

Between Belonging and Difference: Cultural Negotiation in Changing Indonesian and Malaysian Communities

Abd Kadir Ahmad¹

¹ Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional (BRIN), Indonesia

Correspondence: ahmadkadir56@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Studies of changing urban communities often emphasize displacement, redevelopment, heritage, and participation, yet they rarely explain how these processes reorder belonging and unequal membership within the community itself. This study examines how spatial change and urban development reshape belonging, internal difference, and everyday cultural negotiation in Kampung Aquarium, Jakarta, and Kampung Bharu, Kuala Lumpur. It employs a literature study with a comparative approach which were analyzed thematically across the two cases. The findings reveal two distinct but overlapping sources of legitimacy. In Kampung Aquarium, belonging gained political force through displacement, collective organization, and participation in rebuilding, whereas in Kampung Bharu it rested more strongly on inherited land, family history, and intergenerational responsibility. Neither pathway produced equal authority among community members. Administrative verification, organizational participation, legal ownership, and heir consent shaped who could return, speak, decide, or benefit, producing stratified belonging. Cultural continuity was therefore not secured by preserving old forms alone. It depended on residents' ability to sustain livelihoods, use shared space, and influence how change was interpreted and managed. The comparison develops everyday cultural negotiation as a process of selective continuity and identifies relational displacement as a possible condition in which physical presence remains while social ties, livelihood security, or local authority gradually weaken.



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INTRODUCTION

Kampung Bharu is widely recognised as an important Malay settlement in central Kuala Lumpur, yet that recognition has not given residents full authority over the neighbourhood's future. As land values rise, ownership has become dispersed among numerous heirs, making redevelopment inseparable from family inheritance. Some residents see economic opportunity; others fear the severing of intergenerational ties to the land. Kampung Aquarium followed a different course. Its residents lost their homes through eviction, after years in which the settlement's designation as spatially disorderly had weakened their position. Demolition did not end life in the area. Livelihoods tied to the location and neighbourhood relations sustained after the eviction later supported residents' rejection of the idea that they were merely temporary occupants. Together, the cases unsettle any simple relationship between legality and belonging. Legal recognition may exist without meaningful community control, whereas an administratively precarious position may still sustain a strong moral claim. The anthropological question is who has the right to determine what should remain when a kampung is transformed (Iqbal & Vonika, 2019; Ju et al., 2012).

A community is not formed simply by people living near one another. Proximity becomes meaningful through relationships maintained in everyday life: memories of place persist through work, while obligations among neighbours and routine mutual assistance keep local ties active. Belonging thus exceeds comfort or emotional attachment. It involves recognition of membership and the grounds on which a person is entitled to speak about a place's future (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The politics of belonging becomes especially visible when redevelopment requires proof of who may legitimately receive benefits or provide consent. Administrative criteria then confront social relationships that long predate the redevelopment process, producing tensions that are rarely straightforward.

The literature on urban kampungs offers important accounts of eviction, housing change, and redevelopment pressure. Studies of Kampung Aquarium commonly examine community-based planning after eviction, the construction of vertical housing, and the cooperative's role in sustaining livelihoods. Research on Kampong Bharu focuses more heavily on Malay heritage and ownership dispersed among heirs, often treating divergent landowner interests as a major obstacle to redevelopment. Community itself has not been ignored; rather, the term is often used too readily, as if residents occupied comparable positions and exercised equal authority. Analysis consequently tends to stop at whether people were consulted, relocated, or compensated, paying less attention to changes within the community. Registration may make some residents easier to recognise, while ownership requirements diminish the voices of long-term residents without formal title. Even those who remain may wield unequal influence after redevelopment. Procedures that appear technical can therefore reorder local power without generating open conflict (Hanafiah et al., 2021; Hasnawati & Rahardjo, 2023).

Social differences acquire meaning through the decisions under dispute. Ownership matters when compensation is discussed; length of residence carries a different weight when historical legitimacy is at stake. A position in a local organisation may also provide greater access to information and negotiation. Familiarity does not erase these inequalities. Someone may be accepted as a neighbour yet treated as less consequential in discussions about the settlement's future. Difference should therefore be examined through the effects it produces. The sharper question is not simply who differs, but when difference becomes a boundary of membership, why that boundary comes to seem reasonable, and how it shapes the weight of particular voices and access to collective benefits (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Kampung Aquarium and Kampong Bharu are not treated as representative of Indonesia and Malaysia. They are brought together because urban pressure operates through different social foundations in each case. The legitimacy of Kampung Aquarium strengthened after the eviction as residents remained, organised, and negotiated reconstruction. In Kampong Bharu, belonging is closely connected to inherited land and family histories embedded in the area's status as a Malay settlement. This difference provides the analytical basis for comparison. The first case helps explain how residential experience can become a political claim when formal recognition is weak. The second raises another problem (Fujita, 2010). Historical recognition and ownership do not necessarily provide full control over spatial change. The comparison therefore concerns how membership is formed rather than which kampung is more authentic.

Spatial change becomes community change when residents must establish anew who is entitled to remain, make decisions, and benefit from redevelopment. Differences that were previously unobtrusive may then become grounds for allocating rights. This article calls the resulting condition stratified belonging: a form of community membership marked by unequal recognition and authority. The concept of everyday cultural negotiation is used to examine how residents accept certain changes, adapt their practices, or resist elements that threaten relationships they value. Such negotiation occurs in formal meetings and in practices rarely recorded as decisions. Culture is not treated as fixed. What endures is selected through present concerns, and residents often seek to maintain relationships rather than reproduce every earlier form of the settlement (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

This study asks how redevelopment reshapes belonging, internal difference, and everyday cultural negotiation in Kampung Aquarium and Kampong Bharu. In the former, residential experience and participation in collective struggle became sources of recognition; in the latter, ownership and family inheritance provided a different basis for membership claims. Comparing them extends the study of urban kampungs by treating redevelopment as a process that alters the structure of membership, not merely the form of space. Everyday cultural negotiation also helps explain why communities accept some changes while protecting relationships they regard as irreplaceable. The comparison probes the

boundary between social continuity and the physical success of redevelopment. Community endurance ultimately depends on residents' capacity to influence how change unfolds, even when the outcome does not fully meet their expectations.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a comparative literature review. Kampung Aquarium in Jakarta and Kampong Bharu in Kuala Lumpur were selected because both have faced urban redevelopment pressures, although their histories of recognition and ownership differ. Indonesia and Malaysia are not treated as unified national cases. Instead, the two kampungs provide settings in which spatial change can be related to belonging, differentiated membership, and community-level social relations. The units of analysis are empirical findings and accounts of residents' lives in the selected sources. Theories of belonging, social boundaries, and cultural negotiation serve as analytical frameworks rather than comparative data. This distinction keeps the analysis grounded in evidence from the two locations rather than in conceptual interpretation alone (Snyder, 2019).

Sources were selected purposively, with the search concentrated primarily on publications issued until 2026. This period encompasses contemporary developments in both locations, although earlier sources were retained when necessary to explain local history or central concepts. The main materials consisted of full-text journal articles and theses that clearly reported their methods or data sources. Sources were identified through academic search engines, journal portals, university repositories, and official government websites. A source was included when it directly addressed either case and provided information relevant to the research focus. Materials that mentioned a location only briefly or lacked a verifiable basis were not treated as primary evidence (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The data were analysed thematically. Findings were organised around three themes: the formation of belonging, differences in membership, and negotiation over community change. The two kampungs were compared within each theme, avoiding separate descriptive accounts. Policy claims were checked against official documents, while accounts of social life were compared across previous field studies and community reports. Differences among sources were retained because they may reflect variations in timing, method, or the positions of the actors involved. The findings offer analytical, not statistical, generalisation and are not intended to represent every community in Indonesia or Malaysia (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Making Community through Displacement, Inheritance, and Moral Emplacement

A place derives value from more than its legal status. Livelihoods may depend on a particular location, while family relations and routine mutual assistance give a settlement a depth that ownership documents cannot capture. Such measures rarely appear in the language of redevelopment. Government agencies read an area through legal evidence and land-use plans; residents remember a different social history—who has lived there for years and who continued to care for the neighbourhood when protection weakened. This tension appears in both cases, though along different trajectories. In Kampung Aquarium, recognition strengthened after eviction and the struggle to return. In Kampong Bharu, claims to place arose from inherited land and the area's status as a Malay settlement. Both show that relations with place cannot readily be reduced to price or administrative standing, and that physical improvement need not confer equal influence over decisions. Once lived experience becomes a basis for participating in an area's future, place acquires moral weight (Lewicka, 2011). In this limited sense, moral emplacement describes the conversion of residential experience into a claim regarded as legitimate.

The 2016 eviction of Kampung Aquarium removed buildings while also weakening residents' position within Jakarta's spatial order. Their presence did not end when their houses were demolished. Several families remained, constructed temporary shelters, and later used that experience as the basis for demanding a right to return. Previous research records that their decision was not solely a refusal of relocation. Residents also sought to preserve proximity to employment and to the social environment that had long supported everyday life. The experience of loss later provided grounds for collective claims, although residents did not all take the same position. Some accepted relocation. Others remained because moving was understood as likely to disrupt livelihoods and social networks. These differences

matter because the community should not be presented as speaking with a single, undivided voice (Age, 2022).

Community organisation gave those claims a more political form. The Community Action Plan provided a channel through which residents could bring their needs into planning discussions. Support work later continued through the establishment of a cooperative (Muhtadi & Anggara, 2020).. The available sources, however, record the voices of active residents and community leaders more often than those of other former inhabitants. Participation was not equally intensive. The term insurgent belonging is therefore more useful for describing how belonging gained force through struggle than for characterising all residents as permanently confrontational. Recognition still depended on who was registered, who took part, and who was considered entitled to return.

Land in Kampong Bharu presents a different problem. It is not treated only as an asset because inheritance connects it to family history and to the area's position as a Malay settlement. At the same time, rights dispersed among numerous heirs make redevelopment decisions difficult. Legal authority may rest with people who no longer live in the area, while those who sustain its daily life may not possess equivalent decision-making power. Ujang and Abdul Aziz (2016) found that some owners accepted redevelopment provided that Malay rights and benefits for future generations were not displaced. Such a position cannot be reduced to resistance to modernisation. Disagreement emerges because the preservation of inheritance carries more than one meaning. Some associate it with continuity of family life in the area. Others view controlled redevelopment as a means of preserving the value of the land for heirs. Economic needs and everyday proximity to the settlement further shape these differences, so ownership does not produce a uniform position. Custodial belonging helps explain belonging grounded in the responsibility to inherit and protect, without presuming agreement on what responsible protection should entail.

The limits of exchange become clearer when the cases are considered together. Compensation may replace a building or parcel of land without restoring access to work or neighbourhood networks. In Kampong Bharu, land prices likewise fail to encompass the genealogical meanings attached to property. Inalienability may cautiously describe aspects of relations with place that cannot be exhausted through exchange. This does not imply that land can never be sold or that a settlement must remain unchanged. The concern is what disappears when economic value becomes the dominant measure: residents may be moved farther from their livelihoods, their authority may weaken, and family connections to inherited land may gradually erode. In both cases, place retains value because it is constituted by relationships that cannot be moved like physical assets (Cernea, 1997).

The construction of Kampung Susun Aquarium presents the problem from another direction. Residents could return to the site, but vertical housing changed patterns of encounter and the management of shared space. Post-reconstruction studies document the role of the cooperative and communal areas, while showing that livelihood problems persisted. Delfirman et al. (2024) found that better housing did not automatically improve employment or income. Residents' return cannot therefore be treated as proof that the community itself has been restored. Social relations still have to find new forms within a different building arrangement. On the available evidence, reconstruction created opportunities for collective life to continue; it did not recover every earlier relationship without change or loss.

Insurgent belonging and custodial belonging are best understood as pathways through which legitimacy is formed, not as closed community types. Kampung Aquarium gained strength through loss and post-eviction participation, whereas Kampong Bharu drew more heavily on inheritance and intergenerational responsibility. Both encounter similar limits when social relationships are translated into documents and economic value. Recipient lists determine who may return in Kampung Aquarium; in Kampong Bharu, proof of title and land price shape the weight given to particular voices. Active residents may gain greater influence, while legal heirs can make decisions without being fully involved in everyday life. Once collective recognition must be converted into concrete benefits, the question of who may legitimately speak for the kampung becomes difficult to resolve.

2. Difference, Boundary Work, and the Production of Stratified Belonging

Community membership does not automatically confer an equal voice. Differences become visible when redevelopment requires evidence of entitlement, consent, or eligibility. Long-term residence may generate social recognition yet remain insufficient within official procedures. Conversely, a legally recognised right may belong to someone rarely involved in everyday community

life. Community boundaries are not fixed; they harden when categories determine who may return, consent to redevelopment, or receive benefits. In this limited sense, boundary work describes the process by which an ordinary difference begins to shape a person's position within the community (Wimmer, 2008).

Following the eviction of Kampung Aquarium, recognition of the kampung as a collective entity did not resolve who was entitled to return. Residential experience had to be translated into names, histories, and documents that could be verified. Research on the reconstruction process records the role of the residents' cooperative in the Community Action Plan and in discussions over the management of vertical housing. Such involvement helped bring residents' needs into the planning process, but former inhabitants did not enter that process from equal positions. Some families remained on the site, others had been relocated, while some were less involved in community organisations. The available sources more often capture active residents, leaving the position of those who participated less frequently comparatively obscure. Registration remained necessary because housing units had to be distributed through identifiable criteria. Yet the procedure also simplified more complex histories of residence. Someone known locally as a long-standing neighbour might not automatically be legible as an eligible recipient. Administration at this stage did more than record the community. It helped constitute the community recognised in reconstruction and determined the routes through which residents could obtain new housing (Pane et al., 2023).

Involvement in the cooperative and planning forums gave some residents closer access to information. Their opportunities to communicate their needs also increased. This does not mean that community organisations deliberately excluded others. Employment, family responsibilities, or distance after relocation could make sustained participation difficult. Nevertheless, voices that appeared most frequently were more likely to enter decision-making. This interpretation must remain limited because existing studies have not mapped all former residents with equal detail. The safer conclusion is that participation opened access while access remained unevenly distributed. Organisational influence operated through proximity to information and the opportunity to articulate needs earlier in the process (Nurdiansyah, 2018).

Land rights in Kampong Bharu produce a different difficulty. Many parcels are jointly owned by several heirs whose relationships to the area vary considerably. Some continue to live in the settlement and participate in everyday life. Others reside elsewhere but retain the consent required for redevelopment. Research on urban renewal and frozen estates records differing views over redevelopment benefits, ownership, and the authority to make final decisions. Ownership provides a strong legal basis, but closeness to community life does not necessarily follow the same line. An occupant who maintains a family house and experiences neighbourhood change may possess less formal influence than an heir who is rarely present. Joint ownership also makes decisions dependent on multiple forms of consent, allowing different economic needs to develop into deadlock. Under such conditions, ownership is more than a boundary between owners and non-owners. It also regulates the weight of voices among people who all identify themselves as part of Kampong Bharu. Legal standing, everyday proximity, and economic need meet in an arrangement that is rarely easy to reconcile (Alhabshi, 2010; Ayuni et al., 2022).

Formal rights and social proximity do not necessarily reside in the same person. This relationship cannot be reduced to the claim that occupants without title are always marginalised or that heirs living elsewhere have lost their attachment. Ownership grants enforceable authority; everyday life produces knowledge of the area's needs. When redevelopment privileges owner consent, occupants' experience may carry less weight. Yet a process based only on social proximity could disregard those who legally inherited the land (Liu et al., 2018). Inequality emerges when one relationship is valued above another, and rising land values make such differences harder to reconcile. Neither form of connection can simply replace the other in decision-making.

Familiarity within kampung life can make inequality appear less pronounced. Residents continue to meet, trade, worship, or assist one another even when their positions in formal decisions differ. The situation changes when housing and land enter negotiation. In Kampung Aquarium, registration and organisational involvement strengthened the position of some residents. In Kampong Bharu, ownership and the consent of heirs carried a legal force that social proximity could not easily replace. Everyday solidarity therefore cannot be treated as evidence that authority and benefits are distributed equally. A

person may be accepted as a neighbour but remain peripheral when decisions about the future of the area are made. Close social relations do not necessarily alter the governing rules.

This condition may be described as stratified belonging: membership remains recognised, but is lived from unequal positions. The differentiation does not always arise from deliberate exclusion. It develops through procedures considered reasonable, such as recipient verification, organisational membership, proof of title, and owner consent. In Kampung Aquarium, collective struggle opened a path to recognition, but its outcomes still had to be distributed through individual categories. In Kampong Bharu, Malay history and identity supplied a collective foundation, while joint ownership left residents speaking from unequal legal positions. Differences once managed in everyday life thus became grounds for allocating benefits, making it increasingly difficult to determine who may speak for the kampung.

3. Everyday Cultural Negotiation and the Politics of Selective Continuity

Returning to the same location does not necessarily restore the life once developed there. A kampung may retain its name and incorporate earlier forms into its design, yet social relations change when space, rules, and living costs are no longer the same. Kampung Susun Aquarium illustrates this tension through vertical housing; Kampong Bharu confronts a related problem when Malay heritage is translated into redevelopment plans amid rising land values. In neither case can continuity be judged by physical appearance alone. Residents still need space to work and organise collective life. Some practices can adapt to a new arrangement; others disappear as the function or management of space changes. Relationships sustained through proximity may weaken when encounters follow a more ordered layout, even if the new buildings are materially better. Preservation confined to physical form can therefore overlook the relations that keep a kampung alive. At issue is not cultural imagery alone, but residents' capacity to sustain a life they still regard as socially viable (Ellenbogen & Trivic, 2024).

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Belonging, Membership, and Community Change

Aspect of Comparison	Kampung Aquarium	Kampong Bharu
Principal basis of belonging	Lived residence, post-eviction persistence, collective struggle, and participation in reconstruction.	Inherited land, family history, Malay settlement status, and intergenerational responsibility.
Main redevelopment pressure	Eviction, relocation, administrative verification, and the transition to vertical housing.	Rising land values, fragmented ownership among heirs, and prolonged redevelopment negotiations.
Boundary of recognised membership	Registration, eligibility to return, and participation in the cooperative or planning process.	Legal title, heir consent, residence, and authority within shared family ownership.
Unequal source of influence	Proximity to organisations, information, and reconstruction forums.	Enforceable ownership rights and control over consent, which may differ from everyday residence.
Form of cultural negotiation	Adapting livelihoods, shared-space practices, and kampung relations to vertical housing.	Negotiating heritage among family continuity, economic benefit, and visible Malay identity.
Principal risk	Physical return without secure livelihoods or the recovery of earlier social relations.	Preservation of cultural symbols while long-term residents' influence or capacity to remain declines.
Comparative analytical outcome	Insurgent belonging, selective continuity, and the possibility of relational displacement.	Custodial belonging, selective continuity, and the possibility of relational displacement.

Source: Comparative synthesis of the literature reviewed, 2026.

Kampung Susun Aquarium changed the relationship between housing and shared space. Baharuddin et al. (2022) describe the design as an effort to retain environmental and communal qualities

within a vertical housing arrangement. Communal areas created opportunities for collective activities, although vertical living also required adjustment. Corridors and more clearly divided spaces replaced some of the proximity that had previously developed with greater spontaneity. This change did not automatically disrupt kampung life. Yet the presence of communal areas is insufficient to establish that earlier patterns have been restored. Residents must still find ways to prevent building rules from completely constraining practices they regard as important. Existing research has not documented those adjustments in extensive detail.

Livelihoods further complicate evaluations of redevelopment. Housing improvement was not automatically followed by stable employment or higher income. Several residents remained dependent on precarious work and economic activity near the area. The right to return therefore did not fully answer whether they could continue living there. Housing was available, while living costs and access to work remained sources of pressure. Relations with the area may also weaken when daily employment must be sought farther away. Community continuity ultimately depends on residents' ability to sustain their economic lives, not merely on the availability of inhabitable units (Ashadi et al., 2022).

The language of heritage in Kampong Bharu presents another problem. Malay identity gives the area a significant position, but heritage does not end with traditional houses or readily recognisable architectural forms. Hashim et al. (2017) show that debates over revitalisation extend to land values, redevelopment benefits, and the authority to make final decisions. Their analysis adds another difficulty. Intangible cultural elements are hard to translate into planning criteria, making heritage easier to preserve as appearance than as social relations (Mappaselleng & Kadir, 2025). Some owners accept redevelopment provided that benefits for families and the character of the area remain protected. Their position cannot be condensed into a choice between accepting and rejecting change. Disagreement emerges because the actors involved use the word heritage to refer to different things. For some, heritage means the continuity of family life on inherited land. For others, controlled redevelopment is needed so that the land continues to benefit future generations. Once these interpretations enter planning, not all elements have an equal chance of survival. Visible forms are usually easier to preserve, while residents' authority is far more difficult to incorporate into design.

Cultural symbols are easier to incorporate into redevelopment than social relations. An area's name, roof forms, or façades may be preserved without changing the project's direction (Kadir et al., 2026). Long-term residents may still be unable to remain as land values and living costs rise. Conversely, Kampung Aquarium need not reproduce every former housing form for collective life to continue. What matters is who can still live, work, and participate in determining how space is used. Architectural authenticity is not the sole measure of community continuity; residents' capacity to retain control over their lives matters as well. Preserving symbols does not necessarily preserve their rights to place (Zhu & González Martínez, 2022).

Everyday cultural negotiation becomes visible as residents confront changes that no single decision can resolve (Kadir, 2024). They adapt their use of space and preserve certain functions as circumstances shift. Negotiation occurs in formal meetings, but also in the use of communal areas and in how families interpret obligations toward inherited land. Its outcomes are neither complete nor uniform: some relationships endure while others weaken. Selective continuity describes this form of endurance. Yet residents do not make these choices from equal positions. Because access to decision-making is already uneven, groups closer to community organisations or formal rights exert greater influence over what is retained.

Loss can occur without an obvious act of displacement. Residents of Kampung Aquarium may return while continuing to face economic pressures that restrict their lives. Kampong Bharu may retain Malay symbols even as the influence of long-term residents diminishes. These conditions approach relational displacement: the weakening of relationships that make a place liveable as home, even when a person has not moved. The concept should not be applied to every resident, since the available sources do not support a claim of that breadth. Still, the cases show that physical presence and community continuity can diverge. Change becomes most consequential when residents lose the space to interpret the future and no longer exercise adequate influence over how their place is transformed (Tuttle, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The comparison shows that belonging in Kampung Aquarium and Kampong Bharu draws on different sources. In Kampung Aquarium, recognition strengthened after eviction as residents remained,

organised, and negotiated reconstruction. In Kampung Bharu, claims to place were tied more closely to inherited land and family relations across generations. Yet these different pathways produced a similar problem: redevelopment did not give every community member an equal voice. Registration, proximity to organisations, and formal rights shaped who could be readily recognised or included, so membership in both communities was lived from differentiated positions. Cultural negotiation unfolded as residents adapted their use of space, protected livelihoods, and reinterpreted heritage. Communities endured not because every earlier form survived, but because valued relationships could still be practised and residents retained some influence over the direction of change.

Urban change cannot be assessed solely through improved buildings, higher land values, or the survival of cultural symbols. Everyday cultural negotiation shows that continuity is selective and never socially neutral. Change does not automatically destroy a community if residents can continue living in the area and participate in organising its space. Yet physical presence may persist even as livelihoods weaken and local influence declines. Such a condition approaches relational displacement, in which relations with place deteriorate without an immediately visible act of removal. These cases do not represent all communities in Indonesia and Malaysia. They do suggest, however, that the future of an urban kampung depends less on how closely a new space resembles its past than on whether residents can sustain social relations and exercise meaningful authority over place.

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