

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Djalan Sultan Hasanuddin 29
Medan, North Sumatra
Indonesia
June 20, 1953

Mr. W. S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York City, 36

Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Aiyo! Why don't we go all the way to Kroe? I was over there yesterday playing soccer and Oh the girls! Waduh! What girls!" Arifin was in the back of the jeep smiling at the thought of the girls of Kroe. The jeep jolted and bucked along the dirt road over the Bukit Barisan Range, while the young rubber merchant in the back seat maintained a steady smile, letting us know now and then that stopping in the middle of the South Sumatra mountains just to sightsee made no sense at all.

Sapii, Arifin's cousin from Djakarta, was sitting next to me in the front seat. Despite their similar backgrounds, the two cousins were opposites in their reactions and expectations. Arifin had found a comfortable harmony in his work and family, while quiet young Sapii had been rebelling since his early youth.

Sapii was ignoring his cousin's well articulated interest in the emancipated young ladies on the other side of the mountains. Above the rattling of the jeep and whine of second gear, he shouted some information about his uncle.

We had left the old man just a half hour before, standing in front of his little metal goods shop on the only real street in the frontier settlement of Muara Dua. Late the night before, we had arrived from the south and surprised Uncle Mohammad Abdul bin Zain as he sat in his purple checked sarong, chatting with old cronies under a single coleman lantern in the front of his shop. We introduced ourselves around the circle, and the old-timers mumbled their names almost inaudibly in the Indonesian manner.

"Well, sit down. What will you drink? Help yourselves to the cigarettes." Uncle Mohammad spoke the clear, sharp Indonesian of Sumatra. As in any Indonesian home, we were obliged to accept the hospitality offered. "No thanks" is always an offense.

We had sat there for an hour under the hissing lantern talking with Sapii's old uncle, trading answers about New York, joint stock companies and movie sets for his guarded comments on rubber prices and the wilderness settlement of Muara Dua. Tired after the long ride up from Lampong, we had gone to sleep in Uncle Mohammad's large double bed. Just before going to sleep, I was wondering how a man with such an Arabic name could look so Chinese.

Like so many Indonesians of the Komering River area, Mohammad Abdul bin Zain looked Chinese. There was evidence in his face and

eyes of the marriage of Chinese and Indonesian blood—perhaps several, perhaps many generations ago. The old man had fathered twenty-five children and supported two wives in his seventy years. Now, in his little wooden frame store, he sold knives, pots, wire, and metal cups to catch rubber latex. In recent years, he had traded in rubber and rice on the side, and the proof of his new prosperity was an almost completed rice mill up the hill from Muara Dua. He had been wealthy enough to send his surviving sons (fourteen children had died) to Palembang to school, but not so wealthy that they could go for more than a few years. The youngest children were working for him in the shop; their elder brothers, except for Arifin, had left Muara Dua to find their fortunes as merchants and sailors.

Sapii went on talking about his uncle with an undertone of animosity, as if he considered the old man selfish and stubborn. The road through the narrowing canyon now became even bumpier, and we stopped talking for awhile. From the tops of the towering cliffs, the dust and uninhibited commotion of the jeep must have seemed a silent speck winding carefully toward the pass. Finally at the first summit, we stopped and looked out into the heart of the Bukit Barisan, out over a vast basin of tropical hardwoods snared in an unending tangle of vines and ferns. Scattered fires sent up white smoke from the long green flanks of the volcanic cone far to the south—backwoods farmers clearing space for this year's crop of yams or cassava. Off toward the ocean another ridge hid our objective, Lake Ranau. The dark forest beneath us suddenly came alive with the whirr and screech of birds, insects, and monkeys.

Descending, the road was better and the jeep made less noise. Sapii talked intermittently, and I began to piece together a picture of how this young Indonesian felt about himself and why he had run away from home.

While his cousin Arifin had compromised or glossed over the contradictions between his home and his own ambitions, Sapii had revolted as soon as he was able. Arifin—for all his ideas about the fascinating girls of Kroe and all his love of wandering—was living with his father and playing a straight role as loyal son and provider. He was already twenty-four, but he would not marry until younger brothers had taken his place in the house. He could travel to Palembang to sell rubber and galavant in a way which probably distressed his father; this was evidently sufficient freedom for the happy young rubber merchant of Muara Dua. Sapii could make no such compromise. "See, I'm not like that. I always want to get moving."

Sapii first ran away from home in 1947. He took a job as steward on a Dutch ship, jumped ship in San Francisco, and lived in America until he was deported in spring, 1952. I asked him why he had run in the first place. His answer ran about like this:

"You don't know how it was. See, I want to be a farmer. Yeh, don't laugh, a farmer. My dad, he wanted me to work in his typewriter store in Djakarta. I had a little room upstairs. I used to study some at night, but usually I'd just roam around and waste time. I wasn't getting anywhere. No money for night school. My dad didn't think that was important enough. Anyhow, I just wanted to go to agricultural school, and he wouldn't let me. He's just like my uncle. You can't argue with

him. He didn't understand that I really wanted this, see? So one day, I just caught a ship."

For five years, Sapii had worked around San Francisco and the bay region, going to school at nights and visiting a girl friend in Vallejo now and then. When the crops were ripe down in the Salinas Valley, he would spend a week or two working close to the soil. He didn't make as much money as he did in town, but he was happier. In 1952, he had started his freshman year at a small junior college near San Jose, but immigration officers came one day and took him to detention headquarters in San Francisco. Two months later he was back in his father's store on Djalan Hajam Wuruk in Djakarta. A month later, he had run away again to live with sympathetic relatives in one of Djakarta's native quarters. When I met him there, he was spending his days studying a little and brooding a lot. He had jumped at the chance of a jeep ride through Sumatra.

"Say, I may go to America again. You know, I don't like it so much there. Some people think I want to go back because life is so good there. No, that's not the reason. I don't like to drink and play around, and most of the fellows there waste a lot of time on drinking and women. I only go to America because of...of the opportunity. See, when I'm in America, I can work and make enough money to go to school. I don't live so good, but I can be anything I want to be. Here, I have to work in a little store."

A blue 1950 Chevy truck bounced past us. "Yung Wang's Grape Medicine" was painted in white letters on the side panels; underneath was a slick picture of a healthy, overdeveloped young lady drinking Yung Wang's medicine, just one of the many varieties of alcoholic patent medicines which are widely used to attack most known diseases in Moslem, non-drinking Indonesia. "Hey, there goes another one!", Arifin shouted from the back seat.

"Like I said," Sapii went on, "I want to be a farmer, a scientific farmer. If I learn about irrigation, fertilizer, and all that, I can make my own plantation. See, Indonesia is a country of farmers. I think if I could go to agricultural school in Bogor and learn about scientific farming, I would be happy to have my own plantation. If I don't go to America, I have a plan. I'm going to Sulawesi to plant coconuts. If everything is OK, I'll make enough money from coconuts in five years to go to school. I'll just leave some relatives in charge and go to Bogor. I like to work."

"I'm sure about one thing. I don't want to go back to my dad's shop and the room upstairs. It's like a prison. Our family is pretty big, and there's not enough money. My dad, he just wants me to work for him. He gets mad if I tell him I want to be independent."

Sapii sat there brooding, an intelligent, conservative, cornered young Indonesian, with a goal but no clear road to follow.

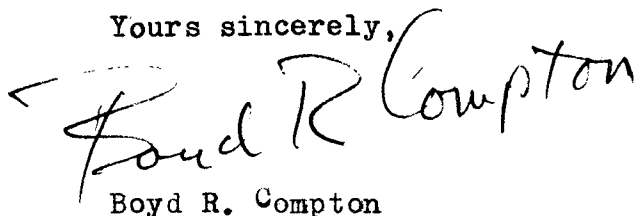
We had arrived at Lake Ranau. Across five miles of teal blue water, the famous tobacco fields reached up toward the jungle matted slopes of dead volcanoes. We were high in the center of the Bukit Barisan.

Down to the left, the road continued on toward the little seaport of Kroe, fifty tortuous miles away. Another Chinese medicine truck went by and sped down the road. I asked Arifin if everybody was sick in Kroe. "Nothing like it. It's the girls. Now in Muara Dua, I admit it's not so bad. Two, maybe three girls to every boy. But do you know how many there are in Kroe? EIGHT! Eight to one! How do you like that? They're modern, wear western clothes, and know how to speak Dutch. There's a nice beach there. All the salesmen in South Sumatra like to go to Kroe, even if they don't sell anything. Say, what do you say? Let's drop down to Kroe?"

Sapii told his cousin to relax. "We're going to look around the Lake and then head back pretty soon. Got to leave Muara Dua about two and head north."

Relaxing comes easy to Arifin. Nothing more was said about Kroe. We headed down toward a little village on the lakeshore, Arifin joking and Sapii frowning.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Boyd R. Compton". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Boyd R. Compton

Received New York 7/7/53.