"Penang Rejects Reclamation": Pre-capitalist worldviews and post-development ideals within a Malaysian environmental movement

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Abstract

Malaysia's indigenous and rural communities have played a vital role in the growth of the country's environmental movement. Yet, the ways in which their cultures and ancestral attachments to territory come to underpin their activism has remained understudied. This article focuses on the current dispute between state authorities in Penang Island, keen on reclaiming land for industrial development, and "*Penang Tolak Tambak*", a movement composed of traditional fisherfolk and environmental activists who aim at preserving the coastal ecosystem. Employing Arturo Escobar's "ecology of difference" and Erik Olin Wright's "anti-capitalist strategies" as theoretical framework, this article uncovers multiple ways in which fisherfolk's identity became a salient part of their environmental struggle. Most importantly, the spiritual principle of *fardhu kifayah*, by which ecosystem preservation becomes a divinely-ordained responsibility towards one another, comes to directly clash with neoliberal-capitalist development as pursued by the state. While the study illustrates how Malaysian rural communities preserve pre-capitalist human-nature relations, it also shows how fisherfolk face serious material constraints in promoting their lifestyle, their mobilization being thus limited to strategies of resistance. The conclusion encourages further research on "ecologies of difference" and how these can not only be defended but also promoted as broader, systemic alternatives.

Keywords: environmentalism, post-development, anti-capitalism, land reclamation, Islamic ecology.

Résumé

Les communautés autochtones et rurales de Malaisie ont joué un rôle essentiel dans la croissance du mouvement environnemental du pays. Pourtant, les manières dont leurs cultures et leurs attaches ancestrales au territoire sous-tendent leur activisme sont restées peu étudiées. Cet article se concentre sur le conflit actuel entre les autorités de l'État de l'île de Penang, désireuses de récupérer des terres pour le développement industriel, et "Penang Tolak Tambak", un mouvement composé de pêcheurs traditionnels et d'activistes environnementaux qui visent à préserver l'écosystème côtier. En s'appuyant sur l'"écologie de la différence" d'Arturo Escobar et les "stratégies anticapitalistes" d'Erik Olin Wright comme cadre théorique, cet article met en évidence les multiples façons dont l'identité des pêcheurs est devenue un élément saillant de leur lutte environnementale. Plus important encore, le principe spirituel du *fardhu kifayah*, selon lequel la préservation de l'environnement devient une responsabilité divinement ordonnée envers autrui, entre en conflit direct avec le développement néolibéral capitaliste tel que poursuivi par l'État. Alors que l'étude illustre comment les communautés rurales malaisiennes préservent des relations humain-nature pré-capitalistes, elle montre également comment les pêcheurs sont confrontés à des contraintes matérielles sérieuses pour promouvoir leur mode de vie, limitant ainsi leur mouvement à des stratégies de résistance. La conclusion encourage des recherches ultérieures sur les "écologies de la différence" et comment celles-ci peuvent non seulement être défendues, mais aussi promues en tant qu'alternatives plus larges et systémiques.

Mots-cles: environnementalisme, post-développement, anticapitalisme, remise en état des terres, écologie islamique

Resumen

Las comunidades indígenas y rurales de Malasia han desempeñado un papel vital en el crecimiento del movimiento ecologista del país. Sin embargo, las formas en que sus culturas y vínculos ancestrales con el territorio fundamentan su activismo han permanecido poco estudiadas. Este artículo se enfoca en la disputa actual entre las autoridades estatales en la Isla de Penang, interesadas en recuperar tierras para el desarrollo industrial, y "*Penang Tolak Tambak*", un movimiento compuesto por pescadores tradicionales y activistas ambientales, que buscan preservar el ecosistema costero. Utilizando el marco teórico de la "ecología de la diferencia" de Arturo Escobar y las "estrategias anticapitalistas" de Erik Olin Wright, este artículo revela múltiples formas en que la identidad de los pescadores se convierte en una parte relevante de la lucha. Lo más importante, el principio espiritual de *fardhu kifayah*, por el cual la preservación del medio ambiente se convierte en una responsabilidad divinamente ordenada hacia los demás, choca directamente con el desarrollo neoliberal-capitalista perseguido por el estado. Mientras el estudio destaca cómo las comunidades rurales malasias preservan relaciones humano-naturaleza pre-capitalistas, también muestra cómo los pescadores enfrentan serias limitaciones materiales para promover su estilo de vida, y su movimiento se ve así limitado a estrategias de resistencia. La conclusión alienta una investigación adicional sobre "ecologías de la diferencia" y cómo estas no solo pueden ser defendidas, sino también promovidas como alternativas más amplias y sistémicas.

Palabras claves: ambientalismo, postdesarrollo, anticapitalismo, tierra ganada al mar, ecología islámica.

1. Introduction

> *Kapitalis untung, nelayan rugi*
> *pembangunan dilakar tidak seimbang*
>
> The capitalists gain, the fisherfolk suffers,
> so uneven are the development plans.
>   –   Couplet by Penangite poet Rizol

In Penang, Malaysia, since 2015 fisherfolk collectives and civil society groups have been battling a land reclamation project which threatens the livability of the island's southern coast. The Penang South Reclamation, as it is known, aims at creating artificial land to be auctioned off to private developers, to generate investments to fund the state's infrastructural expansion (PIC, 2022). The project is however expected to permanently alter the coastal ecosystem and, consequently, fishers' livelihood and Penang's seafood supply (Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2020).

In its modern history, Malaysia has witnessed numerous similar land contentions, as well as the rise of Environmental NGOs (ENGOs). Malaysian environmentalism is understudied, with existing research mainly focusing on how national and international political trends have influenced the movement, and its successes in influencing policies (Tayeb & Yew, 2019). This article aims at enriching the body of literature by analyzing a Malaysian environmental struggle through the lens of post-development theory. Specifically, it explores the traditional worldviews and relationships with nature that underpin Penang's anti-reclamation movement, and the extent to which such values are treated as alternatives to Malaysia's neoliberal-capitalist development model. For this purpose, the theoretical framework combines Arturo Escobar's "political ecology of difference", a post-developmental concept referring to pre-capitalist human-nature relationships, with Erik Olin Wright's ideas on anti-capitalist strategies. The central question is: how do Penangite activists interpret, and mobilize around, their ecological difference?

First, a literature review introduces Escobarian political ecology, and argues for the usefulness of thinking about post-developmental struggles alongside Wright's "anti-capitalist framework." The Malaysian context and Penang's case are then illustrated, followed by a section on methodology. After a discourse analysis of secondary and primary data, the findings outline various aspects of the fisherfolk's struggle: the local

critiques of development, the defense of customary institutions, political-ecological idiosyncrasies, and the concrete activities that the movement engages in. The discussion section illustrates how political mobilization has increased fisherfolk's awareness of, and resentment towards, capitalism; it further shows how Escobarian difference is embodied in the fisherfolk microeconomy, in their "hybrid nature" as well as in their religious practices. However, despite its critique of capitalist development, lack of resources and contextual sociopolitical conditions force the movement to rely on strategies of resistance. Finally, the conclusion outlines a few paths for future research: there is a need to better understand how difference can be promoted beyond mere resistance, as well as to study more thoroughly the social and cultural impacts of Malaysian environmentalism.

2. Seeking the "post-development" era

"Post-development theory" is an umbrella term encompassing the work of a diverse range of scholars, united by a common concern about Western exploitation and oppression of the Global South. Building on Dependency and Postcolonial theories, but incorporating meaningful contributions from political ecology and post-structuralism (Saunders, 2005; Matthews, 2010), the position came to be collectively known as "post-development" in the 1990s (see Escobar, 2007; Rahnema, 1997). This decade witnessed the publication of multiple works radically criticizing mainstream development, with one book – Rahnema and Bawtree's (1997) *Post-Development Reader* – helping cement post-development as a distinct school of thought by bringing together some major development-skeptical writers (Escobar, 2012).

For Rahnema and Bawtree (1997), what made "post-development" a unified school was its central element of *subversion* and *radicalism*, that is the need to observe the development system from the perspective of the people it oppresses, as well as to tackle the root causes of this oppression. While they define "post-development" as the priority of human welfare over capitalist concerns of productivity and profit-generations, they also differentiate it from other anti-capitalist critiques by rejecting traditional Marxist ideals of modernization, industrialization and top-down planning, trying instead to valorize non-Western indigenous ontologies.

Discourse, counter-discourse, counter-action: enter Escobar

Arturo Escobar can be considered to be the one author who theorized post-development's main pillars (Ziai, 2007). In his *magnum opus Encountering Development* (1995/2012), Escobar explains that the post-development position designates three things: a quest for the "end of Development" as both a discourse and an industry; its replacement by locality-specific alternatives based on the practices and knowledge of social movements; and the need to "decenter" development, that is find ways to describe life conditions in the Global South through new discourses other than developmentalist paradigms, which merely view Southern countries as lacking what the North has. Escobar's view of alternatives is one which does not seek "alternative Development" in the sense of improving on existing, hegemonic developmental ideals, but rather "alternatives to Development" as a system.

One of Escobar's main contributions to post-development is his adoption of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Escobar, 1984; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997; Ziai, 2007). By analyzing development-related discourse, Escobar characterizes "Developmentalism" (the ideology of "capital-D Development") as an offspring of Western modernity, a historical phase rooted in Enlightenment values and defined by an ontological view of "Man" as distinct from "Nature", as well as by an epistemological one whereby the world can be known (and controlled) through reason (Escobar, 2004). In *Encountering Development* (1995/2012) modernity, with its capitalist-inspired pursuit of never-ending profit and its onto-epistemic view of poverty as technocratically manageable, is described as an "inherently displacement-creating process" (Escobar, 2004, p. 216), both in the cultural sense of supplanting different worldviews, and in the material sense of destroying ecosystems and their inhabitants.

With regards to nature, Escobar's theorization of post-development alternatives is based on his belief in a constructivist political ecology, a theory which views nature as a socially-constructed concept whose articulations can be known discursively. His goal is to outline alternative understandings of nature that may be

conducive to fairer, more sustainable socio-ecological relations (Escobar, 1996, 1999). Escobar's political ecology is an "ecology of difference" (*ibid*., 2006a), a tool for environmental movements to understand and promote their signification of, and relationship with, the natural world. Communities' idiosyncrasies, ethnic identities, and territorial autonomy is described in relation to hegemonic Western modernity, which views nature as a commodity, and Development as the commercially-oriented management of resources.

Escobar thus synthesizes political ecology insights with post-developmental aspirations by arguing for an "environmentalism of the poor" (*ibid*.), whereby communities defend, promote and upscale their "ecological cultures" in the face of capitalist-induced commercialization. They usually do so by seeking territorial autonomy or policy-making influence and, in this process, they generate "hybrid natures": they merge the "local" and the "transnational" into new identities, engage with forms of market exchange while resisting a purely capitalistic valorization of nature, and reinterpret modernity from non-Western ontological lenses. Though hybrid, these ecological counter-tendencies engender a plurality of alternative economies and development strategies, thus undermining the hegemony of Developmentalism and its economistic-technocratic approach to nature.

The "ecology of difference" is however just one aspect of Escobar's broader argument for a "politics of difference" (Escobar, 2004), where movements' political struggles revolve around not only defending specific ecologies, but also affirming locally-inspired institutions, social relations and modes of political participation. On an ontological level, this can happen through the diffusion of Global South-based counter-discourses. Here, the author builds on the Foucauldian assumption that discourse is "material", and systems such as "Development" are "simultaneously systems of discourse and practice" (2012, p. xiv) – or rather, that "discourse is a practice" (1995/2012, p. 216). The prominent, perhaps conceptually-stretched role that discourse assumes in Escobar's work, at the expense of more material power dynamics, might explain why the author rarely elaborates on concrete non-discursive strategies.

Through a holistic reading of his writings, one can nevertheless identify various "politics of difference" practices which Escobar expects social movements to perform. First are the "politics of place", that is the defense of place-specific worldviews which do not necessarily coincide with Western scientific approaches. With it, Escobar expects social movements to promote specific anti-modernity principles, namely equality, human-nature harmony, communitarianism and understandings of the economy as a socially located, culture-specific activity. To promote such values, movements can engage in "emergence", a bottom-up process whereby counter-action (Escobar cites anti-globalization demonstrations) is promoted from the grassroot level to higher scales, so as to diffuse new macro-behaviors without imposing them from the top down.

Post-development's limitations and Wright's anti-capitalist framework

Post-development's radical critique met with controversy and rebuttals. A major countercriticism is that the school of thought is "vague" and "agenda-less" (Matthews, 2010), "all critique but no construction" (Pieterse, 2000, p. 188), as it deconstructs Developmentalism at length and yet hesitates in identifying ways to overcome capitalist development (Asher & Wainwright, 2019). The criticism is not unfounded: Escobar's main works, for example, focus on promoting non-Western epistemologies, but hardly propose any solution to Western hegemony. This prompted criticism of post-development being intellectualist "armchair reflection" (McGregor, 2009). Moreover, post-development has been accused of assuming that indigenous populations are intrinsically inimical to capitalism (Li, 2014), and of disregarding the ambitions of Global South inhabitants to access the benefits of development (Pieterse, 2000). This criticism, though, does not entirely reflect post-development texts: hybrid economies are recognized as early as in Escobar (1995), where the agency of indigenous people to adapt development interventions to their needs is fully appreciated; similarly, Acosta (2012) argues that post-development recognizes the agency of indigenous communities to adopt whatever aspect of modernity they deem to be beneficial.

To understand how Escobarian difference turns into mobilization, and what difference-based counteraction strategies look like on the ground, it can be useful to think about post-development along the lines of Erik Olin Wright's "anticapitalist framework." Post-development's critique is arguably more sweeping than Wright's, targeting not just capitalism but the entirety of Western modernity. However, insofar as they

attempt to find strategies to overcome today's hegemonic economic system, the two frameworks are not just compatible but complementary to each other. Wright's theories can help expand on Escobar's "ecology of difference" by, first, shifting the focus from counter-discourse to concrete oppositional strategies. Secondly, Wright's framework can overcome post-development's generic ideas of resistance by describing various degrees of opposition to development – some of which might indeed display dissatisfaction with Developmentalism, but also tackle it on smaller scales than a wholesale "end of Development." Conversely, post-development can enrich Wright's framework by contributing insights from more ecologically-focused movements, as well as from the localized, indigenous-based solutions which have been spearheaded by development-critical schools.

Wright's "varieties of anti-capitalism" framework consists of three "logics of transformation", each associated with different strategies, metaphorically equated to moves in a broader game of capitalism (Wright, 2010, 2013, 2019). The first logic of transformation which Wright identifies is the *ruptural* logic, that is the logic of ending the capitalist game altogether. Associated with traditional twentieth-century revolutionary thought, ruptural transformation involves ushering in alternative systems by seizing state power – a strategy termed *smashing capitalism*.

Dismissing rupture as ineffective, Wright (2013) follows it with *symbiotic* transformation. This aims at altering rules within the capitalist "game" so as to create space for subsequent social change, and this can be pursued through two strategies: *dismantling capitalism*, that is gradually replacing it via state-directed, socialist-inspired reforms, and the complementary strategy of *taming capitalism*, that is counteracting its harms through policies such as regulation and redistribution. Said strategies reflect the historical work of social-democratic parties (Wright, 2013).

Lastly, the *interstitial* logic encompasses those strategies happening at the margins of capitalist societies, which do not involve capturing state power. One is *resisting capitalism*, that is defending oneself from capitalist expansion through actions such as protests and grassroot mobilization; another, however, is *escaping* the system, either individually or by establishing intentional communities. Wright (2013) refers to the latter as "pockets of democratic egalitarian practices" (p. 35) which, albeit repudiating political involvement, can become "building blocks of alternative forms of economy" (2019, p. 53).

The following section illustrates the compatibility between Wright's anti-capitalism and post-development analysis.

Ruptural. While Wright (2013) dismisses rupture as an ineffective, authoritarian-prone logic, Chertkovskaya (2020; 2022) and Herbert *et al.* (2021) argue that ruptures can also be understood as small-scale, temporary disruptions, such as blocking coal mines or occupying factories. In such cases, occupied spaces can be repurposed, effectively ushering in non-capitalist ways of organizing through disruptive (rather than reformist) ways. Chertkovskaya (2022) terms this small-scale strategy *halting*: a temporary break in capitalism's rhythm, without the complete overhaul implied in Wright's *smashing*.

The ruptural logic most explicitly captures the post-developmental image of "ending" development for good. Post-development is no stranger to revolutionary struggles: insurgencies such as the Zapatista's and the Kurdish Workers Party's feature prominently as models of post-development practice, and have significantly contributed to shaping this school of thought (Esteva, 1994; Aslan & Akbulut, 2019; Escobar, 2020). Besides "smashing", moments of "halting development" are also attested in the literature: in a memorable example, Ferguson (1994) reported how a rangeland area in Lesotho, which had been allocated for commercial farming, was eventually taken over by locals and repurposed to be freely grazed by all.

Symbiotic. The two symbiotic strategies, "taming" and "dismantling", attempt at slowly reforming capitalism through policy change. Though motivated by anti-capitalist motives, Wright (2013, 2019) admits that symbiosis runs the constant risks of resistance and cooptation by capitalist forces as it operates through mainstream political-democratic channels. Thus, as the radicality of their objectives risks being compromised, Wright sees "taming"/"dismantling" as merely complementing other strategies, by employing political decision-making to support interstitial innovations. Overall, argues the author, the taming of capitalism's worst harms, while not representing systemic change, "remains a viable expression of anti-capitalism" (2019, p. 7).

Due precisely to the risks of cooptation and of compromising with powerholders, symbiosis is one strategy which is hard to reconcile with post-development's radical goals. As noted by Köllner (2023), while post-development did influence some contemporary policies, the line between genuine commitment to change and mere cooptation remains blurry (something relevant especially to Buen Vivir, see Florentin, 2016). Nevertheless, despite this tension with post-development's uncompromising tendencies, multiple small-scale initiatives reveal the reality of non-conforming policymakers promoting alternative livelihoods (Agostino, 2018; Mishra & Virmani, 2020). In Escobarian terms, incorporating difference into policy can help promote "hybridity", therefore undermining the hegemony of Developmentalism.

Interstitial. Initiatives developed within the capitalist system and which do not attempt to confront it directly, but which rather aim at prefiguring what post-capitalist social organization could look like, are defined as interstitial (Monticelli, 2018): examples include anarchist-inspired solidarity economies, worker-owned cooperatives, community kitchens and farms (Burkhart *et al.*, 2020; Wright, 2019). While Wright (*ibid.*) dismisses these as "escaping", Chertkovskaya (2022) argues that such initiatives would be more aptly named "*building alternatives*", as they can establish new networks and power relations outside (and against) the capitalist system.

Defending such spaces from capitalist onslaught, in turn, is the strategy of "resistance." Resistance usually focuses on single issues and, rather than seeking systemic change, aims at solving specific problems by raising awareness and influencing state actions. "Resistance" and "building alternatives" closely reflect Escobarian "politics of place", as well as the closely related notion of defending and promoting difference, a space defined as being "in the exteriority of the modern-colonial system, incompletely conquered" (2004, p. 221). The line between "resistance" and "building alternatives" is in fact blurry as, for post-development, the defense of local socio-ecological onto-epistemologies is intrinsically aimed at prefiguring systemic alternatives.

Having developed this theoretical framework, the Malaysian context is now introduced, followed by the case study of Penang.

3. Development and environmentalism: the Malaysian scenario

In the 1980s, Malaysia began adopting neoliberal growth- and industrialization-driven development policies. Among local citizens, this period led to an increased awareness around the ecological impacts of rapid industrialization. The first environmental protest movements thus emerged to oppose ecologically destructive development projects (Majid Cooke & Hezri, 2017). The government's response to ENGOs was initially repressive, with organization leaders being arrested from 1987 to the early 1990s as part of Prime Minister Mahathir's draconian crackdown on political dissent.

Although the country has democratized since then, environmental activism remains thwarted by semi-authoritarian control over civil society, such as the possibility of detaining activists on "sedition" grounds, police intimidation and surveillance, together with subtler constraints such as courts' and bureaucrats' unresponsiveness (Yew, 2016). An additional weakness of the movement has been the ethno-religious divisions that mark Malaysian society, which can prevent the formation of cohesive, cross-ethnic solidarities (Abdul Hamid & Abd. Matalib, 2021). Despite these obstacles, local environmentalists have devised a variety of tactics to pursue their goals: some groups, such as the Penan example below, have relied on physically obstructing ecologically destructive projects; others have relied on more peaceful strategies such as awareness-raising, petitions, policy recommendations, lobbying or, in the case of individual activists, even the pursuit of key decisional positions through party politics (Majid Cooke & Hezri, 2017; Tayeb & Yew, 2018). In short, local environmental civil society displays a mix of the disruptive, symbiotic and interstitial logics outlined by Wright.

Demographically, the movement encompasses both urban-based, middle-class activists as well as rural and indigenous groups. Among the latter, the most noteworthy campaign is that of the nature-dependent Penan people against the logging of their forests in Borneo. This campaign, which began in 1987, became famous for its disruptive tactics such as anti-logger blockades, and was key in boosting the earliest Malaysian demands for environmental justice (Brosius, 1997). Despite the importance of such communities to the growth of local

environmentalism, there appear to be few studies on rural, indigenous-led environmental grassroots in the country, on the worldviews they uphold and on how they mobilize around these. In this respect, research seems to have been limited to ways of incorporating indigenous knowledge into Malaysian sustainability policies (Lambin *et al.*, 2019; Dansyah *et al.*, 2022). A post-development perspective on Malaysian environmentalism can thus raise some worthwhile questions: is there an "ecological difference" that local groups base their protests on, and what does it look like? Does Malaysian grassroot environmentalism take the form of anti-capitalist, post-developmental critique? If it does, is "difference" understood as a systemic alternative, and what are the strategies used to promote it?

Questions of Escobarian difference are pertinent to Malaysia not only due to the existence of rural, indigenous elements in the local environmental movement, but also in light of other cultural-religious influences that might shape Malaysian environmentalism – most notably Islam, the majority religion. However, with regards to ecology, Abdul Hamid and Abd. Matalib (2021) argue that there have been insufficient attempts at understanding local ecological questions through Islamic lenses: religious parties and organizations focus mainly on *Shariah* implementation, while Malaysian environmentalism remains a predominantly secular movement (*ibid.*). Other researchers have hitherto explored the Islam-ecology nexus in Malaysia only with reference to Malaysian Islamic green finance (Liu & Lai, 2021) or corporate sustainability (Nasir *et al.*, 2021). In these cases the role of traditional value systems within Malaysian environmentalism remains understudied.

The Penang South Reclamation and its opponents

The Penang South Reclamation (hereafter "PSR"), on Penang Island, is a proposed project to reclaim coastal land which is currently being opposed by the grassroot movement *Penang Tolak Tambak* (literally "Penang Rejects Reclamation") (Figure 1). The latter represents an alliance between environmental groups and rural, predominantly Muslim fisherfolk. As Penang's case offers the possibility to explore a community's ecological difference vis-à-vis top-down development, I now move to examine how the Penangite activists interpret, and mobilize around, their political-ecological difference.

The plan to build three artificial islands off Penang's southern coast was announced by the Penang State Government in 2015. Planned for residential and industrial purposes, and aimed at bringing trade and investments to an otherwise "sleepy coast" (PIC, 2022), the 4,500 acres (1,822 ha) of reclaimed land will effectively be auctioned off to private bidders. The ensuing profits are eventually meant to be channeled into Penang's infrastructural expansion (PTMP, 2019).

The movement

The PSR was immediately met with resistance by Penangite fishers and environmentalists, who identified multiple risks associated with the project: the destruction of the maritime ecosystem, the loss of fisherfolk livelihood opportunities, and the threat of eviction of locals by developers (SAM, 2020). After four years of protesting independently, in 2019 fisherfolk leaders from various affected villages came together with activists of local NGOs, mostly JEDI ("Network for Ecology and Climate") and the Penang Heritage Trust. This alliance gave birth to the *Penang Tolak Tambak* movement (hereafter: "PTT"), whose major achievements have included large-scale protests, the presentation of documentary *A Fisherman's Prayer* at the FreedomFilmFest and, in 2021, the revocation of PSR's Environmental Impact approval by the government. As of 2023, Penang's government has renewed its application for approval, but details on the project's implementation remain uncertain as local opposition continues.
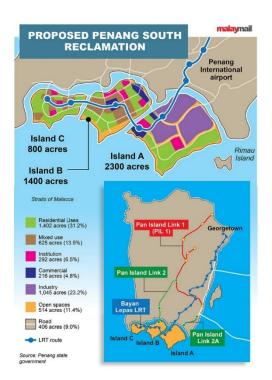
Figure 1: the Penang South Reclamation. Source: Malay Mail, 2021)

The local community

The main community opposing the project is known as "artisanal" or "traditional" fisherfolk (*nelayan tradisi*). While there is no hard-set definition on who is considered a *tradisi* fisher, some attributes of traditionality include small individually-owned boats, simple fishing tools like drift- and cast nets, and a fishing area almost entirely within five miles from the coast (Raduan *et al.*, 2007). Unlike other small-scale fisherfolk around the world whose livelihoods are threatened by industrial fishing (see Bresnihan, 2016), Penang's fishers not only live relatively undisturbed, but are central to a thriving coastal, rural economy: Figure 2, for instance, shows sales reports for the village of Sungai Batu alone. In 2020, profits reached 1.65 million ringgit (circa US$370,000).

Regarding the extent to which fisherfolk oppose the project, there is no official data, but reports (MalaysiaNow, 2023) suggest a rate of 80% of fishers being against reclamation; personal conversations similarly indicate that all Fishermen Units oppose the project except the village of Gertak Sanggul. In this respect, interviewees argued that Gertak Sanggul fishermen do not fish full-time but rather have other sources of income, and are thus less affected. While intra-community divisions need to be recognized, an in-depth analysis of these is beyond the scope of this article.

4. Methods

Consistent with Escobarian methods, this study relies on discourse analysis, with a focus on Fairclough's "Critical Discourse Analysis." Fairclough (2012) considers discourse as intrinsic to social practices – in the case at hand, social practices being how PTT interacts with top-down development. Fairclough also pays special attention to how such practices encompass meaning-making, that is how actors employ discourse to assign meaning to events, as well as identity-building, that is how discourse shapes identities, which are then mobilized for socio-political goals. Critical Discourse Analysis was therefore optimal method to explore how fisherfolk assign meanings to concepts like "development" and "capitalism", how their discourse ties with practices, and how they mobilize around their own identity.

 Figure 2: Economy of Sungai Batu's Fishers Unit. PTT, personal communication, 29 August 2022

The research employs a single case study design, focused on the *Penang Tolak Tambak* movement. While Malaysia has many environmental struggles, Penang Island offered multiple practical advantages for data collection: civil society is vibrant and outspoken, and the island's small size makes it easier to meet respondents in their respective localities.

The data was collected in two sequential phases. First, secondary data was gathered via the movement's Facebook page, and includes posts as well as past interviews. The approach was mainly inductive, noting which major issues would emerge from the data and how they related to the "varieties of post-development" framework. The sample encompasses posts from 2019, the year the Facebook page was opened, all the way to July 2022 when research began – a timeframe selected to capture the movement's discursive history since its birth. Afterwards, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven respondents: two leading PTT activists hailing from the NGOs world, as well as five fishers-turned-activists, leaders (or former leaders) of their respective units. Interviews had a corroborative function, that is delving deeper into what was noted from the secondary data, and inquired deeper into how people perceived "development" and the struggle around it.

Hailing from the Global North to research about a marginalized community in the South involves power differentials and, therefore, ethical challenges (Bryman, 2012). First, I sought a non-intrusive way to encounter the community: I was introduced to fishers by local PTT activists, who already knew me and could confirm I was trustworthy. Fishers were welcoming but explained that, previously, government collaborators attempted to infiltrate the community, and Units now exercise extra care. Secondly, questions programmed for interviews were first discussed with three other activists, to make sure they were not sensitive and would not trigger psychological distress in the fishers. Thirdly, an activist noted that previous researchers gave nothing back to the community in return for their participation – what is known as "extractive research" (Gaudry, 2011). We therefore agreed that as a way to "give back" to the community, I would assist in local activities. Moreover, activists were guaranteed that the final research findings would be shared with them in a summarized form.

This research project obtained ethical approval by a SOAS University supervisor on June 7th, 2022. Participation in interviews was voluntary and consent to participation was obtained verbally, most often in Malay, using a translated version of the SOAS Consent Form template. Respondents were informed that their answers would be reported in my article, and that they could withdraw from this at any time. To keep respondents' identity anonymous, the locality or organizations to which they belong to are not mentioned.

5. Findings

This section divides findings from both primary and secondary data into five macro-themes, with interview results expanding on those of the initial content-analysis phase.

A local critique of development

An initial focus of data analysis was the degree of hostility to development, both as an idea and an industry – that is, Escobar's "alternative Development/alternatives to Development" distinction, or the dimension of resistance that Wright calls "levels in the game."

The first finding was that, in written content, PTT activists often associate "development" (*pembangunan*) with negative ideas such as *musnah* ("destruction") and *penindasan* ("oppression") (PTT, 2019; 2020; Aliran, 2021). However, they also stress that their criticism is not against development as an ideal, but rather against forms of development which threaten communities with socio-ecological destruction – a characteristic echoing Escobar's definition of "capital-D Development." Pertinently, a post that reads "we do not oppose development, we only oppose greed and unsustainability" (PTT, 2020), underscores PTT's outlook on top-down plans as profit-oriented and destructive. A fisherman similarly explains in a video: "we are not against development, but the government needs to find ways to develop which do not harm the fishers" (PTT, 2020). A key notion that appeared both in secondary and primary data was the idea that development can be made *imbang*, that is more equal, benefitting all parties involved.

During interviews, to understand how respondents interpret the multi-semantic concept of "development", interviewees were initially asked to offer their own definition of development/*pembangunan*. For Fisher 1, development should be about enhancing the potential of a land, so that locals can enjoy more of its fruits. For example, they cited fishers' improved productivity (through better fishing equipment) as a form of *imbang* development. The PSR, however, due to its foreseen impact, was described as an "alienating" (*mengasingkan*) type of development. A similar response was shared by Fisher 5, who said *pembangunan* can definitely improve local welfare and especially the fishers' catch, but also that current development projects tend to be problematic: "they only want us to get out – this is the problem with development nowadays, it's all about building but never about sustaining the population." Lastly, Fisher 3 described development as "the defining feature of today's era", and associated it with environmental destruction, pollution, and food insecurity.

Similarly, the first leading activist responded that development can be fair, but that ultimately depends on whom a project benefits and why it is undertaken in the first place. For them the PSR, being ecologically destructive, cannot possibly qualify as fair development. Activist 2, too, argued that ideal development should improve people's lives and be based on reasonable cost-benefit analyses. They added that the latter, though, are neglected in Malaysia, and that development is untransparent, construction-oriented, ecologically destructive and suffers cronyism. "Good development", for them, would consist of more autonomy for the fishers, and in the meeting of their immediate needs.

What about the possibility of reforming the development industry? Fisher 1 responded that development can certainly pursue both community welfare and broader economic goals. As an example, they pointed out that projects such as Penang's Free Trade Zone could satisfy local needs (he recounted how fishermen's wives found employment there) and the state's growth objectives, without compromising the island's ecosystem. Additionally, Fisher 4 said that development could easily be reformed were it more democratic, and argued that public hearings can be a good platform to raise local concerns. These, however, tend to be held in English, tend to be technocratic, and untransparent with regards to whether people's opinions are taken into account.

Overall, foreseen ecological risks played a major role in determining the rejection of the development project, alongside considerations of democracy and fairness. If ecological destruction and technocracy are features of "capital-D Development", then fishers are opposed. Although fishers have overall negative views about capitalism, they appear to tolerate capitalist developments such as the Free Trade Zone so long as they are not ecologically destructive, and can offer tangible benefits to locals. Activist 2 commented on fisherfolk's behavior: "they feel like they cannot reject *pembangunan*, so they instead try to support the aspects of *pembangunan* that benefit them." Later, Fisher 4 confirmed this as they said that, in their area, the power of developers was already well-established, "so now we started thinking how we can co-prosper with them … if you want to develop, I too want to partake in development." On one hand, such responses are reminiscent of Escobar's "hybrids", where the benefits accruing from Development are selectively accepted though still secondarily to local priorities; on the other, these views appear to be marked not by a consciously critical approach to Developmentalism, but by resignation to its omnipresence.

"Kapitalisme" as "kebuloq"

While initially piloting the interview questions, two activists had advised that inquiring into the fisherfolk's understanding of capitalism would be a lost cause, as fishers supposedly had no grasp of economic matters beyond the bread-and-butter level. Interestingly, the secondary data collection phase revealed otherwise, as fishermen were found to describe capitalism as *kebuloq*, a Penangite word meaning "voracious" or "gluttonous" (CaseEast, 2019). This suggested that the PTT struggle might have also become a space for fishers to reflect on broader economic and social justice issues.

Mentions of capitalism within the secondary data were sporadic but, where they appeared, they pointed to the awareness of profits being concentrated within an economic minority (the *kaya*, "rich"; the *korporat*, "corporates"), while lower-class people bear the damage capitalism creates. In written content, working-class people are in turn referred to as *marhaen*, a politically-charged Malay-Indonesian term coined by Sukarno in his exposition of "Indonesian Marxism", which effectively renders into Malay the idea of "proletarians" and "subalterns" (Kuswono, 2016). The *marhaen* demographic is seen by three different interviewees as being dehumanized in the development process. As eloquently put by a fisherwoman in a news channel interview: "we are not animals, that you can just ask us to move out of the way" (MalaysianInsight, 2022).

It seemed worthwhile, therefore, to inquire into fisherfolk's perceptions of capitalism. To do so, respondents were asked how they defined the expression *golongan kapitalis* which, as illustrated above, appeared to have made its way into fishers' parlance. As expected, "*kapitalisme*" was understood in exclusively negative terms. In fact, Fisher 1 brought up the concept spontaneously when, while sharing their overall thoughts about the PSR, started by saying: "…if you ask me, the state only carries out development to benefit the *kapitalis*, and that is why we oppose it." When asked to give a definition of capitalism, they replied: "to me, capitalism is when entrepreneurs and businessmen devise ways to seize the land's wealth and keep it for themselves, without contributing anything to the local population."

The tone was similar throughout other interviews. Fisher 2 called capitalism "the philosophy of greed", and described capitalists as "a class that in pursuit of profit challenges the laws of nature." They argued that the worst manifestations of capitalism are the environmental disasters that ensue, and later added: "the sea is polluted, air quality has changed, and there's tons of plastic everywhere – this is capitalism!" Fisher 3 described capitalism as "seeking profit while disregarding a place's culture and history, and how locals want to develop." They associated capitalism with the marginalization of poorer classes, rising costs of living, and the risk of food shortages.

The fact that fishers had turned their opposition to the state's plans into a broader critique of capitalism appeared remarkable, but how did the concept take hold within the community in the first place? Knowing the anti-capitalist leanings of PTT's activists, Activist 1 was asked whether there had been an attempt at sharing critical knowledge with fishers during workshops, meetings or events. The response, however, was negative: in the activist's words, there was never a formal attempt at "knowledge sharing" with fishers. Rather, they suggested that the topic had probably emerged organically and regularly throughout the years of PTT mobilization; alternatively, they added, fishers might have picked up the concept during past engagements with

civil society, as some fisherfolk leaders were already activists in their own right. They eventually attributed the rise in anti-capitalist awareness to Malaysia's flourishing civil society, where criticism of national economic and developmental strategies are widely exchanged.

Modernity, identity and difference

The questions above laid the basis for Escobarian analysis by inquiring whether, and to what extent, PTT rejects Developmentalism. Having confirmed that this is indeed the case, my later questions aimed at exploring whether "politics of difference" occurred on the ground – another assumption central to Escobar's critique.

Based on secondary data results, the reaffirmation of fishers' identity and way of life, in all its unicity, indeed emerged as a major part of PTT's struggle – with a particular strategic focus on educating the broader public about what being a fisher entails. For instance, PTT stresses the vital contribution of fisherfolk to the local economy, while fishers emphasize their role in ensuring food security. In this sense, fishing is described as a "sustainable" (*mampan*) activity, in that it can provide local communities with a steady supply of food. Besides raising awareness on the socioeconomic significance of their profession, fishers also assert their right to preserve their occupation due to its *keturunan* ("hereditary", "generationally transmitted") quality. In multiple past videos they recount how their ancestors taught the profession to their sons, and how their struggle is a matter of *turun-temurun*, of being able to continue transmitting their occupation (PTT, 2020).

The ancestral character of fishing also implies a special attachment to territory, and the sea represents the fisherfolk's roots and origin (*asal-usul*). A mini-documentary created by PTT explains that "the sea is their life", in that "whenever they need, they can go catch fish and sell it – no need to borrow money from banks" (*Doa Seorang Nelayan*, 2019). The sea almost functions as a natural safety net, in that locals who are unemployed or in financial hardship can get extra sources of income by helping fishers in their tasks (*ibid*.). These examples show the central role that the sea plays not just in fishers' livelihoods, but in their whole identity. Without access to it – the fishers warn – locals will become "beggars in their own home" (PTT, 2021).

Interestingly, despite the profession's ancestral character, two fishers asserted that their community has already achieved *pemodenan* ("modernization"). Respondents brought up *pemodenan* spontaneously, unasked, as it aided their argument that they did not require the PSR to "modernize" their territory. Fisher 2 described how contemporary fishers use fiberglass, powerful outboard motors, fish-detecting sonars, the newest types of nets and more spacious boats. As such, they argued that "fishers can be considered modern, and do not reject modernity" – in fact, they said a "good" form of development would be if all fishers could receive state-of-the-art equipment. Fisher 4 thought the same, but pointed out that "there is no point having the latest fishfinder sonars if reclamation has killed off the fish!" Fisher 5 added that, ideally, fishers should preserve their traditional knowledge of the territory while simultaneously incorporating efficiencies associated with modernity. Here, as Escobar would expect, one finds a subtle clash in the way "modernization" is signified: for fishers, it is a selection of technological facilities which are compatible to their traditional profession; for the state, it is to "reconstruct the coast … into a trade destination" (PIC, 2022).

Fisherfolk were also asked which aspects of their identity they think are threatened, and should be preserved, beyond fishing itself. The unanimous reply across interviews was that they want to protect their traditional villages. Fisher 1 argued that development's potential should be directed to restructuring the declining fisherfolk villages into cohesive units, focused on preserving and promoting the fishers' cultural heritage. Two other respondents also saw villages as the site where fishers' knowledge is transmitted to new generations, and decried the idea that these places and knowledge be lost: "perhaps the future generations won't know how we used to go to sea, what our boats looked like, how intimate with the sea we were." Two fishers described the village life as *seronok* ("merry, joyful"), while modern housing (where the state would relocate them after eviction) was described as alienating as "one doesn't even know his own neighbors."

Based on these findings, the discourse appeared to have a connotation of *resistance*, of protecting the existing qualities of fishers' livelihood, rather than taking it as the starting point for broader reimagining of development. This aspect is explored further in the following section.

A moral microeconomy of "communal obligations"

The previous subsection noted some features of fishers' identity that the community wishes to preserve, such as their ancestral profession and villages. To delve deeper into their "ecological difference", the focus now shifts to fishers' relationship with their territory, the customs and cultural peculiarities that shape this relationship, and the extent to which "difference" is understood as an alternative to capitalism.

In mobilizing, the fishers bring forward an understanding of the sea as a *ciptaan Tuhan* (God's creation), with two implications. The first is that nature should not be altered or, in the words of a local leader: "if we fight the sea, we die; the environment is God's creation, and altering it means fighting God" (*Doa Seorang Nelayan*, 2019). The second is that the sea is *sepunya*, "collectively-owned", and serves the purpose of seeking *rezeki*. Rooted in Islamic ontology, and variably translatable as "sustenance" or "blessing", *rezeki* encompasses everything that God provides humans with to sustain themselves. Two fishermen described their livelihood as the quest for *rezeki halal*, or "permissible sustenance", that is one which besides providing for one's family, also enriches the broader community. Moreover, the fact that nature provides humans with *rezeki halal* also implies the existence of *rezeki haram* or illegitimate ways to sustain oneself. This concept is used to describe developers who plan to profit from ecological destruction, as well as fishers who support the PSR in return for monetary compensation.

Further questions aimed at finding out what local institutions the fishers uphold and want to preserve, and the extent to which the community believes they can constitute alternatives to Development. Most interestingly, the answers uncovered a microcosmic moral economy influenced by religious-traditional values. The guiding principle to this microeconomy is *fardhu kifayah*, or "communal obligations": these include ensuring that one's *rezeki* actually benefits the community, and overall assistance to each other for practical, day-to-day tasks. The collective enjoyment of *rezeki* then happens through two institutions. The first is village mosques, where *sedekah* ("charity") activities are regularly carried out to alleviate the poorer villagers' burdens. A fisherfolk-specific institution, moreover, is the *unit nelayan* ("fishers units"), which operate fishers *pasars* ("markets") and regularly redistribute profits among the community. The units also reorganize profits into *dana nelayan* ("fishers funds"), which function as communal funds for objectives as diverse as insurance, providing scholarships, or sponsor Muslim fishers' pilgrimage.

The PSR thus threatens not only an ecosystem and its inhabitants, but also a thriving moral economy and a well-established welfare system. Fisher 2 argued that the financial benefits that accrue from Units will be annihilated if the sociopolitical fabric of fisherfolk territories changes. Similarly, both activists explained that Units are able to make good profits by operating the markets, and it is an essential resource for fisherfolk. However, can these cultural features engender broader reimagining of development? Activist 1 argued that such values mainly apply to rural, circumscribed settings, while urbanized people are too individualistic to replicate a support system of that sort. Activist 2, however, argued that values such as *fardhu kifayah* can be easily promoted as forms of alternative development (but not *to* development) as the majority of Malaysia's population is Muslim; they also added that the formalization of traditional values would be "good development" and would benefit the entire state by establishing a more eco-centric, sustainable way of supplying food. It can be concluded that the movement never reached a consensus on whether development can be replaced by local alternatives.

Overall, the view of nature as the space where God's *rezeki* manifests itself, and the community's socioeconomic dependence on this spiritually-charged ecosystem, echo two notions central to post-development: the idea of indigenous understandings of their own biological and socioeconomic life as rooted in concepts of Providence/divinity (Gudeman & Rivera, 1990) and, in Escobar's political ecology, the view of such indigenous societies as presenting a nature-society continuum rather than a divide.

Strategies of opposition

In terms of strategy, respondents were asked two questions: first, to reflect upon the concrete benefits of the NGOs-fisherfolk alliance; and second, to mention some ways in which PTT mobilized against development. With regards to the benefits of establishing PTT, answers were consistent across respondents. All fisher interviewees reported that at their inception their movement was "without direction", as they did not

know how to approach institutions and which actors could help them. NGOs provided fishers not only with institutional knowledge, but also with technical, scientific and legal assistance so as to be able to access additional information and confront state propaganda. Activist 1, in this regard, notes that throughout the PTT year fishers have become more vocal in demanding their rights and sharing opinions.

Moreover, two broad strategies were identified. First, a major focus of PTT has been to raise public awareness about the fisherfolk's plight. Activist 1 explained that this began by bringing stakeholders together and then evolved into advocacy among the broader population. Advocacy took the form of public events such as roadshows, protests and documentary screenings. They added that PTT's main target group is "politically disillusioned" voters, especially youths, whom they attempt to involve in civil society activities. PTT is nevertheless wary of being dragged into party politics: Activist 1 for example decried how, in their pursuit of votes, ethno-nationalist parties try to portray the fisherfolk's struggle as a Malay-Muslim cause. Skeptical of established parties, PTT often stresses that it does not seek state power.

The second strategy is what could be described as a "war of attrition" of sorts between PTT and PSR supporters. Activists and fishers, with the help of external experts, try to put a spoke in the wheels of the state by pointing out legal and ecological loopholes in the PSR's Environment Impact Assessment. Indeed, this has been successful in 2021, when PTT identified various environmental harms which resulted in a negative Assessment for the project and its temporary halt. As explained by the two activists but also by Fisher 2, the longer the project is postponed, the longer fisherfolk get to preserve their traditions and carry out advocacy – the final goal being the financial and political failure of the PSR.

The strategies are therefore very much strategies of *resistance to development*. This sets PTT apart from more disruptive Malaysian environmental struggles, such as the aforementioned Penan campaign in Borneo, which relied on physically halting the activities of developers. In the words of Activist 2, their strategies are akin to "throwing little stones" at the PSR. When asked about the idea of "ending development", both activists replied that that would be too large a goal, and that for now they remain a localized struggle. Activist 1 noted how their very ability to organize into PTT was contingent on local, fortuitous characteristics, which might be absent elsewhere and thus prevent a unified response to capitalist development. Namely, Penang's small size and the state's openness towards civil society are what allows PTT to physically get together to strategize and mobilize, unlike in other states where population is sparse and governance more repressive. Activist 1 concluded with an emblematic reflection, which is best cited verbatim:

> We are focusing on Penang whereas development issues are national, even global, how can we address them? If we win this campaign, then perhaps we can talk about systemic change, but that would be a different monster to fight. Would we have the political stamina, the allies? Let's be realistic, if we want to change development, we'd have to be the government, and we are not ready to become a party struggle. Do we have the people, the financial capabilities? Would be great if we did! We could even finance the first fisherman politician!

6. Discussion

The findings show that, although anti-/pre-capitalist ideals are part of PTT's counter-discourse, in terms of counter-action the movement limits itself to a strategy of *resistance*: resisting the project's implementation, and overall resisting changes to fishers' moral economy and the livelihood it provides. PTT seeks neither state power nor policy influence in the way a symbiotic logic would involve, an nor does it engage in ruptures. It thus differs from Malaysian examples noted in the literature, where activists have disrupted projects or attempted to influence the trajectories of national development by joining party struggles. The following sections discuss the political-ecological difference that was observed in the findings, and some reasons why the struggle around it takes the form of resistance.

Fishers, proletarians, activists: Post-development on the ground

The article began with the assumption that the *Penang Tolak Tambak*'s struggle could be analyzed through the lenses of Escobarian "ecological difference." It thus asked what difference, and the tactics developed around it, might look like on the ground. The findings show that difference vis-à-vis *pembangunan* (development) indeed became salient as PTT grew throughout the years. The fisherfolk admitted that civil society participation deepened their awareness of capitalism, and how it threatens the environment while enriching property developers. They furthermore came to identify themselves with the Malay post-colonial term *marhaen*, "proletarians." This is significant as, in Malaysia's racialized society, socioeconomic issues have historically been framed as inter-ethnic contentions between Malays and non-Malays, something which was earlier noted as a main obstacle to unified civil society mobilization. Although personal observations revealed that ethno-nationalist parties do try to appropriate the struggle for their gains, PTT has hitherto remained a multi-ethnic alliance united against the *kapitalis*. Such anti-capitalist awareness reflects what Escobar (2004, 2007, 2020) calls the "meaning-making" power of resistance, where grassroots mobilization allows for the reinterpretation of concepts such as "development" and "modernity", and for challenges to hegemonic, Western-inspired understandings of these concepts.

Indeed, PTT mobilization led not only to awareness of the difference between *marhaen* and environmentally-dangerous *kapitalis*, but also to broader reflections on modernity and its relation with fisherfolk culture. As shown earlier, fishers do not reject what they call *pemodenan*, but rather embrace its advantages and even appropriate the "modern" label. However, *pemodenan* is re-signified through local values and priorities to refer to any technological advantage that can aid fisherfolk in their profession. This feeds into what Escobar calls a "hybrid nature", where the re-signified modernity does not displace local culture, but is rather incorporated whilst remaining subordinate to place-specific relationships with nature. In the Penangite scenario, *pemodenan* serves the purpose of sustaining nature-dependent institutions such as the Fisherfolks Markets. Such nature-dependency not only blurs the distinction between the biological and the socioeconomic, but also that between the material and the divine, as fisherfolk's economy is influenced by religious concepts such as *rezeki*, the blessings that God bestows on them through nature. As Escobar expects, this "hybrid nature" eventually comes to contrast with top-down development (which understands "modernization" and "development" as generating investments from speculating on coastal land), thus becoming a form of ecological difference. PTT's case, importantly, contributes to our knowledge of Malaysian environmentalism as it illustrates the attachment to territory and cultural values which can come to underpin a local environmental grassroots.

However, the most significant form of difference displayed by PTT are the Islamic values that inspire some of its activists and followers. While PTT is a secular, multi-confessional movement, the most prominent fisherman spokesperson (as illustrated in *Doa Seorang Nelayan*, 2019) is an imam, whose theological competency has been key in framing *fardhu kifayah* ("communal obligations") as part of local resistance. With regards to ecology, previous research (e.g. Nasir, 2014; Nasir *et al.*, 2021) exclusively focused on the incorporation of *fardhu kifayah* into green policy, while most Malaysia-based studies understood these obligations in terms of making various goods and services widely available to fellow Muslims (e.g. Schottman, 2014; Sidek *et al.*, 2018; Hasan *et al.*, 2022). The finding is therefore innovative as it not only shows how *fardhu kifayah* underpins a moral microeconomy, but also unveils how "communal obligations" also acquire ecological undertones by encouraging the preservation of an ecosystem. Moreover, this finding provides a valuable example of pre-capitalist values making their way into Malaysian environmentalism, and contributes to a better understanding of the Islam-ecology nexus in Malaysia.

Strategies of "post-pembangunan" counter-action

Besides illustrating how ecological difference comes to underpin Malaysian environmental mobilization, the findings also raise the question: why does a movement so critical of capitalist development resort to merely resisting rather than adopting strategies of taming, dismantling, or halting *pembangunan/*development? What explains this gap between the activists' anti-developmentalist vision and their strategy on the ground?

The main answer lies in the constraints that PTT faces and, in this respect, the direct quote by Activist 1 is emblematic. In their words, being able to vie for political power and pursue broader change (a symbiotic strategy) "would be great", but two issues tame this ambition. First is the awareness that capitalist development is a global phenomenon, and that small grassroots movements are not (yet) in a position to challenge it. Secondly, the financial and human resources that small, localized grassroots work with are limited. This becomes an inevitable challenge to upscaling local-based alternatives to Developmentalism. Alongside these hurdles, additional explanations had to be sought in the regional context: Penang is a state enjoying free speech, democracy and an active civil society, which might make disruptive tactics unnecessary; at the same time, Penang State is also constantly in pursuit of private sector-led economic growth, meaning real-estate firms such as those involved in land reclamation enjoy strong political leverage (Loh, 2015). This might be a reason why some fisherfolk perceive a need to compromise with developers, rather than openly confronting them.

The problems mentioned in the activist's quote, that is the perception that capitalism is insurmountable and resources too limited, have important implications for post-developmentalists. Such challenges also echo two theories from which post-development could learn. First is Herbert's (2021) theory of "crisis lock-in", a situation where environmental activists, cognizant of how entrenched the existing, unsustainable political-economic structures are, limit their focus to small-scale action. Secondly (and arguably complementary to crisis lock-in theory), post-development could pick up from Resource Mobilization Theory, which in the past has been employed illustrate how the growth and success of environmental movements is often contingent on their material resources (e.g. Ingalsbee, 1996; McLaughlin & Khawaja, 2000). Resource Mobilization Theory could thus be key in understanding how to overcome structural challenges.

Overall, PTT's case raises the question of how, and whether, localized anti-Developmentalist strategies can be scaled up. The fisherfolk's struggle is marked by a tension between its criticism of capitalism and top-down development, and the awareness that these represent systems whose transcendence feels unrealistic. Perhaps, with regards to Escobarian political ecology and Wright's anti-capitalist strategies (2019), the idea of difference is bound to interstitial logics aimed at defending it – with more sweeping symbiotic and ruptural tactics requiring additional favorable conditions, the study of which can lay the basis for future scholarship on this topic.

7. Conclusion

Like many countries of the Global South, Malaysia is contradictory reality where the latest neoliberal-capitalist policies coexist with ancestral indigenous, rural-based, religious-inspired ways of living. In a context of frequent land disputes between property developers and local communities, this article aimed at studying how ancestral ways of relating to nature inform Malaysian environmentalism – something that has hitherto been under-researched. After developing an analytical framework based on Escobarian political ecology and Erik Olin Wright's anti-capitalist strategies (2019), the article zoomed in on *Penang Tolak Tambak*, a fisherfolk-led grassroot movement dedicated to opposing land reclamation on Penang Island. The rest of the study explored how Escobarian "difference" (that is pre-capitalist ways by which indigenous communities relate to nature) came to represent a salient element of *Penang Tolak Tambak*'s struggle, as political mobilization made fisherfolk increasingly aware of their cultural idiosyncrasies. Employing the concept of difference allowed for the discovery of a nature-dependent microeconomy, as well as for the identification of some traditional, spiritual ways of relating with nature which inspire activists on the ground. In particular, *fardhu kifayah* was noted as a guiding principle which encompasses both the ecological, the socioeconomic, and the spiritual dimension of local life: it is, namely, a need to preserve the ecosystem and distribute its fruits evenly within the community.

The main aim of this study has been to bridge the study of Malaysian indigenous and rural cultures with that of local environmentalism. This felt particularly urgent as communities who most often had to endure ecological degradation rarely had their own culture-specific understandings of "nature" explored (Majid Cooke and Hezri, 2017). This is despite the pivotal role that indigenous groups have played in shaping Malaysia's environmental movement. As this study has shown, Malaysian rural communities hold promise in acting as custodians of alternative ecological paradigms to top-down, environmentally destructive Developmentalism.

Unfortunately, this role appears to be bound to strategies of *resistance*, as the more active, bottom-up promotion of ecological and socioeconomic alternatives requires resources that many grassroots simply do not possess.

Some limitations of this study must be recognized, the first being its brief time frame which only allowed for a small sample of interviewees, with a semi-ethnographic snapshot of what local institutions and values exist on the ground, and the extent to which these are promoted. The limited number of respondents prevented the study of variations in perspectives among fisherfolk, and the single case study did not allow, for instance, to compare how other Malaysian ecological struggles fare on the ground. Heuristically, however, these limitations open new research paths regarding development-skeptical communities and movements – ideally shedding light on how these can overcome their own material constraints and unfavorable political-economic contexts to shape broader socio-economic structures.

This study also opens up exciting research directions with regards to Malaysian environmental justice: its role in promoting multi-ethnic class consciousness, for instance, but also the local blossoming of Islamic interpretations of political ecology. Being a country so rich in ethno-religious diversity, Malaysia is an ideal place to explore onto-epistemic alternatives to capitalist modernity – something which researchers of post-capitalist transitions should not overlook.

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