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Nusantara Travels: Spices, Celebrations, and Roots of Indonesia in Queens

Western history possesses numerous accounts of the botanical riches indigenous to the Spice Islands (contemporary Indonesia), as well as how they spawned a century of conquest, trade, and even massacre to guarantee access to the "green-gold"². Yet, travel to Indonesia today clearly indicates that it is the islands' cultural practices that distinctively celebrate the natural botanical wealth from both Asia and Australia (with some cultural influences of the Middle East, India and even Europe) which continually imbue Indo-Malay native spices and plants with value. For instance, since the time of colonization, native Indonesian spices such as cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), have been integrated into other world cuisines to both fuel (and even combat therapeutically) the foreigners' sweet tooth e.g. in Indian chai, American pecan pie or eggnog, or even as an oil (of cloves) to cure a toothache. However, to recall the [origins](#) of Indonesia's botanical, linguistic and cultural treasures is to unearth the way spices and unique plants remain embedded in Indo-Malay language, cultural practices and material culture that transcend even the local confines of the island nation. This is revealed as Indo-Malay botanical treasures which are accessed through Indonesian [cuisine](#), [jamu](#) (magic/medicine), a few rare instances of Indonesian [local entrepreneurship](#), as well as the Indonesian version of an Islamic festival celebrating the end of Ramadan called, [Lebaran](#), in Queens.

"Roots" work with Indonesians in Queens

Fieldwork in Queens³ revealed that the "Indonesian community" in Queens is dispersed. Unlike the Filipino community's "Little Manila", off 69th and Roosevelt, and the Thai community's "Little Bangkok", off Broadway and 74th there is no identifiable "Little Jakarta" where one may find Indonesian literary resources, enjoy "Indonesian" cuisine, or purchase Indonesian artisan products such the Balinese gamelon or wayang (shadow) puppets. However, during [Lebaran](#), areas of Woodside, Astoria, Long Island City and Jackson Heights yield glimpses of Indonesian community in a transplanting and renewing transcultural replication process that finds unique modifications and expressions in Queens as a "frontier" land. Yet, given the limited establishment of Indonesians in Queens, research with the community and into their celebration of Lebaran was, admittedly, a bit limited⁴. Nonetheless, the above links to Indonesian cultural origins, cuisine, festivals, botanical applications, resources, and ritual medicine reproduced here and abroad may still provide "partial" portals into the world of Indonesians in Queens⁵.

¹ *Nusantara*, or the "1,000 islands", is an alternative Bahasa Indo-Malay term residents may give to the Indonesia's collection of islands, or archipelago. This original name suggests the arbitrary way 1,000 different islands can all be drawn into a common national "Indonesian" identity, opposed to more the regional affiliations e.g. Timorese, Balinese, Javanese, etc.

² This history lends itself to new questions and ethical concerns related to contemporary "biocolonialism" and even cultural rights and sovereignty over this heritage. See Frommer's "The Cultural Right to Reproduce Traditional Medicinal Knowledge in Zimbabwe", (2002) McGill University, for a discussion of these issues and related cases in Zimbabwe.

³ The methodological approaches and theory behind this research are drawn from:

- the background of anthropologist and cultural rights advocate Chloe Frommer

(see www.culturalrights.com);

- historical background research by environmental scientist Siobhan Smyth (see resources listed)

- contemporary ethnographic and botanical fieldwork undertaken with Indonesians individuals, establishments and institutions in Queens, NY and abroad;

- as well as a brief foray into Queens' Islamic Indonesian practice of Ramadan and celebration of the Indonesian version of Eid El-Fitr, called Lebaran.

⁴ Since the Indonesian community may not yet have found particularly fertile and welcoming grounds in Queens in which to plant their roots and grow strong, there is even stronger support for QBG to help facilitate the transition of cultural roots and practices here - especially with regard to the celebration of Islamic festivals which have drawn some controversy in recent years.

⁵ "Partial" referring to Geertz's (1990) "partial ethnographies" that honestly evaluate anthropology's contributions as being only one side of the entire picture of a society or community that is disparate through gender, age, religion, ethnicity, language and social roles.