

KEKE TUMBUAN GLOB-ALAY-ZATION (OR GLOB-414Y-ZATION)

One of the predominant characteristics of Indonesia's technological-industrial revolution since the late 1990s is that of instant gratification. With the speed and accessibility of digital information, where everything is just one click away, comes the intense proliferation of excessive entertainment on the internet. In the midst of it all, a generation of millennials emerged. And then came Gen Z, colloquially known as zoomers. In between these generations—deeply intertwined with the rapid growth of technology, factoring in a bucketload of socio-economic issues—a sort of subculture materialized. In both essence and appearance, this subculture compares to instant noodles; cheap, filling, and loaded with artificial yummy-ness of industrial MSG. Here in Indonesia, we call it *alay*.

Alay was originally a derogatory term, first used to describe a person who wears a certain style of knock-off fashion or behaves in a trashy manner associated with Indonesia's working-class youth. Veiled in neon colours and glitter, *alay* represents an offshoot of Western "emo" style—distinct for its wannabe-rebel mannerisms and look (eyeliner on the bottom lid; black nail polish; dyed bangs worn long and brushed to the side of the face, covering one eye). On the other hand, it resembles a simplified version of the Japanese



"J-Rock" style. Taken a step further, it is also used to describe the distasteful, lowbrow style associated with a whole realm of frowned-upon local subcultures, including texting slang, hobbies, music genres, and even a style of posing for selfies. Alay was then expedited by the existence of social media in Indonesia. Back in the early 2000s, Indonesia, like most South-East Asian countries, lagged in the usage of social media platforms since their creation in the West. Friendster was the first social media platform that gained mass traction in Indonesia, followed by MySpace and Multiply. Between 2005 and 2007, Indonesia had the third-largest number of Friendster users in the world. Shortly after, most of those users made the transition to Facebook. The first Indonesian users of social media opened their accounts using personal computers or laptops. But Indonesia is largely considered a mobile-first country since the vast majority of users will get their first, and perhaps only, taste of the internet via mobile devices—partly thanks to the increasing affordability of smartphones. A recent article observed, "a large share of Indonesians use smartphones and they use them for nearly everything to make their life easier. There are quite a few who suspect that the congestion in large cities and the associated waiting times have led

to social platforms enjoying ever greater popularity."¹

But the history of alay started and continues primarily in visuals—beginning in fashion.

Imagine a skinny emo boy, with anime-inspired dyed hair, in a tight, knockoff branded t-shirt (or counterfeit band T-shirt), and skinny jeans. In short, imagine Stuart Pot, aka 2-D, from the band Gorillaz, with red or blonde hair. Then accessorize with Ray-Bans, studs, bracelets, and nail polish. When this kid started appearing all over Indonesia, we started calling them alays. Indeed, alay was first used to describe boys, although later girls also began to interpret their version of the style, and the term was then used for both genders. The word is a portmanteau of the words *anak* (child) and *layangan* (kite), thus, "a kid who flies a kite," his skin grimy from dust and sunburn. Flying a kite is considered cheap entertainment for the middle and lower classes, thus alay is a signifier of taste and socioeconomic standing. The use of the word has since deviated from its original meaning, and instead has everything to do

1. Hanadian Nurhayati-Wolff, "Indonesia: social network penetration Q3 2020," Statista, March 11, 2021.

with asserting a distinct distance between the lower classes (in terms of economics, education, intelligence, decorum, experience, or taste) and whatever class to which you think you belong. But the alays don't care. Rather, alay boys and girls started appearing everywhere, flaunting their loud style.

In the late 1990s, just before alay style surged in popularity and became noticeable, a whole industry of factory outlets invaded the city of Bandung, the capital of the West Java province, just a few hours away from Jakarta. A factory outlet (FO) is a clothing industry business with the basic concept of selling leftover goods from export-quality manufacturers at very low prices. When the monetary crisis hit and caused a suspension in the export of textiles and clothing from various regions in Java, the idea of further developing an FO was created, and the nearest big market was Bandung. It became the centre for cheap branded apparel, to the delight of shoppers across Java—especially those in Jakarta. When it became too overcrowded for shoppers to dip into Bandung on the weekend, distros (distribution outlets) soon popped up in cities of Indonesia. The supply chain went like this: garments that didn't get exported were sold in the factory outlets, and subsequently spread out to distros.

Simultaneously, the surplus that "leaked" during transportation from the FO to the distros was sold on the street or in night markets across the country. This is where youth from the mid-to-lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum—with no income beyond their weekly allowance—began spending money on fashion. Soon after, trends that formed amongst the youth floated to the surface, becoming visible and even predominant in everyday Indonesian life. The hesitance to be different—which correlates with the larger population of fundamentalist religious folks around the lower-income neighbourhoods—subsided, specifically over appearance. Colours, hairdos, make-up, and the latest sways would never again be confined to the higher-class crowds.

During the last decade, increased internet access and economic growth generated by the smartphone revolution have contributed to the progress of Indonesia's e-commerce market. Nearly all the factory outlets (those that survived the early 2000s boom) have moved their businesses to online shopping platforms. The most influential trends that the alays try to mirror come from South Korea and Japan, but mostly with products made in China or Thailand. Access to online shopping, digital



Artwork by Alvin Pang

entertainment platforms, and the latest mutations of trends have all been attributed to the moulding of alay. Aside from the abundance of information on fashion and entertainment, alay reflects a lifestyle based on instant gratification and enforced idleness. A mindset of expecting things to happen quickly by doing less work was in danger of becoming prevalent.

The embedding of alay in the common practices of a general population would be considered by many as the beginning of its downfall. The tackiness of the aesthetic, the lack of grace and social awareness it promotes, the simplistic outlook on life, the disregard of public affairs—from politics to religion, law, traditions, and ethics in general: many would think that these presumed flaws could potentially ruin a (sub)culture of a developing nation. In short, alay could be defined as the complete opposite of the domestic take on hipster, which for the most part is considered to be higher quality in terms of taste, political views, sophistication, environmental awareness, etc. Although hipster is now (jokingly) thought of as something akin to “pretentious” in mainstream conversations relating to fashion and lifestyle, it is still regarded as much more respectable than alay, at least to the Indonesian cultural

establishment and elites. So, since alay culture has been recognized, the general public’s perception of it has been largely contemptuous. But miraculously, alay has become a fun phenomenon, sparking within different aspects of Indonesian pop culture—from fashion to social media, music, design, recreation, and language. Indonesia as a country is energized by its large youth population, and where there’s youth, there’s a way. It was recently reported that “Indonesia’s younger population, the so-called Gen-Z and the millennials now make up more than half of its citizens, according to the latest Statistics Indonesia (BPS) census.”²

The youth in Indonesia love technology, partly for the creativity it offers. Although Indonesia is in a nascent stage of digitization, with its ICT (Information and Communication Technology) infrastructure weak and digital usage still uneven, its digital denizens are among the world’s most active. The wonderful thing about this is that the limited possibility of reaching the higher echelons of digitalization plays right into the whole alay vibe. Improvise or suffer.

2. Norman Harsono, “Do or die as youth dominate demographics,” *The Jakarta Post*, January 25, 2021.

Tech life hacks are favourite activities for alays, who embrace every new advance in smartphone technology, especially given the increasing affordability of devices over the last five years. Advances in digital technology really ramped up the “instant gratification” theme within alay culture, but instead of descending into idleness, a more creative side has emerged. Instead of expecting things to happen quickly while doing less work, it became a means of getting further while having less.

Alay culture is all about making the most out of almost nothing. It takes pride in the fact that it is the street-savvy underbelly of mainstream pop culture. As in most economically developing countries around the world, the contrast between societal classes in the big cities of Indonesia is extreme. This situation has triggered a materialistic mindset among people there, regardless of the stratum of society they belong to. In Indonesia, possessions attain social meaning not merely through their instrumental usage in everyday life, but because they represent ambition, aspiration, personality, and self-expression. Traditional morals notwithstanding, the promise of upward social mobility outweighs any possible negative repercussions. Alay has landed smack in the middle of consumer culture among the lower to middle classes in Indonesia,

and we have been having fun with it without labouring too much over its meaning. While the rich—and mainstream fashion—are obsessing over expensive branded goods, the alays will easily buy counterfeit brands and wear them without shame. While upper-class fashionistas shop and lounge at luxurious high-end malls, the alays bulk buy at the many budget malls, markets, and bazaars (with the best street-food stalls right outside). While “nonconformist” artsy types—usually from the middle to upper class—are into all things analog (cassette tapes, vinyl, photography, clocks with hands and faces, and other such trendy vintage things), the alays are all about using the latest (free) apps and features on their smartphones. The alays do not position themselves for or against anything, they don’t care about politics or theories—hence the absence of concern over political correctness—and those who are religious are free to practice (many alay girls, for example, wear hijabs). Alay’s radicalism lies precisely in its refusal to define itself in opposition to the upper class, to the mainstream, or to the so-called establishment. It just so happens to be the preferable way for alays to express their snazzy selves.

Alay is the cheaper way. The faster way. The fake-it-till-you-make-it way. It is bootleg. It is the ultra-modification of cheap automatic

motorbikes (*metic*) to look cool. It is the artificial colouring of street food. It is the ultra-shorthand complicated text-messaging language or leet (like “u hv 94n74?”). It is a pixelated meme made in two minutes. It is making DIY WhatsApp stickers. It is dreaming about a Korean soap opera star. It is trying to look like a Korean soap opera star. It is abbreviating everyday terms. It is youthful and funny. It is using “wkwkwk” to express laughter (hahaha). It is calling Indonesia “Wkwk Land,” which means being proud of the country irrespective—or even more so because—of its many deficiencies. Regardless of its background and lowbrow conceptualization, alay is all about surface-level delight.

In the last decade, Indonesian artists, content creators, and creative folks alike have embraced aspects of alay in their everyday rhetoric. Everybody is starting to use alay slang, abbreviating everyday terms and names of food or places. We even see ads for popular brands adopting alay tongue on huge billboards. Celebrities instantly gain traction when they start “being” more alay, as it is regarded as humble and intimately connected to the “common” people. Alay even has a wide variety of musical genres. In the early years of its conception, it was predominantly linked to the local ultra-melancholic cheesy emo-type rock ballad bands

that were highly influenced in terms of looks (not music) by J-Rock bands. Bands such as ST12, Radja, and Kangen Band dominated the alay playlists. There was even a hugely popular band at the time called, simply, J Rocks. Indeed, why not just name your band after the very music genre performed by bands whose aesthetics you tried to imitate? That is *so* alay. In recent years, a super-fast, high-energy techno-based remix of Dangdut and traditional Javanese music called Koplo or FunKot (Funky “Kota”) has become closely associated with alay, on account of its massive popularity amongst party-goers in the rural areas and on the edges of city districts. No matter how marginal these areas may seem through a socioeconomic lens, the people there take their parties seriously. They will have the loudest sound system and get the best Koplo DJ they can find. FunKot is basically Koplo that gets played at mega-clubs in big cities, hence the name Funky Kota (“Kota” means city, but it is also an area in West Jakarta known as the Chinatown or “old town” of Jakarta, where huge clubs once operated). Technology and the digitization of music play a big role here, and studying the trajectory of Koplo or FunKot is another step towards understanding the visualization of alay.

FunKot as a music genre is entirely associated with alay nightlife.

It is euro house music on speed, almost hypnotically dark dancehall, hyper-sexualized trance, and all things garish. But for the average working-class youth of Indonesia, many in need of respite from the hardship of everyday life, it is maximum euphoria to an otherworldly degree. This is when the barriers are gone, and one can be as *katrok* (*norak*, or worse than unsophisticated) as one wishes to be. For this very reason, FunKot music and its wild party vibe have a cult following in Japan. It grew in popularity around the Otaku scene, among those who are fans of anime and manga.³ FunKot DJs in Japan started adding new elements such as video game sounds or samples of anime soundtracks to their remixes. These FunKot party videos from Japan, saturated with elements of video game aesthetics and cosplay Lolita dancers, were subsequently discovered back in Indonesia, effectively elevating the perception of alay culture in the minds of the locals, who are so cleverly *ngehek*. *Ngehek* is mostly used as slander to call someone either unprincipled or sly, but sometimes it might accurately be used as a compliment to call someone

3. Interview with DJ Jet Baron, *Whiteboard Journal*, March 26, 2014.

crafty in the positive sense. When *ngehek* meets talent and ingenuity, wonderful things emerge. Specifically, when they are alay at heart.

In 2019, a group from Yogyakarta called Prontaxan was a highlight of major music festivals in Jakarta, such as Synchronize and Joyland. They do straight-up FunKot remixes of popular indie tunes and embody the stage persona of an alay FunKot group, right down to the style of video they make and the language they use. Prontaxan's stated mission is to blur the social hierarchy on the dance floor, by remixing prominent indie tunes that seemingly "belong" in the mid to upper-class realm of music listeners into FunKot. Visual artists are also more and more inspired by alay culture, with one of them illustrating this article. Alienpang uses neon colours and bold fashion statements in her drawings, but also incorporates humdrum aspects of alays' day-to-day life. When she is not drawing, she hangs out at a little hair salon that she runs with friends in South Jakarta called Gledex, which provides clients with an alay level of hair dye and flashy, glam punk "alien" makeup, as well as a range of shoulder massages—a practice that is fairly common in

Indonesia, even between friends while hanging out. As a designer of apparel she also uses alay culture as source material. Another notable fashion designer who is often associated with the word alay, Ican Harem, persistently uses words like *katrok* or *norak* when asked about his fashion direction. Harem is immersing himself in the reformational dimension of this strand of Indonesian pop culture, attempting to establish his high-cycle designs as the future of alay. His claim of a "post-alay" aesthetic is also used to describe the music of Gabber Modus Operandi (GMO), the experimental gabber music project by him and his partner Aditya Surya Taruna aka DJ Kasymmin. *Post-Alay Holistic Sound Healing*, to be exact. GMO utilizes a mixture of hardcore FunKot sounds and traditional gamelan samples yet is polished with punches of European-toned gabber. In a way, it takes the primal source of FunKot and Koplo, which lies in traditional trance sounds, and carries it into the future. All these phenomena give the impression of the beginning of a post-alay mentality—an alay that is more in sync with contemporary consciousness, one that involves a deeper understanding and love of the culture, as well as imaginative *ngehek* ways of revamping and enjoying it. What

was once a mere spectacle, propelled by digitization, is now ready to be utilized as a device for cultural reflection. This critical twist may be for the betterment of the future or simply offer a different experience. One thing for sure, it will always be a spectacle. There is no turning away from that.

At present, the word alay is, to a certain extent, no longer used as a pejorative in a pop-culture context. Somehow, the meaning of the word goes all the way back to describe Anak Layangan again, as in kids or teenagers loitering on the streets. Of course, some may still use it to describe tacky things, but class differences no longer play a part. When talented content creators and influencers gain millions of followers and capitalize from being alays, using the word as a snide comment would be, at the very least, misplaced. Perhaps the more we are acquainted with alay culture in daily life, the more we realize that we all carry aspects of alay within us. I am quite sure that there are alays all around the world already, freely flaunting their 414y ways.