

Anxious Awakening of the Dormant...

Sindhunata Hargyono

His sister's condition had visibly worsened. She needed medical treatment in the city. The man knew what to do. He had to call the Mission Aviation Fellowship office in Tarakan to request a humanitarian airlift. Turning on his phone, he hoped for a miracle that was not there: cellular signal. The base transceiver station (BTS) was sleeping.¹ Thus began the journey of trying to awaken the BTS. Hastily, he grabbed a jerry can and his motorcycle key. Once the nearby shopkeeper had filled the can with overpriced gasoline, he drove to the hill where the BTS tower stands. He couldn't wait to entrust the jerry can of fuel to that expert of BTS awakening, the operator. To his surprise, though, the operator was not there. He shouted the operator's name to no avail. Hurrying on again with his motorbike, he arrived at the operator's house only to find it empty. He circled around the villages, asking people the operator's whereabouts, but nobody knew. The illusion of control collapsed; emotions resurged. Anxiety about his sister's wellbeing soured into anger. In a last-ditch effort, he repeated the first sequence: shouting the operator's name around the BTS tower. Same result. Red-faced, he flung rocks at the tower, declaring the superfluity of this infrastructural form and damaging its solar panel.²

¹ A BTS mounted on a tower allows nearby mobile devices to access cellular services.

² Reconstructed from different second-hand accounts.

... for Good

The incident described above occurred in Kayan Hulu, a subdistrict of Indonesia's North Kalimantan province. Like most Indonesian border regions, Kayan Hulu has suffered long-term infrastructural violence of the "passive" kind (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012: 407) due to state neglect (Eghenter 2007). This passive violence not only manifests in the lack – if not total absence – of public services in the region, but also in the subdistrict's relative isolation from population centers on the coast.

Between 2012 and 2016, however, anxiety caused by the absence of infrastructure gradually declined as state institutions increasingly targeted Kayan Hulu for development. A combination of political patronage from para-state "border elites" (Eilenberg 2012: 5) at subnational levels and emerging pro-border development by the central government facilitated the unprecedented sprouting of new infrastructures. Two power plants, overhead powerlines and a BTS tower were built. Whenever infrastructure gets planned or constructed (see Gupta 2018), it simultaneously promises "circulation and distribution" as well as "modernity, development, progress, and freedom" (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018: 3; see also Larkin 2013). Such is the case here. In 2013, as the BTS tower and overhead powerlines were virtually completed, residents had high hopes. Kayan Hulu was "becoming like a city," as one elder told me.

Infrastructures developed between 2012 and 2016 in Kayan Hulu.

Map: ESRI World Imagery via OpenStreetMap
iD-Editor, edited by the author, 2023.



But the story of infrastructure in Kayan Hulu has been a rollercoaster of anticlimactic inclusion and unevenness. Each time a new infrastructural element is seemingly complete, it typically will not operate on a permanent basis. Power plants have been constructed without corresponding powerlines, while a separate overhead powerlines project was completed without there being an actual energy source. Moreover, the BTS tower cannot function reliably due to insufficient gas supply from the regency government.

These infrastructures are either technically incomplete or facing logistical issues; they do not work all the time as is their supposed “modernist” fate (Di Nunzio 2018: 1). Nevertheless, they have become pervasive technical objects embedded in the local landscape, in the process shaping the everyday aesthetic experience of residents. Despite their failure to properly function, these infrastructures routinely convey their potentiality to do so – for example, the diesel power plant’s mechanical noises (i.e. maintenance) and the tower’s beaming red light (i.e. aviation protocol) at night have long become parts of daily life. Residents expect that with the right interventions, these infrastructures will be able to operate for good. They are not broken; they are just dormant.



Overhead powerlines with no power source and the monument commemorating Lencau Ingan, a local historical figure, Kayan Hulu.
Photo: Sindhunata Hargyono, 2013.

New infrastructures promise better futures for Kayan Hulu’s residents. Yet, by quickly falling into dormancy, these same infrastructures evoke a prolonged state of potentiality, or “the future’s capacity to become future” (Bryant and Knight 2019: 107). This stretching out of their potential to be realized means that dormant infrastructures generate an anxious temporalizing affect, since their ability to function is out of the hands of local residents. After all, potentialities are equally capable of being impotentialities as long as they are not yet actualized (Agamben 1999: 182). The initial excitement of novel infrastructures, then, turns into a sense of nervousness and unease. Here, a new kind of infrastructural anxiety emerges at the intersection of state neglect and waiting in a situation of extended possibility.

When will the state awaken the dormant for good? Could these non-functioning infrastructures merely represent a glitch in the usual pattern of neglect?



... for a Moment

Living with dormant infrastructures is ironic as residents can access infrastructural objects and interfaces but not the matters they promise. These dormant infrastructures are, nevertheless, a manifestation of the state's rare investment in the region. They evoke "an affectively real and emotionally available" (Larkin 2018: 185) presence of the state. They have become focal points through which residents evaluate the work of the state and their long-deferred rights as citizens. All this sediments politically-charged "affective flickers" (Martínez and Sirri 2020: 853) of frustration and disappointment about the state, ready to become a potent political force at an apt moment. The opening vignette recounts one such moment, where an anxious episode of seeking to awaken the dormant turned into anger which resulted in a politically tangible effect that I will address at the end of this section.

Temporarily rousing dormant infrastructures is as anxiety-inducing as wishing to awaken them for good. If the latter is associated with the act of waiting for the historically unreliable state, the former rests on the illusion of exerting one's agency. This opportunity for temporary awakening is rooted in the BTS tower's distinctive "temporal fragility" (Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly and Budds 2020; see also Joniak-Lüthi 2019). Residents have a degree of control over the BTS's temporary operation, as the local authority allows private residents to procure gasoline and fire up the BTS with the help of a site operator. This

The BTS tower seen from a football field in Long Nawang village, Kayan Hulu.

Photo: Sindhunata Hargyono, 2017.

distinctive infrastructural temporality is troubling for both the residents who wake up the BTS and those who are affected by that awakening. As cellular signal unavailability is the status quo, its sudden appearance disrupts the rhythm of everyday life. Rushing against the uncertain duration of signal availability, people hastily seek to fulfill all their delayed communications. The BTS stirring into life has also been taken as a sign that someone is in medical crisis. A person must be ill, or worse, dead. On one sudden awakening, a woman told me: “This is life... people fall ill, the entire village rejoices [at the sudden availability of cellular signal].”



So, the BTS is inherently anxiety-inducing for those who attempt to awaken it. It does not fit with the common expectation of infrastructure as being “transparent to use, in the sense that it does not have to be reinvented each time or assembled for each task” (Star 1999: 381). The BTS is not transparent in this sense because it has to be reawakened whenever someone needs it to complete a single task. This arrangement inherently induces anxiety because it creates the illusion that its temporary awakening is fully subject to human agency. Awakening the BTS sounds straightforward: procure gasoline, hand it to the operator, and voilà! As the opening vignette suggests, however, this process is an open-ended endeavor contingent on numerous elements beyond one person’s control.

As the illusion of control collapsed, emotions resurged. Sedimented disappointments and frustrations became anger and climaxed in the hurling of rocks. The man was later put on public trial and had to pay a fine. Yet this scandal somehow catalyzed a reconfiguration of state–border region citizen relations, as these actions sparked

Border patrol soldiers stop chatting as cellular signal becomes available and they are able to catch up with loved ones in Java.

Photo: Sindhunata Hargyono, 2017.

debates about what to do with the dormant infrastructures. Local leaders wanted to preserve them in order to maintain a good reputation vis-à-vis the central state in the hope of further investment (Hargyono 2021). Meanwhile, a group of residents circulated a DIY plan to connect pre-existing powerplants to existing overhead lines. Anxious about the possibility of grassroots tampering with state property, local leaders began sending delegates to various national and subnational institutions to pressure state actors to awaken the dormant infrastructures for good. Here, then, the rocks that were thrown at the BTS's solar panel eventually forced local leaders to stop waiting, and made them actively pursue this awakening. A new form of infrastructure politics from the margins was born.

Closing Remarks

As “every infrastructure is an asynchronic timescape” (Joniak-Lüthi 2019: 7), the alignment between human and infrastructural temporalities is not always guaranteed despite dominating the imaginary of modern infrastructural time. In other words, functioning reliably and constantly is just one possible infrastructural temporality among many. Through attending to infrastructures’ “temporal fragility” and “their associated material and affective conditions” (Ramakrishnan, O’Reilly and Budds 2020: 676), we may discover how infrastructures mediate and/or enable situated affective political struggles. By working with a more realistic temporal image – where being dormant characterizes infrastructure’s typical temporality – we see how dormant infrastructures become intertwined with anxiety. Awakening such sleeping infrastructures, whether temporarily or for good, can be a worrisome business brimming with political potential.

References:

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Anand, Nikhil, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel. 2018. “Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure.” In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, 1–38. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bryant, Rebecca and Daniel M. Knight. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Di Nunzio, Marco. 2018. “Anthropology of Infrastructure.” *Governing Infrastructure Interfaces—Research Note 01* (June). London: London School of Economics and Political Science, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/cities/Assets/Documents/Working-Papers/Governing-Infrastructure-Interfaces-Anthropology-of-infrastructure-MarcoDiNunzio.pdf>

- Eghenter, Cristina. 2007. "Of Negotiable Boundaries and Fixed Lines in Borneo: Practice and Views of the Border in the Apo Kayan Region of East Kalimantan, 1900–1999." *Moussons* 11: 133–50.
- Eilenberg, Michael. 2012. *At the Edge of States: Dynamics of State Formation in the Indonesian Borderlands*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Gupta, Akhil. 2018. "The Future in Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure." In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, 62–79. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hargyono, Sindhunata. 2021. "Development from the Margins: Failing Zones and Suspended Development in an Indonesian Border Village." In *Development Zones in Asian Borderlands*, edited by Michael Eilenberg and Mona Chettri, 211–30. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Joniak-Lüthi, Agnieszka. 2019. "Introduction: Infrastructure as an Asynchronic Timescape." *Roadsides* 1: 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-20190012>
- Larkin, Brian. 2018. "Promising Forms: The Political Aesthetics of Infrastructure." In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, 175–202. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (1): 327–43.
- Martínez, José Ciro and Omar Sirri. 2020. "Of Bakeries and Checkpoints: Stately Affects in Amman and Baghdad." *Society and Space* 38 (5): 849–66.
- Ramakrishnan, Kavita, Kathleen O'Reilly and Jessica Budds. 2020. "The Temporal Fragility of Infrastructure: Theorizing Decay, Maintenance, and Repair." *Nature and Space* 4 (3): 674–95.
- Rodgers, Dennis and Bruce O'Neill. 2012. "Introduction: Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue." *Ethnography* 13 (4): 401–12.
- Star, Susan Leigh. 1999. "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (3): 377–91.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank two institutions at Northwestern University, USA: (1) Equality Development and Globalization Studies (through the Arryman Fellows and Scholars Program) and (2) the Buffett Institute for Global Affairs for funding the research underpinning this article. This work was co-funded by the European Union (European Research Council Starting Grant project: [DigID – Doing Digital Identities](#), grant number: 101039758). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the authors only and do not necessarily

reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Cite as:

Hargyono, Sindhunata. 2024. "Anxious Awakening of the Dormant..." *Roadsides* 12: 8-15.
<https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202401202>



Sindhunata Hargyono is Postdoctoral Researcher at Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany, working in the [DigID-Doing Digital Identities](#) project. He holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Northwestern University, USA. His dissertation examined the intersection between aesthetics and politics in an Indonesian border infrastructure development project. His current research centers on the digitalization of the state identification system and its impact on a differentiated citizenship landscape in Indonesia. He is particularly interested in the informal and material dimensions of citizenship. Sindhunata's research encompasses the anthropology of the state, citizenship and infrastructure.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



⊕ **roadsides.net**
✉ **editor@roadsides.net**
🐦 **@road_sides**
📷 **@roadsides_journal**

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)
Madlen Kobi (University of Fribourg)
Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Nadine Plachta (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Matthäus Rest (University of Fribourg)
Alessandro Rippa (University of Oslo)
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 012 was edited by: **Mikel Venhovens** and **Mona Chettri**
Editors-in-chief: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi** and **Tina Harris**
Managing editor: **Matthäus Rest**
Copyediting: **David Hawkins**
Layout: **Chantal Hinni** and **Antoni Kwiatkowski**

ISSN 2624-9081

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



University of
Zurich UZH



Swiss National
Science Foundation

UNI
FR

UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG