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# Southeast Asia over Three Generations
## Essays Presented to Benedict R. O'G. Anderson

SEAP

# INTERKOM IN INDONESIA: NOT QUITE AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have long been concerned with how various forms of mediation help constitute communities. Until recently, however, they have been interested almost exclusively in forms of face-to-face mediation, such as speech, ritual, and exchange. Benedict Anderson's work on the origins of nationalism extends anthropological insights about the role of mediation in community formation to modes of social interaction that transcend face-to-face encounters.[1] He argues that such modern rituals as reading newspapers and novels, memorizing maps in school, and answering census questions both enabled and constrained early nationalist imaginings. He thus provides an example of how to conceptualize the relation between the advent of new forms of *technological* mediation and the formation of human subjectivities and communities.

When Anderson traces the origins of nationalism, he focuses less on signs and their meanings and more on the materialities of sign systems and on the institutions in which these systems are embedded. In this respect, his approach could be compared to that of Friedrich Kittler, whose concept of "discourse networks" combines a Foucaultian understanding of discourse regimes with a McLuhan-like understanding of how media structure the ways in which discourse is transmitted, stored, and retrieved.[2]

If we accept Anderson's argument that the imagined community of the nation has its origins in a very particular discourse network, namely print capitalism, it behooves us to raise the question of what other types of subject and ideas of community emerge in concert with other modern discourse networks that are not based on print. For example: what about such electric media as telephony,

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

[2] Friederich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens, foreword by David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

telegraphy, satellite communications, and the Internet? Each of these networks emerged in various locales under quite different sets of political, economic, and cultural circumstances. Why did these networks come to take the shape they did in each given locale? How did the materialities of these networks define—and get re-defined by—imaginings of self, community, and modernity? A study of the complex articulations between these discourse networks on the one hand, and their articulation with non-electric discourse networks on the other, could help to delineate some of the many strands of local modernities.

In this paper I will focus on a very unusual electric discourse network, known as *interkom*. Interkom is unusual in two respects. First, it is a technology that—as far as I know—is completely indigenous to Indonesia. It was invented there and has never been exported beyond Indonesia's borders. Second, unlike the networks mentioned above, which in the Indonesian context have always been organized by the state and thus have structures that are strongly unified and centralized, interkom exists very much outside the networks controlled by the state. For the most part interkom has evolved without any recognition, regulation, or relation to the state at all.

The lack of official recognition might help explain why interkom is largely hidden from the public gaze. A fairly exhaustive search of the archive of a local newspaper in Bandung (*Pikiran Rakyat*), for example, yielded only a handful of references to interkom in the editions published between 1980 and 1990. My ethnographic experience is also telling in this regard. I lived in Indonesia for four years and interviewed communications engineers, experts, and hobbyists for two years before learning that interkom was still in use. While I had heard about interkom from friends who grew up in Yogyakarta, like them I believed it to have been a short-lived fad for kids in the early 1980s and that it had long since disappeared. This misconception was exposed quite by accident. One day I looked out my window in Bandung and saw two men climbing a tree in my front yard. When I asked what they were doing, they explained that they were repairing an interkom line (one of these men became my guide into the netherworld of interkom). As I inquired further and walked around town, I came to realize that interkom lines were strung up to trees and utility poles throughout the city. It seemed that everywhere I went, if I looked up, I would see the string-like cables of interkom networks. My failure to notice this before was not due to any attempts on the part of interkom users to hide the network from observation. In fact, people string up the lines quite openly. The networks are simply overlooked.

In this paper I focus on two main aspects of interkom. The first concerns the evolution of the network itself: the way it has grown and transformed through the years. The second concerns the type of community to which interkom gives shape. The paper is based partly on participant observation—taking part in interkom chat and meetings—and partly on twenty lengthy interviews conducted with interkom users in the northern part of the city of Bandung.

## RHIZOMATIC EVOLUTION: FROM *LOKALAN* TO *JALUR LINTAS*

What is interkom? As I encountered it, Interkom is a network of cables linking together tiny food stalls or *warung*, ramshackle city homes, rooms in migrant workers' rooming houses, and farms among rice paddies. Its extension is rhizomatic, stretching from Bandung proper out into rural areas just outside the city limits,

following alleyways, roads, and river valleys. Interkom is a local invention, a product of Indonesia's informal economy. In a technical sense, it could be viewed as the homemade analogue of a telephone party line. But in cultural terms, it bears greater resemblance to Citizen Band radio: it is a network where people can chat, listen to music, pass on messages, and exchange information.

When a person is on the interkom line, he or she wears headphones and talks into a microphone. The microphone and headphones are plugged into an interkom set, which usually consists of a gutted amplifier box that has been rewired with new circuits for this purpose. In addition to the headphones, many interkom sets are equipped with a speaker so that others who are not themselves "breaking" (*ngebreak*)—chatting on interkom—at that moment can hear the different sides of the conversation. Many sets are also hooked up to tape decks and radios so that music can be piped into the network for all to hear.

If one asks people who have been involved in interkom since the early 1980s about how the network has changed since that time, they invariably describe its growth as passing through a number of distinct stages. The first lines were used to link together neighboring houses, usually within a single residential compound. They grew relatively quickly to link together a number of different houses within the same *kampung* (neighborhood) or RT (Rukun Tetangga, administrative neighborhood unit). When this process happened in two adjacent *kampung*s, and when the power was sufficient to push further, links were established between the *kampung* networks. In this manner, the larger neighborhood units, known as RW (Rukun Warga), became wired. Up until this point, the evolution occurred in a manner suggesting the growing extension and density of a web. The webs themselves, however, were still quite small: the total extension of such networks, measured as the crow flies, would rarely have exceeded a kilometer or two.

With the higher wattage of the interkom sets in the mid-1990s, however, a different type of line emerged, one that aimed to link together distant points but with a relatively low level of local density. These long-distance lines are known generically as *jalur lintas*: high-speed or traversing lines. With the emergence of *lintas* lines, the old networks that were confined to a neighborhood came to be called *lokalan* or local lines. The longest *lintas* line that was operational during my period of observation (2000-2001) in north Bandung extended for at least seven kilometers. People reported that such lines had on occasion extended even further, connecting to areas outside Bandung that are twenty to twenty-five kilometers away. There were even initiatives to build a Bandung-wide network that would link together all the various parts of the city, although this never materialized.

While this story about the evolution of interkom is a good characterization of an overall developmental trend, it masks many of the complexities of network transformation. The most important of these complexities is the fact that interkom networks do not merely grow by extension and by increasing in density: they actually reproduce through a type of division that resembles mitosis.

People gave three main reasons why users may decide to form a new line. One of the most common reasons was that a given line had simply become too crowded. There are limits to how many people can be talking on a single line and still feel that they can get a word in edgewise. Most people put the ideal number of users on a given line at somewhere between twenty and eighty people (not everyone "breaks" at any given time). When the number of users becomes unmanageable, one will see a tendency for division. Often the name of the new line will reflect its origin: it will

be called by the name of the original line, but with the additional specification "two." Thus, for example, a line called Jalur Dalas was divided into Jalur Dalas Satu and Jalur Dalas Dua. Other times, however, or over time, the new line will get its own name. Sometimes the relation between two such lines is expressed in the idiom of kinship: as an older sibling line and a younger sibling line.

A second reason people gave for establishing a new line was to provide a space for a different type of discursive content. This may also be related to the problem of overcrowding, except the solution is not merely to create a new line of the same type, but to create a line dedicated to a particular type of content. This is what happened, for example, when some members of a line called Jalur Selek decided to create a new line called Jalur Musik. As one of the founders of the Music Line described it, they wanted to create a bit of entertainment on the side of the existing line, but in a way that would not bother the members of Jalur Selek who wanted to talk. In other cases, it may not be the content that is being divided up, but the discursive styles. Conversations on interkom can be quite vulgar and coarse, so sometimes members of a line may decide to set up a line that is more polite and refined. People who want to join the new line will have to agree to abide by the discursive conventions. Those who do not abide by the rules risk being disconnected.

A third reason people gave for establishing a new line was to increase the level of privacy. Under these circumstances the new line will have a selected membership. It happens once in a while, for example, that two people who like to spend a lot of time talking to each other will decide to create their own private line that others are not invited to join. In fact, there is a term for this type of line: Jalur Guha or Cave Line.

The initial shape a new line takes depends on the reason for its creation. If the line is established to deal with overcrowding, it is quite likely that it will follow the shape of the original line, at least for a time. The same is generally true if the line is an attempt to create a different venue for different types of content or style, although this will depend on individual members' interest in what the new line has to offer. In the case of a Jalur Guha, in contrast, the line will have quite a different shape and length from that of its parent line.

The fact that there are multiple lines that criss-cross and run in parallel across the landscape means that in any given neighborhood there may be several different lines, some *lokalan* and some *lintas*. What makes any particular one of these lines expand or link up with others varies. Sometimes a line will extend to a new house because someone hears about it from others or tries it out while visiting at someone's house (there is a term for this: *ngeron*). This is what one would expect. What I did not expect, however, is that one of the main reasons people cited for wanting to join a line was what is referred to as *cepretan*. The literal meaning of *cepretan* is "clicking," like the sound of an insect, but here it means cross-talk. The currents that pass over interkom lines are actually quite powerful, and they have a tendency to jump across onto other lines they come close to. (This can cause trouble with the phone provider because interkom signals often jump onto phone lines; when this happens people on the telephone hear interkom conversations in the background.) But when people say *cepretan*, they generally mean cross-talk between interkom lines. Usually the sound is quite faint, but it can be loud enough to render other people's conversation intelligible and to pique one's interest. Such overhearing—made possible by the existence of numerous lines—can thus also cause the lines to grow.

Not all network change leads to network growth. Just as there is a tendency for certain lines to become popular and for these to extend greater and greater distances, gathering more and more users as they grow, so too is there a reverse tendency whereby lines are used less and less. If they are rarely used, there is little incentive to keep them in working order, and people will either intentionally disconnect themselves from the line or simply fail to fix connecting cables when they break. In fact, all four of the lines that I was connected to in 2000 were no longer in operation in 2002. In at least one of these instances, gradual attrition prompted the remaining users to decide *en masse* to dismantle the network so that the cable could be salvaged and put to use in building a new line with a different name and a different geographical extension. Indeed, during the time that those four lines died out, three new lines were born in the same immediate vicinity, gathering together the former users and others in new constellations.

When one takes into consideration the tendency of interkom lines to reproduce and divide, the picture of network evolution becomes far more complex than it appeared at first glance. While one overall trend in the evolution of interkom has thus been toward the development of networks with greater geographic spread and greater densities, processes of division, reproduction, and attrition have mitigated this trend. Rather than the picture of an ever-expanding and increasingly unified network, we are left with a picture of lines growing, connecting to one another, and creating new unities, all the while reproducing, dividing in new ways, and losing pieces here and there.

All of this makes the interkom network seem a lot like segmentary lineage structures. It is as if interkom users have engineered what amounts to a kinship structure—one that did not exist in western Java—within the urban and suburban milieu. There are, however, some crucial differences between interkom lines and lineages. The first difference is that the line that links people is not the link of bloodlines but actual physical cables. So there is no sense in which one's relations to others on the line is determined by birth. Membership in a line is strictly voluntary and can be quite short-lived. The second difference is that these are *lines* not *lineages*. Although some lines may be identified as having sibling-like relations to other lines, people do not see them as being derived from some common ancestor. This means that the lines are seen as extending in space rather than in time. It also means that the lines are fundamentally non-centered, for there are no ancestors with respect to whom measurements of social distance, and thus hierarchy, could be established. Finally, the segmentary lines that constitute interkom are not exclusive. One is not *either* a member of one line *or* the member of another line: one can be a member of multiple lines (this is done by having several lines enter into one's house and by connecting one's interkom set up to the line one wishes to talk on). Thus, the emphasis is on ever-expanding connections rather than on unity, exclusivity, and boundaries. In short, we could say, following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, that the structure of interkom differs from that of segmentary lineages in that it is rhizomatic rather than arborescent.[3]

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[3] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri. "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 3-25.

## THE LOCALITY OF INTERKOM

While tracing structural transformations in interkom over time sheds light on how the network developed and the types of material constraints that shaped that development, it says little about how interkom relates to other social institutions or what it represents to its users. For a more contextual perspective, it is necessary to look at interkom not as a rhizome that is suspended above other institutions, but one that grows into and out of these institutions in particular ways.

As noted above, early interkom lines emerged in the context of the household and were used to link together different buildings within a residential compound or to link together houses in close proximity. Networks started in a piecemeal fashion as extensions of particular *kampung*-level face-to-face discourse networks. Ibu Karmini, a thirty-four-year-old mother, for example, emphasized that interkom provided a way for her to visit relatives without having to leave the house. So when someone died while she was busy at home, she could pass on the news to her parents via interkom. For her, the early interkom was identified with the types of communicative practices associated with familial ties. For others, early interkom lines represented something a little different: the possibility of a culture of chat that replaced that of *nongkrong*, or hanging out. Rather than hanging out in front of the local *warung*, which was often associated with such costly habits as drinking and gambling, one could hang out and chat on interkom.

Growing out of these *kampung*-level interactions, interkom quickly became a fad. In these early years, some *kampungs* might have as many as twenty or thirty houses on a line (compared to three or four from any given *kampung* nowadays). In many places, interkom was popular enough that communities experimented with turning it into a semi-official communications medium. They did this first at the RT level, then at the RW level, and some communities even tried to wire together whole *kecamatan* (subdistricts). To a certain extent, these initiatives were a function of the times. The early to mid-1980s was a period when the Indonesian government was placing a great deal of emphasis on the importance of neighborhood security.[4] It encouraged RT and RW heads to improve their guardhouses and to work with the local police to organize their neighborhood watches and report the presence of visitors. The government wanted every community to have a guard house with a *kentongan*—a wooden bell that could be struck in particular rhythms to indicate the presence of a threat: one sound for a fire, another for a thief, another for a death.

For a time, users started to imagine interkom as a network that would fulfill the same function as the *kentongan*, but in a high-tech way. A military man, Rahmat, remembered it like this:

> The reason for early [interkom lines] was the need for communication. Communication between the heads of the RW: between RW 1, 2, and 3. At that time security was difficult because telephones were still rare. So we used interkom. So if there was a visitor who wanted to directly report to the RW,

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[4] Joshua Barker, "State of Fear: Controlling the Criminal Contagion in Suharto's New Order." in *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia*, ed. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, 2001), pp. 20-53.

we would let the RW know that if the visitor showed up, there was no need for the signature of the head of the RT.[5]

In north Bandung, Rahmat was active in getting people to build two early lines, one called Jalur Kecamatan (Subdistrict Line), the other Jalur Kantibmas (Security and Order of Society Line). The former line was built in collaboration with the subdistrict office and was used for reporting any gatherings of *kampung* youth, such as for sports meets or concerts. The latter line was linked directly into the local military command (Koramil) and police precinct. As Rahmat explained:

> We connected it to Koramil, so we could pass on information, about crime, delinquent youths, drunkenness, and so on. Yes, cooperation with Koramil back then was very useful. If anyone did something wrong it would be visible.[6]

In the case of Jalur Kantibmas, it was no longer just the face-to-face *kampung* ties associated with families, neighbors, and *nongkrong* communities that were being wired together, but the nested hierarchical ties of local government and local military authority. At least for a brief time, interkom became an additional means for these structures to insinuate themselves deeper into neighborhood life.

In the long run, the experiment with making interkom a tool of the surveillance state was just that: an experiment. Both Jalur Kecamatan and Jalur Kantibmas eventually disappeared, and no similar lines have emerged to replace them. Rather than the state, it was *kampung* culture that ultimately left its imprint on the evolving network. Nowadays, this imprint can be seen in how the network is maintained, in the types of social activities that interkom users engage in, and in the terms in which users imagine the interkom community as it extends further afield, leaving the *kampung*, as such, behind. I will discuss each of these aspects in turn.

The vast majority of interkom lines are run on a very informal basis. An initial group of people, usually not very large, will agree to establish a line and will buy the cable necessary to link together their houses. Once established, the line grows incrementally, from house to house, as others hear about it and want to join up. Each person who joins has to provide the cable necessary to reach the nearest point in the line from his or her particular location. Thus, the line is built out of pieces of cable that are supplied individually or in small groups. Maintenance, however, is a more collective concern, because if the line gets disconnected somewhere in the middle—something that happens quite frequently—it means that large numbers of people will not be able to communicate.

Line maintenance is handled by a number of people called *teknisi* or technicians, who can be called upon when there is a problem. Each *kampung* will have one or two people who act as *teknisi*, usually maintaining more than one line in the area. They do this on a volunteer basis, but may receive some coffee or cigarettes as informal payments from those benefiting from their services.

Occasionally, interkom lines can be organized quite formally. One that I studied had an elected head, a membership fee, rules of use, and small monthly contributions for line maintenance. In essence, it functioned with the same political

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[5] Personal Interview, Rahmat, October 2000.

[6] Personal Interview, Rahmat, October 2000.

structure as a neighborhood association. The advantage of this system, according to its users, was that any problems with the line were usually fixed within a few hours, as the head supplied any necessary cable and had technicians on call. Furthermore, the quality of sound was good because the cable used throughout the whole line was telephone cable purchased with the money from the membership fees.

Whether organized formally or informally, interkom lines all involve activities and events that resemble the types of things a *kampung* might organize. There are *arisan* (gatherings where women make contributions to a common kitty and take turns winning it) for the women of a particular line, feasts where people gather to eat, and special events like musical festivals and group outings to the beach or to nearby tourist destinations. These events are paid for by those who choose to participate and are often organized to celebrate the anniversary of the formation of the line (HUT, Hari Ulang Tahun, anniversary celebrations). Not all members of a line turn out for these events, but a good number do.

Even as networks extend well beyond the *kampung* sphere, the idiom in which the users imagine the new community continues to be in terms of kinship and *kampung*-like relations.[7] As Dede, a man in his forties, put it:

> Besides communication, [interkom] is for harmonization. Looking for kinship [*persaudaraan*], bringing friends closer together. As we look for kinship, people who we didn't know become people we know. Kinship, really, that is the goal. So every month we gather somewhere to celebrate our friendship. And we have an *arisan*. Yes, basically it is to strengthen the lines of kinship.[8]

Strengthening the lines of kin can be understood in both a metaphorical and a literal sense. People I interviewed often told me that interkom in their area had grown because many residents wished to communicate with relatives who lived some distance away. At the same time, however, people who met on interkom would frequently enter into the types of exchange relations associated with kinship. Whether understood in "literal" or "metaphorical" terms, the important thing was that interkom added to one's circle of relations. Halimah, a thirty-six-year-old grandmother, described types of relations she had on interkom this way:

> It wouldn't be possible to have [interkom] and be enemies . . . not possible! Cause you are only friends when you have interkom. That the women on it now have an *arisan*, it's not for nothing. Like when we're finished cooking, we can chat . . . Rather than being bored or daydreaming while cleaning, better to chat on the line.[9]

Even though interkom is comprehended within the familiar idiom of kinship and *kampung* relations, it is not reducible to these relations. In fact, what is most

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[7] In western Java, *kampung* sociality is closely associated with kinship. Most *kampungs* are remembered as having been founded by one family. Although some descendants may have taken up residence elsewhere, and newcomers may numerically predominate, the offspring of the founding family tend to constitute the core of *kampung* social life.

[8] Personal Interview, Dede, November 2000.

[9] Personal Interview, Halimah, December 2000.

fascinating about interkom is the way it allows for the creation of a different kind of world that stands in opposition to everyday life. This opposition is characterized by a sharp distinction between interkom society and face-to-face society. This distinction, borrowed from the older cultures of amateur radio and CB radio, draws a line between the "on-air" (*di udara*) world (sometimes "on-line" or *di jalur*) and "on-land" (*di darat*) world.

Everyone who uses interkom has both an on-land name (*nama darat*) and an on-air name (*nama udara*). On-air names, which may be chosen for oneself or assigned by others, are not all of a given type. Some are Sundanese words with a particular meaning. Some examples of this type were: Seagull, Mr. Open Hand, and Grandpa Swinging Back and Forth. Other names included The Japanese, Scooby-Doo, and Delta, as well as several ordinary Sundanese names. Some people have different on-air names for different lines, while others keep the same name regardless of which line they are on. People who are frequently on-air together eventually learn each other's on-land names. But when invitations are sent out for interkom-related social events, like picnics and anniversary celebrations, they are addressed using people's on-air names. Even in person, people refer to each other by these names.

These on-air names provide a space for people to construct a sense of self that is different from the one they have on-land. Rather than being based on one's familial ties, the place one lives, or one's looks, this sense of self is established largely on the basis of one's discursive style and sound on-air. The types of adjectives people use to describe the voices they like are gentle (*lembut*), sweet and melodious (*merdu*), exquisite (*bagus*), attractive (*menarik*), and enjoyable to the ears (*enak didengar*). People are always experimenting with their voice modulation by speaking in different tones and trying different bass, treble, and reverb settings. Since they cannot hear the output of their own speech, as it sounds on-air, they rely on others to help them find the settings that generate the most attractive sound.

This fascination with the modulated voice as a way to captivate listeners is not restricted to the world of interkom. Local radio personalities achieve stardom on the basis of a particular sound, a fact interkom users are well aware of. Indeed, one user I talked to said that he originally got into interkom because he did not have the background necessary to get a job in radio. This similarity to radio is evident in the term used for someone who likes to act as host on a given interkom network: *penyiar lokalan* (interkom broadcaster). In this sense, interkom represents a kind of amateur version of the radio big leagues, much as home karaoke systems represent an amateur version of singing stardom. Both provide a means to partake in, and to appropriate, the power of modulated voice and to generate a local version of stardom.

The persona one develops on-air does not necessarily carry into interactions on-land. As Ani, an unemployed twenty-six-year-old who lives with her parents, pointed out:

> It's true that when we chat on the line we hear their voice. The voice is great so we figure the person is also great. But then it turns out they are just ordinary .... So voices and people, sometimes they are the same and sometimes they're different.[10]

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[10] Personal Interview, Ani, December 2000.

According to Iwan, a twenty-eight-year-old civil servant who moonlights at a VCD (Video CD) rental stall in the evenings, it is not just that a person's voice guarantees nothing about his or her other characteristics, but that the sound of a voice on interkom can be quite different from its ordinary sound.

> On air people's vocals are more beautiful because of the influence of modulating technologies. When you meet they aren't that beautiful. Interkom, after all, uses turn control, so you can adjust the bass and treble. You can even give it reverb.[11]

The contrast between people's on-air voice personae and their on-land personae provides the grounds for many humorous stories and some disappointments. A typical story is that of someone who was attracted to the power of an interkom voice and then learned upon meeting the person that he was just a parking attendant. Indeed, within interkom lingo there is actually a word, *kiobok*, which refers to someone who sounds beautiful on air but turns out to be unattractive in person.

The difference between the on-air and on-land worlds is not only marked by a distinction between identities and traits on- and off-air, but also by a difference in discursive style. Everyone I talked to described interkom discourse as being more free (*lebih bebas*) and less subject to the types of constraints that are usually placed on face-to-face interactions. Didin, the forty-two-year-old noodle vendor, described the difference as follows:

> It's different. On the line we joke and chat [but] on land if you meet the person you're rather embarrassed [*malu*]. On the line it is more free, on land it's a little shy if you don't know them that well. After all, on land they have a husband.[12]

This freedom from shyness or shame does not just mean that men and women can interact in ways that would be frowned upon in face-to-face meetings, it also means that they experience a greater freedom from hierarchical discursive patterns. People can get away with teasing and jokes on interkom that would otherwise be considered disrespectful and impolite. Bahrudin, a fifty-three-year-old construction worker, described his own feelings on this:

> On land there are limits. Even when someone is younger than me, there is no way I can say something unpleasant to them on land. It just isn't ethical. But on line I can be burned [by other people] ... they just go on and on. On land it couldn't be that way.[13]

Such freedom, however, does not mean that such considerations are entirely absent. A twenty-nine-year-old man named Tulus said that interkom discourse still has its rules.

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[11] Personal Interview, Iwan, December 2000.

[12] Personal Interview, Didin, October 2000.

[13] Personal Interview, Bahrudin, December 2000.

> It's the language. The language is different. On-air maybe it is free but there are still rules. You can't say just anything you want to. If you know you're connecting to someone older you talk well, different.[14]

If names, personae, and speech styles found on-air are somewhat discontinuous with those to be found on-land, the discontinuity is driven home by interkom's most popular speech genre, namely, *pojok-memojok* (cornering). Cornering is when two people, usually of the opposite sex, engage in a conversation that involves getting to know each other, flirtation, and intimate banter. It is something quite close to phone sex, but in cornering sexual references are never made explicit, but remain implicit in metaphor, allusion, and innuendo. As a speech genre, cornering is not restricted to interkom; it also exists on CB radio, amateur radio, and the Internet.

On interkom, cornering involves a peculiar mix of intimacy and display. By definition it is a discursive interaction that involves only two people. But as one interkom user pointed out, although only two people are talking, the number listening may be as many as forty. In this sense, cornering is like a dance. Out of a crowd of people, two take the floor and engage in a kind of intimate performance. Then, after a time, they fade back into the darkness of the crowd and another pair emerges to give their performance. On interkom lines in Bandung, this performance is going on almost non-stop day and night.

What is interesting about cornering is that, over the long term, it means most people on a given line come to be paired with a specific partner, referred to either as a *pojokan* (a person with whom one corners) or a *pasangan* (partner). That is, through cornering people establish more or less long-term on-air couples. These couple relationships, along with the friendships and kinship ties that link interkom users, help give a definite but flexible structure to the interkom community. The structure is manifest not in any formal tie, but in ties of loyalty. Edi, a forty-five-year-old laborer in a furniture factory, described such loyalty as follows:

> On some lines there are people who really are loyal. Sometimes when their chatting partner hasn't turned up . . . sometimes they just wait for hours. Sometimes if one wants to shift over to another line one's partner won't allow it.[15]

The twenty-six-year-old Ani also drew attention to the fact that partners can be quite possessive:

> It's like this: on the interkom line each person has a partner. If I talk with someone else it's wrong and people will get angry at me. That's why everyone on the line has a partner, so there are a lot of them.[16]

To appreciate the significance of cornering and coupling on interkom, it is necessary to realize that many of the people involved are—on-land at

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[14] Personal Interview, Tulus, October 2000.

[15] Personal Interview, Edi, December 2000.

[16] Personal Interview, Ani, December 2000.

least—married and have children. In fact, many of the interviews in which people described the practice of cornering were conducted with both husband and wife present. Yet it appeared not to be a practice that caused any major domestic conflicts. This despite the fact that within the communities where interkom is popular, any hint of on-land infidelity is treated very seriously. This radical divergence is illustrated by the case of a family I know quite well. The husband spent every night until the wee hours cornering on interkom, a situation that provoked only occasional complaints from his wife. But on the one occasion that his wife caught him and a male friend chatting with a single mother—who had nothing to do with interkom—on an empty plot of land next to their house, the wife was completely beside herself, threatening that she would either commit suicide or murder the other woman. While eventually things were sorted out peacefully, the reconciliation took a couple of weeks and ended up involving several families in the *kampung*.

When I asked people about why interkom does not cause such conflicts, the standard response was: because on interkom there are so many people listening. Thus, people expect that nothing too untoward will happen. Furthermore, they explained, everyone knows that interkom is "only for entertainment." As long as it is kept that way, it does not cause any problems. But more than a few people provided a word of caution. Yayah, a thirty-four-year-old housemother, put it most clearly:

> No, [the pairing] is only on interkom. Never bring it down to land . . . that would be destruction. No, we all understand this . . . If someone jokes with someone else's wife or with someone's husband that's no problem, that's only on line. If that took place on land: bankruptcy.[17]

As long as on-air society can be kept separate from on-land society, things will be just fine. Only if they get mixed-up could things fall apart.[18]

## DISCOURSE NETWORKS AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

In sum, interkom has a rather peculiar status in relation to older forms of on-land communities. On the one hand, it grows out of these communities and has been heavily shaped by them. In this respect we could say that interkom is "wired" by *kampung* and kin relations. This wiring gives interkom an aura of familiarity, rather than an aura of an alien technology. But at the same time, interkom itself wires these relations and transforms them by extending them outward beyond their usual geographic and social confines. This extension enables the creation of a new field of discursive interactions that are not reducible to face-to-face interactions. The differences between the two are partly due to the various materialities of communication: the differences between seeing people when they speak and only hearing their voices, the differences between modulated electric speech and ordinary speech, the possibility of anonymity, and so forth. The differences are also due to conventions that mark out a special discursive space for interkom, where

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[17] Personal Interview, Yayah, October 2000.
[18] The situation for unmarried people is more complex, since many people actually use interkom to find spouses.

talk is freer from social constraints and where people can practice the art of cornering and others can listen with envy to the melodious tones of a good performer.

As the dominant speech genre of interkom, cornering helps to pattern interkom social relations into male and female pairs. This flexible structure of pairs departs from other forms of sociality on interkom, which tend to be understood as literal or metaphorical extensions of kin relations into this new domain. In contrast to the latter types of relations, these pairs introduce a form of sociality that could conceivably disrupt the presumed order of face-to-face, on-land family and *kampung* life. Perhaps to guard against this eventuality, interkom users choose to treat interkom as a world unto itself, an on-air world that ought not have any material effect on the on-land world of real families and friendships, except when it acts to strengthen them. The division into on-air and on-land is thus somewhat reminiscent of American conventions that distinguish between television and reality, or reality and virtual reality. But interkom is distinctive because conceptions of self and community—not conceptions of reality—are at stake. Rather than challenge existing conceptions of self and local community, interkom users simply multiply themselves and their communities, using humor and sanctions to negotiate the potential conflicts such multiplication engenders.

One could contrast the sense of community on interkom to the "imagined community" of the nation. That idea of community transcends locality and introduces a type of identity that is fundamentally different from the identities engaged in face-to-face communities, and fundamentally new. In print media and in the *lingua franca* of Melayu, people encountered languages, news events, and personages in a manner that effectively uprooted them from their local contexts and installed them in a more transcendent symbolic and geo-political frame. In identifying themselves with this frame, people came to see themselves as part of a broader community of Indonesians and moderns. In contrast to this, interkom represents a community that is not quite imagined, but also not quite face-to-face. Perhaps we could call it "voice-to-voice" instead of face-to-face. It allows people to move beyond the familiar and safe settings of the household and the *kampung*, but does so in a manner that ensures that the routes back to these local worlds remain open and traversable. The foray into what could have been an unfamiliar world thus becomes an intriguing but relatively unthreatening excursion. It allows one to feel the pleasures and comfort of coming home without actually having left.

This point was impressed upon me by one of the people we interviewed, Dede, a forty-five-year-old who worked in a low-level position in the government body responsible for elections. In relation to interkom, Dede was a colorful figure with a great deal of bravado. When asked about which lines he was connected to, he exclaimed that they were many because the citizens—*warga*—of interkom actively extended their lines to him, since all of them wanted him to join their networks. This, he claimed, was because of his beautiful voice, which had the power to attract the interest of people everywhere. When he was on-air, everyone else would stand by in silence so they could listen. In short, Dede presented himself as the interkom version of a "man of prowess,"[19] someone whose voice had the gravitational pull to attract both listeners and interkom lines. But what was most

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[19] Oliver W. Wolters, *History, Region, and Culture in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, 1999).

interesting about Dede was his on-air names. One of these names spoke to his prowess: Suara Dewa or Voice of Divinity. But his other name was revealing of something else: it was Pak Waas. Waas is a Sundanese word that has a very particular meaning. In his dictionary Jonathan Rigg describes it like this: "Waas" is what is

> . . . said when a pleasurable feeling is caused by seeing someone or something which reminds us of what we ourselves possess, but which, for the moment, is out of our reach. [It is] a happy or pleasing remembrance or emotion regarding something which we do not at the moment see.[20]

"Waas" then is the type of feeling and the type of imagination that I would associate with interkom culture. What is generated as one passes outside of the local is not a fascination with the new and a nostalgic longing for irrecoverable origins, but a pleasurable longing for something that has been transcended but remains within reach. In this respect, the culture of interkom differs from those cultures—like ethnic and national cultures—that have been subjected to control by the state and affected by the dialectics of power. It could have been otherwise. Had the New Order state recognized the usefulness of interkom for initiatives like Jalur Kantibmas, those could have become standardized across the nation and then Indonesia's security state would have been truly wired. But it did not, and interkom users themselves were not terribly interested in that particular path of development. What they were looking for was a form of communication that was relatively free from hierarchy and was "just for fun." Anytime it stopped being fun, all a "breaker" had to do was to pull out his or her cable and disconnect.

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[20] Jonathan Rigg, *Dictionary of the Sunda Language of Java* (Batavia: Lage, 1862), pp. 524-25. The contemporary usage of waas is not always pleasurable. It can refer, for example, to the feeling one gets when, while looking down from a cliff, one suddenly imagines falling (but does not actually fall).