

Seeking a Moral Economy from a Charitable Place: Village life in an urban *waqf* as a critique of development in Penang, Malaysia

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This paper explores the lifestyles, sentiments, and socio-political perspectives of residents of a Muslim charitable property (*waqf*) through their uses and understandings of the charitable place in which they live: an urban *kampong* (village) in the state of Penang, Malaysia. A case study based on qualitative ethnographic research, it sets life here within the contexts of both state-level management of Muslim religious properties and a national agenda that simultaneously highlights tangible, built symbols of both Muslim indigeneity and globalized urban development. Residents here are well aware of the sometimes contradictory implications of these multiple sets of meanings and practices. The analysis examines how they see themselves as same, yet different -- as exemplary enactors of religious/national values and at the same time representative of a way of life with the potential to morally challenge certain negative social consequences of rapid, urban-based economic development. As beneficiaries of the benefits of *waqf* -- specifically inexpensive ground rent of sites for self-built houses -- residents here have an acute sense of the combined social, cultural, religious, and economic value of the urban residential space they inhabit and use for a common good. The paper analyzes how, in effect, the experience of their particular charitable place has empowered them to build a sense of community and a practice of accountability literally from the ground up -- in terms of self-initiation, self-built architecture, mutual self-help, self-employment, and self-actualization more generally -- all in ways that they see as standing in moral counterpoint to an increasing trend toward alienated, impersonal administrative control by outsiders of both religious endowments and urban planning, as well as an ever-deeper penetration of monetization and profit-seeking self-interests into seemingly more and more aspects of everyday life, especially urban residential space and a greater set of non-economic values that one's home and home place should ideally embody, express, and reinforce.