilaf. Masih harus banyak belajar agama.”

Figure 3. Muhammad Misrad, *Marhaban Ya Ramadhan*, May 30, 2018.
Courtesy of the artist.

The existential needs for rootedness and for relatedness are not the only driving forces behind the act of *mudik* for Lebaran. We must keep in mind that *mudik*, to one degree or another, is the product of another driving force, namely the Islamic faith. The practice of adult Indonesian Muslims returning to their parents’ home for Lebaran is, we argue, a response to a challenge: how can those Muslims properly celebrate the end of Ramadan whose self-defined “place of origin” is at a great distance from their place of work, study, or residence? The uneven geographical distribution of Indonesia’s resources has meant that millions of its Muslim citizens have had to leave their hometowns and villages for big cities in search of

education, work, and wealth. As a result, to spend Lebaran with their parents, these migrants have no choice but to make the arduous journey home once a year.

More than an epic journey for a Lebaran family reunion, *mudik* is part of the attempt of Indonesian Muslims to fulfill what Fromm (2002: 61-64) defines as the need for a “frame of orientation” and for an “object of devotion.” The former is an interpretive template and a master discourse for people to capture and articulate the truth about the world and give their lives a meaning. The latter refers to that ultimate entity which people can devote their lives to, and which provides these lives with a purpose. *Mudik* for Lebaran takes place within the context of the month-long fast in Ramadan, a ritual that constitutes one of Islam’s five “pillars” or obligatory acts of worship. Islam is itself a religious frame of orientation that focuses on Allah (God) as the only adequate object of human beings’ devotional submission.

During Ramadan, the month the Qur’an is believed to be first revealed to Prophet Muhammad, Muslims take up a spiritual engineering project whose overall goal it is to reboot their lives, bringing themselves back to their *fitrah*, that is, the human being’s prelapsarian, God-given, spiritual nature (Qur’an 30: 30); in short, *fitrah* is monotheism, the worship of Allah, the one and only God. The Ramadan project involves a set of exercises that center around self-discipline, self-purification, introspection, altruism, and loving submission to God. Muslims must abstain from food, drink, smoking, and sex from sunrise to sunset. They also must refrain from sinful behaviors like engaging in lechery, telling lies, gossiping, getting into

a fit of anger. Instead, they should make charitable donations to the poor and the needy. And, by performing prayers, obligatory and supererogatory; by reciting and studying the Qur'an; and by spending the last ten days of Ramadan in the mosque on a spiritual retreat (*itikāf*), contemplating human frailty and God's omnipotence and infinite love; they pull themselves away from worldly attachments, surrendering themselves to, and seeking communion with, God.

Ramadan does have a mystique about it that inspires even non-devout Muslims to become introspective about the way they have been living their lives and to engage in acts of piety during the fasting month. This is an insight that we can gather from examining, for example, "Marhaban Ya Ramadhan" (Welcome, O Ramadan!), a comic strip by Muhammad Misrad (see Figure 3). The central character "Mice," a single, working-class male Jakartan in his thirties, embarks on his annual spiritual journey of Ramadan. It has been a while since he last touched the Qur'an. (He seems to have been too busy staying alive to do so.) He blows and wipes the dust off the holy book. For a moment, with his hands trembling, he holds it close to his heart. Then, alone in the privacy of his room, seated cross-legged on the floor, he starts reading verses from the Qur'an. As the speech bubble shows, Mice utters the Arabic words, "*A'ūdhu bi-llāhi mina l-shayṭāni l-rajīm,*" which means: "I seek refuge with Allah from the stoned Satan." This is one the two obligatory formulas for Muslims to say before reciting the Qur'an. At the bottom of the comic strip, the artist Muhammad Misrad adds a note: "Brothers and sisters, forgive me for my mistakes and oversights. When it comes to religion, there's still so much for me to learn." With the first

sentence of the note, the artist is putting into practice that hadith of the Prophet according to which the archangel Gabriel said to Him to this effect: If Muslims reach the month of Ramadan without being forgiven by the people they have mistreated, then they will burn in hell and Allah will cast them far away (Ibn Ḥibbān 1993). The idea is that to worship Allah is to perform good deeds to fellow human beings.

Ideally, therefore, in those last days of Ramadan when Indonesian Muslims are making their journey home for Lebaran, they have already become at least a slightly better version of themselves. While some may have done so, others are so carried away by desire that they unleash their inner “beast,” defeating the very purpose of fasting. To fast while going on *mudik* or waiting for one’s children to come home is to go through a spiritual test. When it comes to this, the Ratmana character in the film *MLI* is thus a cautionary tale, not a model to emulate. And so was one participant in the present study who binged on the comfort food her grandmother made for her. By contrast, to perform as best they could in the Ramadan spiritual reboot program, the other participants took a thoughtful approach to the trials that they underwent in their journey back home. One of them recalled, “We got stuck in traffic jam. Aware that this was a test of patience, I stayed calm.” Another emphasized the importance of *mudikers* not ruining their fast and their family road trip with bickering and arguments.

III. Conclusion

Mudik is the annual, religiously-driven migration by millions of Indonesian Muslims to celebrate Eid al-Fitr with their relatives in their places of origin, real or perceived. This practice proves to be a response—which could strike observers as rather desperate and, in the long run, probably unsustainable—to one major challenge: the impossibility for a growing number of Indonesians to confine to a single location all the activities they need to perform to stay alive and sane. As a result, many have to live lives that are psychologically and geographically fragmented: seeking a good education in one place, making a living or raising a family in another, but feeling at home only in still another.

As it happens, the psychogeographical predicament results from a set of problems. Almost eight decades after independence, and despite—and because of—the capitalist transformation that Indonesia has been going through since the late 1960s, the country's economy remains plagued by structural challenges. These include the race among population growth, productive resources, infrastructural capacity, and ecological degradation, as well as the development gap between the city and the countryside and between Java and the so-called “outer islands.” On top of this, many Indonesian Muslims are caught up in the tension between the pull of ancestral ties and the push toward a life of high mobility. And, like the believers in other religions, they also have to embrace the dual nature of their faith. Islam, too, enables as much as it constrains, with the two functions working dialectically in the Muslims' lives. On one hand,

faith fills these lives with meaning, purpose, coherence, focus. Yet at the same time, it saddles them with a whole series of burdens, including, to name only a few, material culture and organizational structures; orthodoxy and ethical obligations; rituals and ceremonies. Perhaps nowhere else have the joy and the burden, the promises and the dangers, of the Islamic way of life been demonstrated more dramatically than in the combination of *mudik*, ritual fasting, and Eid al-Fitr.

That millions of Indonesian Muslims continue, year after year, to undertake the costly, disruptive, and grueling journeys to their places of origin to celebrate Lebaran with their relatives—with some of them suffering serious injuries and even dying in road accidents—shows how much they are willing to pay for a way of life that provides them with what Erich Fromm calls a sense of “rootedness” and “relatedness,” “transcendence,” and “unity,” as well as a “frame of orientation” and an “object of [ultimate] devotion.” The more challenging and disorienting life gets, the more determined people will become in their attempts to satisfy these existential needs.

The results of this study give the impression that Erich Fromm’s theory of “existential needs” has done a decent job of revealing that a historically specific, geographically defined, and culturally patterned form of seasonal, circular, mass-migration, such as the Lebaran-motivated *mudik*, may, at bottom, constitute a way for people to resolve the contradictions in “human nature.” One of the key mediums in which the quasi-transhistorical contradictions express themselves is the interplay between people’s mental lives and their social and physical worlds.

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<국문초록>

“연어도 상류, 태어난 곳으로 이동한다”:
인도네시아 무슬림의 대규모 이동,
무딕(mudik)의 심리지리학

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매년 수백만 명의 인도네시아 무슬림들은 르바란(Lebaran, Eid al-Fitr)을 고향에서 친지들과 함께 축하하기 위해 전국 각지로 이동하는데, ‘무딕’(Mudik)이라고 불리는 이 대규모의 이동은 혼란스럽고 자원이 많이 소모되며 때로는 위험한 일이 발생하기도 한다. 이 기간에는 고향으로 이동하는 이들의 시간, 재정, 그리고 에너지가 낭비되는 것은 물론, 주요 도시를 한동안 유명 도시로 만들고 교통 인프라에 막대한 부담을 주며 많은 교통사고가 발생하기도 한다. 본 연구에서는 무딕을 수행하는 것이 인도네시아 도시 무슬림에게 어떤 의미를 갖는지 고찰하면서 인도네시아의 무딕 전통을 이해하고자 하였다. 본 연구를 위해 온라인 인터뷰 기록과 설문조사 자료, 르바란을 주제로 한 단편 소설, 장편 영화, 유튜브 동영상, 노래, 만화, 그리고 블로그 등 다양한 자료에 대한 주제별 분석을 진행하였다. 본 연구는 현대 인도네시아 무슬림들이 무딕에 부여하는 일련의 의미를 발견하고 이를 통해 이 전통이 소모되는 많은 비용에도 불구하고

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하고 유지되는 이유를 설명하고자 했다.

주제어: 무디, 이드 알 피트르, 이슬람, 인도네시아, 심리지리학