

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BRC - 1

My Friend Omah

Asrama Mahasiswa  
17 Pegangsaan Timur  
Djakarta, Indonesia

September 29, 1952

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Perhaps you will remember hearing about Mohammad Omah, the Indonesian sailor and man-about-the-world I knew in San Francisco. Friday I met Omah again and have spent a good part of the last three days talking to him about his new life in Indonesia after ten years away. Reacquaintance has been enjoyable and taken me into several compartments of Indonesian society I hadn't seen before.

Omah spends part of his time in Djakarta with Min, his shy and lovely Sundanese bride, and part with his mother in Pasar Kemis, a village thirty miles to the west. After we met Friday morning, we rode double on his gadget-laden bike to his Djakarta home in Djatibaru. Over half of Djakarta's area is covered by these closely packed native settlements (kampongs); like the rest, Djatibaru is hidden away behind the facade of western-style homes and shops which sprawl along Djakarta's broad boulevards. We dismounted at Djatibaru's boundary and pushed our way through the neat, narrow lanes which grid the kampong. At the last whitewashed bamboo cottage in Alley 7, we were greeted with smiles and enthusiasm by his relatives and neighbors. In a few minutes, his aunt had served tea to the men on the porch, and the ladies retired to their work.

After his deportation from the United States, Omah came immediately to his cousin's house in Djatibaru, where he accepted the obligatory family hospitality for several weeks before going on to his mother's home in Pasar Kemis. That was four months ago, but it was obvious that he still occupied a special place in the group gathered on the porch.

He was the only Indonesian in the group in western clothing; the others were wearing typical Indonesian dress: sarongs, shirts, sandals, and topis. He was further distinguished by his American watch, diamond ring and Ronson lighter. While Omah reminisced in English, the others spoke politely to me about prices, Dutch cupidity, and the weather in Indonesian. The language conglomeration was hopelessly mixed when Miss Saleh, a seven times married local belle, joined the group and started me in on Sundanese lessons. We switched from tea to rich, sweet coffee, and talked on through mid-day, the group of children watching from the lane increased, and Miss Saleh tried valiently to perfect my pronunciation of several key Sundanese words in the field of romance. It was soon time to eat.

Dinner was served in the neighbor's house, perhaps because it had a nicer bedroom for formal eating. While Omah and I filled up on new rice, hot peppered meats, several mixed dishes of tropical vegetables and peppers, an assortment of fruit, and finally coffee and watermelon seeds, his wife and mother-in-law worked in the kitchen. About an hour later, we put our spoons and forks aside (table manners are still Dutch) ignored a finger bowl, and lit clove-spiced Javanese cigarettes, called Kretek because of the crackling noise as they burn.

As the afternoon wore on, Omah talked seriously about his problems of readjustment. In his opinion, life was seventy-five per cent better than under the Dutch, but he could not tolerate Djatibaru's unsanitary habits after life in San Francisco and New York. He was still embarrassed to use the kampong's public toilet--its winding canal--and feels obligated to reprimand his friends about spitting on the pavement or floor. Most oppressive of all has been the lack of privacy. In Djatibaru he is never alone. Eating, sleeping, playing or working, he is in constant contact with other members of the community. He wonders now if he can regain the communal attitude which formerly made life pleasant in this physically compressed society.

Shortly after his arrival, Omah gave a well-received public speech on his adventures at sea and in America. He told me his main point was the necessity of hard work. But Omah's money is running out now and he has to think of working himself. His ideal is to own a taxi, which a driver will operate, and accumulate money to buy rice land, which he will rent or have relatives cultivate. In the meantime, his wife and mother-in-law earn a little making dresses with an old Singer, the family's principal piece of capital equipment.

The heat in the house gave way to a light breeze, which entered and rustled the yellowed mosquito netting over the double bed, flapped the paper pictures of President Sukarno and a famous mosque on the wall, then finally got lost in the dark, windowless rear of the cottage. We walked out on Alley 7 and through the kampong. Djatibaru is a low rectangle of almost solid bamboo, hardwood, and tile; sunlight only hits the ground in the narrow alleys. Its curving backbone is a narrow canal which receives its sewage and washes most of its laundry. There is one unpretentious wooden mosque, scarcely larger than the average cottage. On the broadest alley, a score of tiny stalls sell orange soda, cigarettes, sweets and general merchandise. Fruit vendors display their bananas, mangoes, durians, and papayas; others sell hot, peppered dishes or sweets, wrapped neatly in green banana leaves and fastened with a toothpick. At the end of the kampong, we passed the tiny brothel, quiet in the mid-day lull. We stopped at Djatibaru's southern border, where the low hum of kampong life gives way to the racket and riot of Tanah Abang, one of Djakarta's dozen major market places. It was almost time for my afternoon lecture, so I thanked Omah and rode off in a betcha (bicycle rickshaw).

The next afternoon I was back in Alley 7, watching Omah enjoy his role as local expert on foreign lands and the problems of democracy, on the porch of Tuan Minin, the moderately prosperous owner of the building materials shop around the corner. While Omah proved his flair for metaphor and generalization, a mixed group of neighbors listened attentively. Tuan Minin soon excused himself for sunset prayers at the nearby mosque, and Omah spoke extemporaneously to the younger people about Youth and Freedom in Indonesia. After covering the American Revolution, Washington, Lincoln, and Dutch tyranny, he ended with the thought that, "we adults are not yet free, but, Allah willing, the little children playing in front of the house would someday be emancipated with education and skill." Tuan Minin returned in a half hour and a question period started.

While we ate a confection of crushed coconut and cinnamon syrup from banana leaves, a young man of twenty in a checked sarong took the stage away from Omah and spoke about his labor union's progress since breaking away from SOBSI, the communist-led federation. He asked me to reserve my opinions about Indonesia until today's children are a little older, agreeing with Omah that many of today's problems might be solved in the future by the millions of children now in school. For one thing, they will speak a truly national language. To illustrate, he asked me to listen to the

children who were shouting and jabbering outside in clear Indonesian. For almost everyone else on the porch, Indonesian was a second or third language, still spoken with some effort.

His optimism for the future, however, was more than balanced by disgust with prevailing moral standards in Djakarta. He defined this immorality and dishonesty as largely a disease of the upper classes, the officialdom, and the army veterans. In his opinion, I could trust the simple people of Djatibaru, but had better be on guard against the disrespectful, fun-loving students at the university. Omah seconded his conservative analysis, condemning the low standards of those classes whose social and economic life has been revolutionized with the years of independence, and applauding the people of the kampongs, who live much as they did before.

It was already dark outside. Down the lane, a badminton match was starting under the arc-lights between the local champ and the challenger from the next kampong. Time to relax, talk, and joke with neighbors. Next door, a student was reading a newspaper aloud to five young friends. A block away, according to Omah's information, a gang of young pickpockets was starting the night operation. It was time to leave Djatibaru and enter a different world at the students' dormitory. Promising to return soon I put one hand on my wallet and started down Alley 7.

The next morning early, Omah and I rode out to Pasar Kemis to meet his mother. On the way Omah apologized vigorously for Pasar Kemis, especially for the food I would receive. It seems that his cousin was married there a week before. Omah had invited 800 guests and fed them with 200 pounds of rice, seven goats, and quantities of vegetables and peppers. The food supply was low now, but the wedding had been memorable. We talked for twenty miles, then turned off the paved road and bumped along through the lush flat countryside. We passed sections of thick jungle, rubber groves, fields of vegetables, and expanses of rice land being cultivated for next month's rains. People were everywhere, walking, working, or resting; but few villages could be seen. "Well, here we are," Omah said. There was not a house in sight. We headed down a lane strewn with volcanic boulders, into a bamboo grove, through a dense growth of bananas and mangoes and finally into the market square, surrounded by a single row of less than 100 old houses. We entered the largest and met his mother, a bent gray-haired lady in a faded sarong.

Half of the packed dirt floor space was porch, the other half was divided into several rooms for eating, cooking, and sleeping. The dark porch was soon crowded with neighbors, who smiled, shook our hands in the limp Sundanese manner, and settled down on the low bamboo couches against the walls. After apologies for their "village in the jungle," the women disappeared and several of the men began asking questions about crops, seasons, houses, and animals in America. The others--shy or not fluent in Indonesian--sat by quietly.

The entrance of the local constable, a military police corporal, interrupted the conversation. He accepted the best chair next to me and began to talk about Pasar Kemis. He pegged the population at 3000 (an unbelievable number for these few houses), described landownership as completely private with brokerage in the hands of non-resident Chinese, and defined the town itself as essentially a market. The name Pasar Kemis means Thursday Market, but market is now held on Monday as well in the tile-roofed market place which dominates the village. The village children are educated in either the People's School or the Islamic Arab School. While we talked, the usual row of youngsters stared in from the street. In later conversation, I found they spoke the same clear, precise Indonesian used by the children in Djatibaru. Inside, most of their parents were speaking with Sundanese accent or a generous admixture of Sundanese words.

Before dinner we wandered out into the field behind Omah's house. A cousin shinnied up a tree and brought down green coconuts to quench our thirst. While we drank, he walked over to a banana tree and hacked it down with three blows of his machete. With the naivete of the temperate zones, I commented on his all-or-nothing approach to banana picking, only to learn that a banana tree grows in as little as three months and usually bears but once. Back in the house, the children were chasing dinner--a tough, shifty little chicken--from room to room. In a confusion of quacking ducks, racing cats, and laughing people it was finally caught in the kitchen. In no time it was frying over an open wood fire in the corner. Over the next fire several pounds of new rice were boiling in a semi-spherical brass cauldron. Next to the big double bed in the opposite corner, an uncle was paring down ripe coconuts with his machete, stopping from time to time to rock the baby hanging in a sarong cradle from the ceiling. On the baby's legs the first ulcers of yaws could be seen. Omah's mother moved lightly from room to room inspecting household activities.

We walked again through the village and surrounding fields after dinner. Beyond the thirty-foot well, we found Omah's two remaining oxen (he sold one to pay for the big wedding) who were suitably named Merdeka (Independence) and Sekolah (School). Back on the square, we bought three cents worth of candy at one of the several permanent merchandise stalls, but found the clustered youngsters too shy to accept sweets. In a field on the other side of the village, a dozen women were harvesting a crop of rice. As we watched, a bent old man in a brown velvet topi stopped on the path and said, with a sweep of his hand toward the horizon, "It's a vast country." He mentioned that he had lived briefly in New York in 1938 and went on his way. The afternoon thunderstorm was already coming up from the south, so we cut the stroll short and said hurried goodbyes to the village. From appearances, we might have been returning from a day in almost any nation's countryside, as we left Pasar Kemis with bundles of fruit, vegetables, and a noisy chicken.

Back in town, Omah explained the solemn face he had been showing all day, claiming that he feels even more a stranger in Pasar Kemis than in Djatibaru. He admitted feeling homesick for San Francisco and talked fondly for a few minutes of union-scale, cleanliness, and education. He joked about bringing his American wife over to live with him and Min (Min already accepts it as inevitable), then proposed more seriously to return to San Francisco until things have progressed a little more in Indonesia. I promised to see him at least once a week to talk about America and left him at the entrance to Djatibaru.

Three days with an atypical Indonesian in a typical Indonesian setting are no basis for conclusions on Indonesian society. Except perhaps that, around Djakarta, it is a friendly frank society which welcomes strangers with even more warmth than its religion and communal tradition require.

Yours sincerely,



Boyd R. Compton

Received New York 12/2/54.