

12. LIVING AS A VILLAGER OF EAST JAVA, BALEARJO, 1952

With his recently married wife Darsi, Widjojo lived in a small hut, about the size of a garage, just across the road from our house. A modest start for one who destined for such a brilliant career. We visited them often, and noticing him attempting to do his lessons in the dark I gave him a pressure lantern. I told him we wanted to study a typical village in a crowded country side. Widjojo took over from that--he recommended the village of Balarjo near Malang in East Java as the site of our studies; he assembled a team of about four of his fellow-students, and we set out by car for a six-week stay in Balarjo. Widjojo was born in 1929 into the family of an official in Malang Thus he was about 22 when we started working together in this village close to his birthplace.

Another good student was Permadi, who called himself "orang ketjil", referring to his small stature, who subsequently became Director of the Bank Rakjat (People's Bank) set up to lend money to peasants who needed small sums for investment on their holdings. He was very capable and second only to Widjojo in leadership qualities. The Bank Rakjat did grow rapidly during the period of his Directorship. I remember him for his ready wit--wise-cracking is by no means common among Indonesians. I got to know him very well during the month or two that we lived in Balarjo. And am sorry to have lost touch in the years since, so not knowing if he is still alive.

When we got to Balarjo, after duly asking permission all down the line, starting with the Department of Internal Affairs in Jakarta, we were cordially received by the village headman, lodged in his best bedroom, and sat down to drink tea while he asked what he could tell us. We asked a few questions about his job, and then said that we had come to talk to the village people. He assured us that he could tell us about them much better than they could themselves. We finally got across the idea that we wanted to talk to the peasants themselves, to learn the detail of their way of life. At first he accompanied us in our interviews, but finally realized that our purpose was not sedition or in any way a danger to the State. We just wanted to walk around the village, take notes on what people were doing, and talk to whomever we saw in the fields. Preferably without any official present at those interviews, though that I left unsaid.

The team did a thorough job on the economic life of Balarjo and we went back to Jakarta with a raft of notes on the villagers and their ways of earning a livelihood. I did what teaching I could arrange on demography and social science, and after some uneventful months the year of my leave was over. The family and I went home by air, travelling over the Pacific, so completing the first of several trips around the world.

I had a call to do one thing or another in Indonesia every three or four years. Each time I came the language had departed further from the Indonesian I knew on my first trip, adding words of

Sanskrit, Javanese, Dutch and English origin to meet the needs of the modern industrial state that Indonesia was becoming. Now I would need frequent reference to a dictionary to read the simplest newspaper article. Over the half century ending in 1989 when I last visited -- movies, painting, literature, music -- were rapidly shifting, the traditional forms merging with the current fashions of the West. Business people and tourists were filling the new hotels built to accommodate them. One could accept that, if with regret, if it were only accompanied by the prosperity of America. This departure from traditional forms has been most regretful for Bali, whose people in our time seemed to live for beauty in painting, music, and drama.

My visit of 1964 was the saddest. Sukarno was in his last days. The country was lapsing into poverty and people wanted him out. Wherever he went he had the protection of a tank or two. I remember going round to the back of the hotel to find my driver when I found myself face to face with a tank, the gun barrel pointed right at me. You can believe that I retreated quickly.

Sukarno planned a war with Malaysia to divert attention from the shortage of food and other essentials. He had young men marching up and down on vacant lots with wooden rifles on their shoulders. He had no idea whatever of how to get the economy going. Some kind of revolt was inevitable.

In 1965 General Suharto staged a coup, capturing Sukarno. There followed a carnage of the Chinese, who were widespread through the economy, and some 500,000 were said to have been murdered. To this day no one knows for sure what part Suharto and his new Government had in it. Was it sending out death squads, or trying to protect the Chinese against popular lynching? Probably neither; it seems that the military and police simply stood by until the killing wore itself out.

Such an event takes one back to Freud, whose exploration of the dark corners of the human soul found that the drive to hurt or rob or kill one's neighbor is part of the id, and within the id just about as strong as sex. The disaster of the holocaust of 1965 can be prevented with the education that imposes community and civilization on the raw id.

Under the new government there was indeed order. There was corruption as before, but now it was centralized--Suharto and his family monopolized it. One rumor spoke of his wife, Madame Tien, as Madame Ten Per Cent, that being the family rake-off on all public and private projects.

The country settled down under the new arrangements. My onetime student, Widjojo, of whom I am very proud, has kept himself clean of all temptations to corruption. His probity and intelligence carried him to the highest levels of government. He was made Minister of Economic Affairs and then he went up from that to fill a new post: Supervising Minister of the three or four Departments of Government concerned with production and finance. He was Suharto's chief

adviser. He represented the country in all international negotiations. He used his high position as a moderating influence on the destructive forces--the corruption and the violence--in the country. How far the exalted title enabled him to keep these forces down I do not know. What I do know is that he protected and gave a job to the liberal Soedjatmoko (see below) when the latter had incurred the displeasure of the Government. But most important of all, with Widjojo at the helm, constructive policies were adopted to get the economy into motion, and annual increases were impressive.

On these subsequent assignments we were first accommodated at the home of the Papadimitriou's (Caecil and Alex), a large estate about 10 miles from Jakarta, and then were invited by the Widjojo's to their house in Pondok Indah, where we were given the second floor to ourselves, along with a Javanese cook who knew the whole wide gamut of local cooking. I can't imagine better accommodation, except for the traffic on the road between Pondok Indah and Jakarta. What should have been a 15 minute drive twice a day took well over an hour.

All in all I spent the equivalent of about four years in Indonesia. Those years were the richest experience of my 90 years.

Meanwhile despite all Widjojo's efforts, the economy has sunk to a low point. A CIA overview based on data for the last years of the 20th century says:

Indonesia, a vast polyglot nation, faces severe economic problems, stemming from secessionist movements and the low level of security in the regions, the lack of reliable legal recourse in contract disputes, corruption, weaknesses in the banking system, and strained relations with the IMF. Investor confidence will remain low and few new jobs will be created under these circumstances. Growth of 4.8% in 2000 is not sustainable, being attributable to favorable short-term factors, including high world oil prices, a surge in non-oil exports, and increased domestic demand for consumer durables.

I have to confess my ignorance of not only the present condition of Indonesia but of what went on before in the higher reaches of Government. What I do know is that there are indeed problems, but the prospect for the future is brighter than it is for the United States at the moment. Here we have corruption--crony capitalism--at the highest reaches of government, the Constitution has been trampled on, the dollar has lost almost a third of its value since 2000.

While once it was thought the United States was a model to follow, that is, at least for the moment, not true. As things are now going, the whole apparatus of social security is being dismantled. The Trust Funds, meant to be saved and augmented for the flood of old people who will claim benefits starting 2010, are being spent on arms and on tax remissions to the rich. Indonesia shows no sign of such a socially divisive policy, thank goodness.

