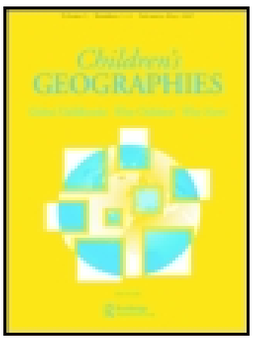

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'In the middle of things': on educated un(der)employed young people's pragmatism and idealism in rural Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about young people and their troubled education-to-work transitions in the global south usually concern urban case studies, in which young people are typically described as if they are outside the normal flow of things. By contrast, this current paper focuses on rural tertiary-educated young people (aged 20–30) on the island of Flores, East Indonesia. These young people try – and are enabled by their communities – to act as responsible community members through what they called 'having *semangat*', a term connoting commitment and spiritedness, being lively and passionate. The analysis of having *semangat* stimulates us to rethink the common link between young people and upward mobility, and contests an image of young people as potential social failures who direct themselves to the margins when they fail to comply with hegemonic ideals of success.

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Introduction

Discussions about young people and their troubled education-to-work transitions in the global south often revolve around urban case studies, in which young people are typically described as being outside the normal flow of things and marginal to mainstream society. By contrast, the rural tertiary-educated young people in this paper, aged between 20 and 30, living on the East Indonesian island of Flores, tried – and were enabled by the larger community – to act as responsible community members through what they called 'having *semangat*', an Indonesian term connoting commitment and spiritedness, and being lively and passionate.

Due to its numerous meanings, *semangat* is rather difficult to translate. In Flores, it is used to refer to a set of activities through which young people manifest themselves as caring community members. For example, a young woman told me she helped a local primary school to organise activities for children, because she 'had *semangat*' for them. The analysis of these activities, stemming from both pragmatic and idealistic motivations, brings to the fore a set of practices that are mostly neglected in contemporary youth studies from the global south, which focus on young people and their failed trajectories of upward mobility within neoliberal contexts. In particular, young people are often seen as having 'too much' time, which is expressed in concepts such as 'boredom' (e.g. Mains 2007, 2017), 'timepass' (Jeffrey 2009, 2010) and 'waithood' (Honwana 2014). These concepts are used to describe the agentive capabilities of young people. Yet, as I argue, they also connote practices of 'self-peripheralisation', a concept I borrow from Mark Liechty (2010:, 43), who uses the term for young people in urban Nepal who long for a life in New York, but feel

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stuck in Kathmandu. These young people imagine themselves as being 'out here', not partaking in modernity.

Similar feelings of being stuck are common throughout the global south. Hegemonic notions of progress – as expressed in images of consumption, career ideals, and pressures to get married and start a family – are out of reach, when the aspired careers and financial stability that they imply fail to materialise. The practices that young people adopt when navigating their societal place imply feelings of being 'peripheral'. They are bored, just pass the time, or they wait, as if their lives are less meaningful (cf. Chua 2014; see also Naafs 2018, 55).

Initially, I also used these terms to interpret the navigational practices of young people in Flores, as they did not seem to face such different structural circumstances to their urban peers. However, based on a year of anthropological fieldwork in Ronaga,[1] a village of about 3,000 people in Ngada District (population of 150,000 people), located a 10-minute motorbike drive from the district capital Bajawa (15,000 people), I argue that unemployed or underemployed Ngada young people do not feel peripheral, and instead act as if they are 'in the middle of things'.

In Ngada District, named after the area's dominant ethnic group, most people rely on small-scale agriculture. Ronaga itself is distinctly rural: adjacent to the village lies the productive dry garden land, where people grow coffee, maize, yams, fruit, small green pumpkins, beans, and red rice. Almost every family has access to land. However, not everyone is dependent on agriculture: some work in construction, have a small roadside store, or earn money through weaving. Many others work as civil servants in Bajawa, in the village administration, or at local schools and health posts.

The young people central to this study aspire to these civil servant jobs. They typically came from modest backgrounds. Their parents are small-scale farmers who had been able to pool money to support at least one child's educational efforts; or, their parents are primary school teachers or low-ranking civil servants with some disposable income. With the financial help of larger kin networks, these young people managed to obtain a tertiary degree, often the first in their family to do so. It has, however, become nearly impossible for them to obtain their desired jobs in Ngada. In an area traditionally deprived of private sector investment, the former typical path for educated Ngada young people would be to start working as a civil servant, for example in health posts, state schools, or local administrations. However, the local government implemented a hiring freeze in 2011, considering the local bureaucracy to be saturated and consuming too much of its budget.[2] This hiring freeze remains more or less to this day, motivated by national policies aimed at reducing the size of the bureaucracy. As a result, hundreds of tertiary-educated young people in Ngada District are without proper salaried employment.[3]

Despite these educated young people's bleak labour market prospects, they were not 'self-peripheralising'. Instead, through having *semangat*, they did not imagine themselves as 'out here', and acted as if they felt connected to their families, communities, land, and customs (*adat*). They told me that, due to their educated status, they had a moral responsibility to 'develop' (*membangung*) their communities. But, having *semangat* was also motivated by pragmatism, through which un(der)employed educated young people hoped to gain networks and experience, and in the end their desired job.

Compared to most studies concerning young people in the global south, this account is rather atypical, both in terms of these young people's location and their activities. Yet, the analysis of having *semangat* is more than just a counter-example to the norm; it also stimulates us to rethink the common link between young people and upward mobility, contesting an image of young people as potential social failures who direct themselves towards the margins of society when they fail to comply with hegemonic ideals of social mobility (see also Naafs and Skelton 2018, 4). I question the typical focus on self-peripheralisation, arguing that young people can be successful and 'live a good life' even when they cannot adhere to hegemonic narratives about progress.

To make this argument, I first present perspectives on contemporary youth that deal with boredom, timepass, and waithood, and discuss how we can discern practices of self-peripheralisation in

them. Then I discuss educated un(der)employed young people in Ngada and their *semangat*. I explore the factors that enable their associated actions, focussing on the rural situatedness of these young people, and how this amplifies the effects of a nationwide discourse on development (*pembangunan*). In the conclusion, I question the dominant focus on young people and upward mobility.

Boredom, timepass, and waithood

Young people's lives all around the world are enmeshed in flows of money, goods, and ideas, while formal education opportunities have expanded globally. These processes alter ideas and ambitions about future possibilities among young people and their parents, as well as in society at large. States, however, increasingly concentrate on relatively few core functions, resulting in smaller bureaucracies (Van den Berg and O'Neill 2017), while private sector investments are often limited to specific geographical – often urban – areas and fail to provide job market alternatives to these shrinking bureaucracies, particularly in rural areas like Flores (see e.g. Li 2010). As a result, many educated young people become trapped between their personal desires, their parents' hopes and expectations, and the economic realities that cause them to become either unemployed or underemployed.

Issues of un(der)employment are not confined to the global south, yet it is particularly here that young people, often better educated than their parents, are unable to find their desired white-collar jobs. Studies conducted in, for example, Niger (Masquelier 2013), Ethiopia (Mains 2007, 2017), Mali (Soares 2010), Egypt (Assaad and Ramadan 2008), India (Jeffrey 2010; Froerer 2011), and Indonesia (Minza 2012; Naafs 2012) discuss young people and their troubled search for appropriate entry-level jobs. A recurrent feature in these studies is that un(der)employed young people are in a state of 'not yet' (Lindquist 2009, 12), aspiring to middle class ideals that fail to materialise, and having 'too much time'. For example, in Daniel Mains' study of relatively educated but unemployed urban youth in Ethiopia, his male interlocutors spoke of boredom: '[t]here is no difference between today, yesterday and tomorrow … [w]e live like chickens, we are just eating and sleeping' (2017, 38).

Boredom is a temporal construct: it emerges when imagined ideas of progress are not realised (Mains 2017, 39). In Ethiopia, as in most parts of the world, these ideas are closely related to expanded education opportunities, which are thought of as a necessary condition to secure government employment. These jobs have, however, been largely absent in the country from the late 1990s onward, leading to massive unemployment of relatively educated youth, who cannot advance through life to become socially accepted adults (i.e. to become financially independent and start a family). Yet, boredom is also a social construct: Mains' study concerns urban young men who were all actively looking for jobs, but considered most available jobs as unbefitting their educated status. Local understandings of status and shame (*yiluñña*) stipulate that certain types of work, such as informal sector jobs, are inappropriate. As a result, 'youth of all class backgrounds … accepted extended periods of unemployment' (Mains 2017, 41) and depended on social networks for their livelihood.

Similar processes are at play in Craig Jeffrey's (2010) work about university-trained young men in North India. These young men cannot obtain properly salaried employment, due to which social adulthood is out of reach, and they are subject to 'temporal and spatial anxiety' (Jeffrey 2010, 466). They experience a rupture in time, as they cannot comply with hegemonic visions of personal progress. These young men feel useless and left out of modernity, and spend their days doing 'timepass' (Jeffrey 2010, 465). Timepass is an expression of 'social suffering' (Jeffrey 2010, 473), but it is also an agentive practice of self-expression. Young men hang and joke around, occupy street corners, and play cards, through which they create a new sense of identity. They are 'seen' by other people, and get a sense of masculine solidarity from their peers, transcending class and caste boundaries. Hence, these young men, despite their marginality vis-à-vis mainstream society, are nevertheless able to become 'someone'.

Practices of crafting oneself as a public 'someone' also feature in Honwana's discussion of 'waithood' (2014; see also Assaad and Ramadan 2008). Due to unfavourable economic circumstances, many attributes of social adulthood are out of reach for educated youth in large parts of urban Africa, including having one's own house, getting married, and establishing a family. Hence, they remain 'young' longer than in times when jobs were more plentiful. Honwana argues that while staying young longer, these youths experience the 'contradictions of modernity, in which young people's opportunities and expectations are simultaneously broadened and constrained' (2014, 20). They are in touch with globally hegemonic discourses and images, yet lack access to proper jobs and income. They are forced to live at the margins of the formal sector, where young men, sensing that their waithood is becoming an increasingly permanent state, carve out new identities and spaces as they improvise their livelihoods by pursuing odd jobs or criminal activities (Honwana 2014, 23–24).

I refer to the work of Mains, Jeffrey, and Honwana to exemplify how young people creatively challenge the status quo and pursue alternative modes of living to dominant notions of how things should be, while facing the difficulties of contemporary economic constellations. Yet, they are also examples of how young people remain marginal to hegemonic discourses and images of success (i.e. obtaining a white-collar job and its associated benefits, and getting married). This is not a mere 'matter of fact' economic position; the young people clearly *feel* marginal, particularly in relation to dominant ideas regarding desired life-course trajectories, and imagine themselves as being 'out here'.

Without going into explicit comparisons between the situation in Ngada and parts of urban Africa and India, yet acknowledging the many differences between these places, the discussion of the work of Mains, Jeffrey, and Honwana is useful as it elicits questions regarding the situation of un(der)employed young people in Ngada. On the one hand, we can draw parallels between the various cases. For example, as in many other places in the global south, Ngada young people experience a mismatch between ideals of progress and actual economic opportunities. In Ngada, the lack of a private sector, as well as the government hiring freeze, severely limit educated young people's job market opportunities, which are further restricted by general ideas that certain careers, in particular those in agriculture, are unfit for educated young people. This brings about a temporal rupture: educated young people in Ngada cannot progress through life to become socially accepted adults, as the attributes of adulthood (in particular financial stability, which is the prerequisite for marriage, in turn the principal marker of adulthood) are out of reach. As a result, they remain dependent on social networks for their livelihood for prolonged periods of time, similar to the young men in Mains' example.

Yet, on the other hand, and quite different from most other representations of troubled education-to-work transitions, the un(der)employed educated young people in Flores that I spoke to did not imagine themselves as 'out here'. Though they were bored sometimes, they did not experience structural temporal anxieties, nor did they engage in timepass or waithood, even though they longed to become a modern and consuming 'someone'. Ngada young people did not consider themselves as having 'too much time' and did not 'self-peripheralise'. Instead, they wanted to live a good life, to act as responsible community members, and show *semangat*. Why is this? To answer this basic question, below I first describe the ways in which Ngada young people have *semangat*.

Having semangat

While discussing his volunteering – he organised the yearly soccer tournament for Ronaga's primary schools – an educated young man explained to me:

> It's good that people know (…) you help organise sporting events for the local primary school. Then people know you have *semangat* for the community. People know you're a good person, and they know you want to contribute to the development of the community. People will talk about you, which can help to get a job.

Clearly, having *semangat* contains a pragmatic component, as it is about becoming known in the community, gaining networks and new experiences, which might be helpful in one's quest for employment. Yet, having *semangat* is also driven by deeply idealistic motivations. Using examples

from the Church, customary practices, and volunteering and work-like practices, I illustrate this combination of pragmatism and idealism.

Catholic youth movement

I met Mako (25), a female bachelor graduate in English, during a meeting of the local branch of the Catholic Youth Movement (OMK, *Orang Muda Katolik*) in Ronaga.[4] Through OMK, young people – all unmarried and often relatively educated – organise and participate in numerous activities, including Bible reading groups and regular sporting events. These activities provide a rare venue for young people to come together in youth-only groups. There are no bars, cafes, or shopping malls in Ngada, and OMK activities provide a place for mixed-gender socialising (Schut 2020). As OMK activities take place within the Church's ambit, they are considered a safe and acceptable place for young men and women to mingle. Meanwhile, young people acquire skills in organising events, and become known in the community as having *semangat*. Some also help in the parish administration, keep the Church grounds clean and do maintenance work.

These activities are motivated by youthful pragmatism, yet OMK is also a place through which young people can give expression to their religious beliefs. For example, there are OMK prayer nights, OMK members serve in the choir and services, and they participate in Church celebrations (e.g. the Easter pageant). Though we should not conflate this religiosity with impeccable moral behaviour – I often found young men playing cards, drinking, or watching pornography on their smartphones, things the Church frowns upon – many young people felt they had to act as a moral example.

Mako was deeply religious. She participated in OMK activities and sang in the Church choir. She also went to the hospital in the district's capital on a weekly basis to pray for the sick and wounded. She told me: 'I hope that I can help people this way, to get better. But I also hope that people will see me, and follow my example of living a good life'. When I asked her what she meant by 'a good life', she replied that 'people should gossip less, and don't drink and gamble'. She also complained about young boys, already smoking (which she considered a waste of money), driving too fast on their motorbikes, and no longer going to Church.

Though few other educated young people joined Mako to pray in the hospital, or were as anti-gambling and anti-smoking as she was, most of them confirmed her ideas about living a moral life. For example, Egiel (26), a graduate from a seminary, said that he admired priests very much, as they were such good people and had given up much of their personal lives to help the villagers. At one time he had wanted to become a priest himself, but he had realised that he could not make the necessary sacrifices. Still, he took the lives of priests as an example, tried to stay away from gambling as much as possible, and stimulated people in his community to join him in Church. He also hosted prayer nights at his family's house, inviting neighbours, family, and friends.

Mako and Egiel were not unique. The OMK meeting at which I met Mako was aimed at improving the leadership qualities of and promoting capacity building among the 25 participating young men and women (aged 19–29, most with tertiary degrees). Supervised by a young priest from the diocese, the participants frequently mentioned that to them, leadership meant living by example. Specifically, many felt that they had a responsibility to take care of their parents, siblings, and community members. One of the participants illustrated this by saying that one should not be '*bagai kacang lupa kulitnya*' (like a peanut that forgets its shell), implying that young people should not forget that their family had taken care of them when they were younger, and they should therefore return the effort. This is particularly relevant for educated young people, as many receive support from parents and larger kin networks while studying away from home.

Customary practices

The idea that young people have a responsibility to care for parents, siblings, and other family members, and the community in general, is an important reason for young people to return to Ngada

after finishing their studies. For young women, this responsibility reflects a general gendered opinion about what is proper, and in Ngada, young women have internalised ideas about being dutiful and caring daughters (see also Somaiah, Yeoh, and Arlini 2020). But care responsibilities also relate to young people's experience of Ngada customary practices (*adat*). Most Ngada families are organised along matrilineal lines and are structured through uxorilocal residence patterns (e.g. Schröter 2005). Clan-like structures remain central to the social fabric; houses as physical constructions, but also as social nodes and ritual abodes of the ancestors, are particularly important within these structures. Daughters in particular feel a strong commitment to their House;[5] they feel that they need to be close to their ancestors, who typically reside in the attic of senior clan houses (the social and ritual centre of an extended family), as they need to take care of them during rituals. Moreover, due to the uxorilocal residence patterns, many young women become the House guardian upon the death of their senior female kin, which means taking care of it and its associated land for future generations. Hence, a typical reply to my question of why a young woman had returned to rural Ngada was 'because of custom'; 'it was *adat*' that had required them to do so. They needed to be in the House.

Young women are, however, rather ambiguous about this cultural pressure to return home. Some show resentment that young men enjoy relative autonomy compared to young women. As one young woman explained to me why she had returned to Ngada immediately after finishing university, while her brother had spent years in Java after his graduation: 'Parents just always worry more about their daughters'. For example, Vera (29) had to be at home primarily because she was the only daughter among five children. She had spent time in cities away from Ngada for her studies, where she had lived with much pleasure. She said: 'Life in the city is exciting … here it is a bit boring. Ah well … what can I do? It's our culture'. Mako had also been requested by her parents to return to her natal house, even though she had wanted to stay in the city of her studies: 'I know I should return … it's culture … but my parents are still strong, and I had hoped to stay away a bit longer'.

At the same time, however, both Vera and Mako, and most of the other young women I spoke to, were proud of their culture, and strongly supported customary practices. Mako mentioned that she *should* be in the House, as misfortune might befall her family if she, as the senior daughter, were absent. She illustrated this with an anecdote about the construction of a neighbour's clan house, in which – against custom – nails had been used instead of a self-supporting construction. In the following months, numerous people living in the house had become ill. The cause of these illnesses was supposedly dissatisfied ancestors, who could only be appeased by reconstructing the house according to custom. To Mako, this story indicated that her presence in her natal village mattered and that she could not renounce her *adat*-defined tasks, including her future House guardianship.

Young women seem proud of their cultural heritage. Ngada's matrilineal tradition is frequently cited as something unique, fostering communal ties and making 'Ngada women strong', particularly in relation to neighbouring ethnic groups organised along patrilineal lines. They are very interested in their 'culture'. Young women shared with me their fascination with the rituals and myths, and other cultural expressions, including dances, songs, and ritual usage of language, which feature in frequent and elaborate celebrations. They told me that they wanted to learn more about *adat*, as if more knowledge about customary practices would make them more Ngada, and they participated eagerly – like their male peers – in rituals and celebrations.

The young women were indeed not alone in their self-declared fondness for Ngada culture. As one educated young man stated, echoing the sentiments of several others, he had returned home because 'Ngada is where I belong'. He referred to Ngada's spectacularly beautiful landscape, but also to the social ties among people, the land, and the ancestors, celebrated through ritual. When I sat with some educated young men, sharing food and drinks, I asked them what they liked so much about Ngada. Their answer echoed a common reply to queries like this: 'Culture is still strong here, unlike in the city; here we care for each other'.

Volunteering and work-like activities

It thus seemed that educated young people were committed to Ngada customary practices. However, in the same conversations in which young people praised these practices, they also critiqued them, particularly because such practices create something that they called 'a culture of requesting' (*budaya minta*; Schut 2019). They blamed a perceived lack of socioeconomic development in the region on 'archaic' cultural practices, including a tendency to share any surpluses one has with one's extended family and neighbours. Many educated young people mentioned that they wanted to 'develop' their natal communities, although the notion of development was only vaguely defined. They often said that villagers' mindsets should become more individualistic, particularly in relation to finances. Josef (28), a graduate from an agricultural college, made use of an exaggerated yet typical trope to illustrate this:

> How is it that a day labourer who works the land can smoke a package of cigarettes a day and drink palm wine at night, while he doesn't make enough to pay for proper food for his family? It is because of the *budaya minta*: there's always someone who will provide food and drinks, probably his relatives … Meanwhile, his kids are sick, and probably can't continue their education. He should spend his money wisely, stop smoking and drinking … maybe try to save some for his kids.

Regarding *how* Josef and others wanted to contribute to this change in mindset, young people were unclear. Through a wide variety of actions, educated young people tried to contribute to the general wellbeing of their community and its 'development'. Mako's praying in the hospital and singing in the choir, and Egiel's prayer nights, were partly motivated by the ideal that they should positively contribute to people's lives. The young man who volunteered for the yearly soccer tournament for Ronaga's primary schools also believed that his actions had pedagogic value, as they would foster team spirit among the young participants and provide a sense of competition. Even customary practices, such as celebrations, dances, and songs, were used in the name of development. Jasinta (25), a graduate in Communication from a Java-based university, taught traditional dances and weaving practices to primary school children. She reasoned that teaching children about *adat* would create a sense of community among them, through which they could become contributors to the wellbeing of their community, and help it to 'progress'. She therefore also created a small library with the help of visiting tourists whom she asked for donations. She also gave creative writing sessions at junior high schools. With both activities, she aimed to activate local children to become critical community members who could break with local tendencies towards – what she called – 'passive mindsets' (*otak pasif*).

Jasinta's volunteering was deeply idealistic in nature; for others, volunteering was much more pragmatic, aimed at gaining new skills and contacts, and hopefully properly paid work in the long run. Many young people, including Josef, performed ad-hoc duties for village councils, including taking notes, organising meetings, and gathering data for yearly reports. Meanwhile, at the time of my fieldwork, there were hundreds of *sukarela* (volunteers)[6] and *guru honor* (teachers paid an honorarium only) active at Ngada's local health posts and schools respectively. Most of them had finished relevant tertiary degrees and functioned as proper nurses, sanitation experts, physiotherapists, or midwives, or as proper primary school or high school teachers. However, they were not awarded any salary, or in the case of the *guru honor*, a quarter of a teacher's salary only, without the advantages of a teacher's contract, including job security, access to healthcare, and a pension. These *sukarela* and *guru honor* were rather pragmatic: while government-supported contracts were not available, they figured that they should try to gain some experience and networks, in the hope of one day receiving a proper contract.

Volunteerism is common throughout Indonesia. There is a long history of free labour mobilisation for the state, typically framed as work for 'the common good' (Jakimow 2018, 148). This labour mobilisation is heavily gendered (e.g. Somaiah, Yeoh, and Arlini 2020), which explains why the vast majority of educated young women in rural Ngada aim to work in health-related or teaching jobs. Due to the top-down nature of these volunteering arrangements, we should be aware of its their disciplining nature, and how this affects young people's choices.

Yet, other processes are also at play in young people's volunteering decisions, including the absence of private sector jobs in Ngada, due to which young men aspire to government-supported jobs too. Moreover, agricultural careers are considered, by both young people and their parents, as undesirable for those with an advanced education. Though small-scale agrarian livelihoods remain important in Ngada (see also Rigg et al. 2018), they are emically considered unprofitable and anachronistic, and incompatible with the perceived modern nature of tertiary degrees.[7] In fact, young people's work-like activities as *sukarela* or *guru honor* are motivated by a state-sponsored development ideal, through which people are stimulated to see themselves – through their volunteering – as agents of positive change, revitalising stagnant local mindsets.

Thus, Mako – a *guru honor* at the local junior high school – tried to be a moral example, not only through the Church but also through her work. She visited pupils at risk of dropping out, and persuaded them and their families to put more effort into their education. Mira (24), a *sukarela* nurse at the Bajawa hospital, similarly hoped to have a positive impact through her work. She told me she liked to talk to patients and visitors about hygiene, diet (in particular the detrimental effect of sugar, an expensive commodity), and the dangers and costs of smoking: 'If people would eat less sugar and men would smoke less, then people would become healthier and could save some money!' Mira also complained about the common practice of cooking on wood fires in small, dark kitchens, which, according to her, is bad for one's health. Though she liked traditional houses and the community spirit they represent, she was adamant that 'modern houses are better for hygiene'.

Understanding having *semangat*

Mira had *semangat*, which she expressed in a typical manner: she admired customary practices and their representations, yet also considered them to be outdated. Her words exemplify young people's ambiguity regarding customary practices, reflecting a nationwide modernisation discourse. Here, I argue that this discourse, in conjunction with the rural context of young people in Ngada, motivates the drive to have *semangat* and its associated practices.

Indonesia's nationwide modernisation discourse is deeply anchored in its educational system. As in many other postcolonial states, this system was designed to instil young people with notions of citizenship (Parker 2003), which was – and still is – intimately connected to the theme of development (*pembangunan*) (Langenberg 1986). This theme had featured in official discourse since the foundation of the post-independence state, yet it was especially during Suharto's New Order regime (1966–1998) that it became key to political legitimacy (Langenberg 1986, 7). The notion of *pembangunan* was, however, ambiguous. On the one hand, the New Order regime spearheaded modernisation, envisioning an urban middle class as bearers of *modernisasi*, who would consume Indonesia towards economic powerhouse status. On the other hand, the *pembangunan* ideology contained elements that were cultural in nature, stressing '"mental", "moral" and "spiritual" development' (Langenberg 1986, 19), evoking images of 'the village' as a harmonious society, where people undertake duties to support general wellbeing. In this latter sense, development was based on something bigger than the individual and appealed to morality, as opposed to individual consumption for the sake of consumption, or modernity for the sake of modernity.

During the New Order regime, the idea of *pembangunan*, including its ambiguity, permeated all levels of administration, and infiltrated the social and personal realms of Indonesians, becoming 'a universal truth' (Heryanto 1988, 2). This has not changed much since the *Reformasi* (the post-1998 reforms) (Bjork 2005). Contemporary young people still reflect both its 'universal truth' and its ambiguity. It is through these ambiguous tendencies that returning educated young people become firmly tied into the fabric of their rural communities. We can connect both their desire to develop 'archaic' practices, as well as their self-declared commitment to these very same practices, to their educated subjectivities (Schut 2019).

Modernisation discourses affect (young) people globally, yet the rural context of this study – as compared to the urban contexts of most other studies – amplifies the effects of this discourse. In Indonesia,

following official rhetoric, popular discourse stipulates a divide between urban and rural, in which 'ruralness' is both celebrated and stigmatised (Munro 2013). Whereas the former means young people feel connected to their village, because 'here we care for each other', the latter encourages young people to critique these practices as part of the 'culture of requesting' (*budaya minta*). As educated people, they embody the ideals of modernity, also because they have lived in cities away from their rural communities. They have made an 'educational pilgrimage' (Anderson 1983), moving to regional urban centres and therefore up in an imaginary hierarchy, with Jakarta, the capital city, at its zenith. That many of the young people in Ngada did not study in Jakarta, and came back to Ngada, does not deter them from feeling privileged, knowledgeable, and modern. Jasinta explained to me: 'People who spend all of their lives in the village, they lack an "outside" perspective'. She considered this outside perspective vital for prosperity, development, and progress, both on a personal and community level.

Jenny Munro, in her study about educated young Dani – an ethnic group from West Papua – reports a similar feeling of privilege among her respondents. These young people feel that they are able to 'help the community' (2013, 33) with knowledge gained through their education. Among the Dani, a gift-economy prevails, and 'big-man' leadership is the norm. 'Doing good' is thus not merely a trope, but matters. Regardless of whether they can have an actual positive impact upon society, educated young Dani people imagine themselves as the vanguard of positive change and try to act upon it, in a way contributing to the local gift-economy and gaining prestige.

Something similar takes place in rural Ngada. Though the Ngada political and economic landscape is quite different from the Dani context, networks of mutual help are prevalent. As Jayne Curnow mentions, in Ngada, '[p]roviding necessities for all is central … , actively endowing individuals with an immutable sense of being-in-common … bring[ing] individuals into each other's lives, homes, and fields[,] ensuring physical and spiritual sustenance' (2007, 141).[8] As a result, young people, while working as *sukarela* or *guru honor*, or being active volunteers, do not need to worry much about their livelihoods, as they can rely on well-established socioeconomic networks of interdependency. They live with their parents, siblings, or aunts and uncles, who house them, feed them, and provide pocket money if necessary. When I asked Mako whether she was considering another job, as her current position was severely underpaid, she replied: 'Why would I do that? What do I need the money for? I already have a house, and my parents pay for my food. And if I need something, I can always get some money from my parents or my older brother'.

Ngada networks of mutual help are maintained through countless interactions, ranging from the mundane (e.g. street-side socialising or the regular exchange of basic foods between neighbours), to ritualised festivities, in which people share food and re-establish mutual obligations and relationships of dependency. We should not romanticise these networks; they come with social pressures, severe gossip, and social exclusion when people fail to conform to the norm. Yet, with regards to the cohort central to this article, I noticed how educated young people are absorbed into these networks, which enables them to bring their *semangat* into practice. Meanwhile, as among the Dani, the young Ngada *want* to be active. Though we can interpret this as a way of (partly) compensating for living with kin while being un(der)employed, we should not forget that these young people have just finished a degree. They are often the first in their family to do so, motivated not so much by clearly-defined, class-related lifestyle ideals, but rather by a vaguely, and often ambiguously, defined ideal of development, of the self *and* the community. These young people aspire to white-collar jobs, but also feel connected to Ngada's 'sense of being-in-common' (Curnow 2007, 141). They want to convert their degree into a job, an income, and an opportunity to bring ideals of development into practice. Thus, *semangat* can be seen as an attempt by these young people to contribute, perhaps in a limited way, to Ngada networks of mutual help.

Conclusion

Clearly, we need to understand educated young people's *semangat* in context. I have shown that the version of rurality existing in Catholic, matrilineal Ngada produces dynamics that are quite

different from the urban contexts usually covered in the literature. This paper is not, however, simply intended to be a comparative example of troubled education-to-work transitions. Its analysis aims to stimulate the critical assessment of conceptual frameworks in contemporary ethnographies of youth, especially those that try to understand troubled education-to-work transitions in the global south. In particular, regardless of existing state discourses and youthful pragmatism, there seems to be an inherent logic to the young people's practices in Ngada. Given that their families have often invested in their education, and must support them while they are un(der)employed, does it not make sense for these young people to have *semangat*? Is it really surprising that they want to 'do good' in their natal communities?

Of course, Ngada's rurality, and the fact that these educated young people live with their families in their natal communities, largely explains the specifics of the current analysis. Nevertheless, the seemingly instinctive nature of *semangat* suggests that many more young people all over the world could be engaging in practices that connote commitment and spiritedness, and being lively and passionate. These practices are, however, rarely featured. Instead, terms connoting self-peripheralisation are the norm, due to which we are encouraged to imagine young people at the margins of society, particularly when upward mobility is out of reach. Here, in the concluding remarks, I reflect on this norm, contesting an image of young people as potential social failures.

Ethnographies of youth are nowadays overwhelmingly concerned with 'the practices through which culture is produced' (Bucholtz 2002, 526; see also Jeffrey 2012). The focus is on how young people creatively navigate their day-to-day affairs within contemporary economic regimes, showing us the often harsh realities of their lives. These realities can be productive, challenging the status quo. Craig Jeffrey (2009), for example, describes how some of the 'timepassing' educated young men in India have become political intermediaries between the state and informal factions, operating outside of formal politics, hustling and manipulating policy. These productive capabilities are, however, often framed in opposition to mainstream society, as if young people's challenging potential is subject to their inability to become successful in terms of dominant narratives of upward mobility and their place at the margins.

A focus on young people at the margins echoes – and reproduces – 'a sense of crisis surrounding the predicaments of juveniles' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005, 20). This sense of crisis is informed by hegemonic ideals linking young people, as human capital, to upward mobility, as the 'bearers of Great Expectations'. But, they also 'stand for trouble' when they cannot materialise these expectations (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005, 20). The research informing the current paper initially intended to study 'trouble', too. Indeed, I found that educated young people in Ngada are subject to a disciplining discourse, which informs their subjectivities with a 'neoliberal ethos' of self-responsibilisation (Naafs and Skelton 2018, 4). We should not naively see having *semangat* as a form of resistance to today's economic constellations, nor is it a nostalgic representation of the village. Instead, we need to recognise that having *semangat* reflects young people's pragmatic aspirations to white-collar lifestyles.

Nevertheless, we also need to acknowledge that my findings present an alternative picture, and that young people can aspire to more than just individual upward mobility. In Ngada, having *semangat* reflects young people's desire to positively contribute to their community's wellbeing, stressing that young people do not necessarily need to be peripheral to mainstream society when jobs are absent. Instead, they can be inherently part of their village, trying to act as responsible and moral subjects, living lives that matter to themselves and their communities.

This may sound odd – 'living lives that matter' – but all over the world there are young people who do not consider their lives meaningful, including those who are bored or just doing timepass. These examples are spectacular reminders of the desperate conditions that young people can live in. But, building on work that studies how 'young people define their own conditions and explore possibilities for meaningful education, jobs, and income through social relations with peers and the adults around them' (Naafs and Skelton 2018, 4; see also Appadurai 2013), I believe that the 'non-spectacular' should also be included in our narratives. That is, we should not see *semangat*

solely as a way to save face or as opportunism, or merely wonder about the sustainability of volunteering arrangements and giving back attitudes in the long term. Instead, we should make sure to acknowledge the subtle ways in which people try to live good lives.

Notes

1. Ronaga is a pseudonym, as are all personal names used. During fieldwork, I talked to dozens of un(der)employed educated young people who had returned to their natal communities upon finishing their tertiary studies. I also talked to their parents, local government officials, and customary and Church elites. Though I lived in Ronaga and conducted most of my research there, I also collected data in neighbouring communities.
2. Post-Reformasi decentralisation policies in Indonesia (from 1998 onward) resulted in growing local administrations, opening up positions to an increasing number of educated young people. In Ngada, however, 2011 marked the end of this growth, creating a novel and rather unexpected reality for fresh graduates.
3. See Schut (2019) for a discussion of why these young people return to their natal communities upon graduating.
4. In Flores, the vast majority of people identify as Catholic. Members of OMK are unmarried 'young people', aged 13–35 years, organised into various age groups.
5. I use House spelled with a capital 'H' to refer to a social construct, whereas house spelled with a small 'h' is used to refer to a physical construction.
6. *Sukarela* is used in daily speech to refer to volunteers, even though it is an adjective; the noun for volunteer is *sukarelawan*.
7. To be sure, many young people rely on their family's agricultural income during their troubled education-to-work transitions. Hence, we might question how unprofitable and anachronistic rural livelihoods really are. Moreover, as Rigg et al. (2018) describe, smallholders still persist in many parts of the world, despite modernist narratives of a 'rural exit', because they remain vital in the provision of livelihoods when states fail to provide social safety nets. Still, young people's educational trajectories are motivated by their parents' desire for their children to move out of agriculture and into stable salaried employment (see also Schut 2019).
8. Related to this quote, I wish to stress that Ngada society is relatively egalitarian, in which – for various reasons (see Curnow 2007) – historical processes of class differentiation are hardly present.

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