

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Segan is an Indonesian word worth considering, for it hints at some things particularly Indonesian. In different usages, it seems to mean "averse to" or "reticent." Actually, though, it is nearly untranslatable, for it speaks of a social viewpoint which is seen widely here and rarely in America.

Last week, I asked a young Javanese to come over in the afternoon to help me with a translation. After two hours steady work, we finished the job, a sort of triumph in the close afternoon heat of the East Java coast. Mountains of blue cumulus clouds were beginning to build up over the volcano Ardjuna close behind the port city, and we sat back to gossip.

The conversation hovered for a minute on fist fights here and in Sacramento (where my friend had lived for several years), then went on to the skyrocketing prices of cloth, tires, and flour. Finally, I asked him about the word segan.

I had first learned to use segan two years ago, while I was auditing courses at the University of Indonesia in Djakarta. My language teacher had wanted me to pay him for the past week's lessons, but he wouldn't come out with a direct request for the money. I finally sensed his embarrassment, put the money in an envelope, and slipped it to him as unobtrusively as possible. He said he was segan to receive payment, because he wanted to give me lessons out of friendship. I thought I understood him clearly enough.

After that, I used the word segan to indicate a feeling of reticence when I did not want to disturb the proper balance of a social situation: "I feel segan if you call me 'tuan' (sir), just call me 'saudara' (brother)"; "I am segan to remind you of such an unimportant thing, but that book you borrowed five months ago..."; "I feel segan to enjoy your hospitality so often when I can't repay you." Like most Americans, I found little use for the word, but tried to use it now and then.

It was quite a lesson in language and politics last week to find that I had only penetrated the outer surface of this interesting word.

I was reading an article by a Masjumi Party member about Mohammad Natsir. Natsir is the scholarly, determined chairman of the Masjumi, and the article was meant to praise him. Yet a sentence read, "The people of Indonesia look on Brother Natsir with feelings of love and segan."

So I asked my friend Arif what in the world the sentence meant. How could people love Natsir and still have a feeling of "aversion" for him.

Arif answered my question at length, quietly emphatic, gesturing with that easy physical grace which is so Indonesian.

He first remarked that no greater compliment could be paid a leader. "For example, if I went to see our President Sukarno, I would approach him with a feeling of segan, for he is very great and I'm just nobody."

I asked, "Do you mean that you would feel so uncomfortable that you would rather not go?"

"Oh, no. I would certainly go, but with a feeling of segan."

"How would you speak to Sukarno?"

Arif answered, "Why with great respect, of course, and in high Indonesian. Certainly not just in ordinary language, like we are using. He is very high."

I asked him if the feeling of segan toward leaders was strong during the revolution, when high and low Indonesians were fighting shoulder-to-shoulder against the Dutch.

He thought for awhile. "It's like this. When we were actually fighting, there was no feeling of segan. But generally we had the feeling of great respect for our leaders, for after all they were our leaders."

Arif's comment on "respect for leaders" reminded me of an experience in 1953. I think this case illustrates the feeling of segan which soldiers have had for their leaders--or "papas"--in recent Indonesian history.

In November 1953, I travelled with a former guerilla leader to Banten, the arid, impoverished western tip of Java. I was on my way to look at irrigation works, and he was on a mission to contact the former members of his hizbullah (Muslim guerilla band), which had fought the Dutch in the Tangerang region in 1947 and 1948. He invited me along, and I accepted gladly, for I had just begun to learn something of the part played by village hizbullah during the revolution.

In attending three large meetings the next day, I caught

glimpses of the revolution as it must have been--faded, of course, by my foreignness and the haze of six years peace. The clearest picture of all was of the paternal relationship between my friend and his troops. He began one of his speeches, "My children,....." Some of the 'children' squatting respectfully on the dirt floor of the meeting house were easily seventy years old. When he had finished admonishing them, the questions and complaints began, "Papa, please answer this..." "Papa, we are troubled..."

Later, I left the hall with my friend--'papa' was a young man of thirty years--and we went to the village office. The orange crush was just being poured, when three youngsters from the audience came reticently into the room, obviously dissatisfied about something. They spoke to their chief.

I'll paraphrase the content of the conversation. It was interesting in itself and pertinent to the feeling of segan I want to illustrate.

"Papa, we know that you understand better than we. But we can't stand this government any longer." (The Ali cabinet had just come into office.)

He answered their excitement calmly. "You're very young. We who have had more experience know how you feel. The government may be no good, but we fought to establish a legal state, a democracy. We must respect our victory, mustn't we?"

"Well, yes, of course." Their argument was visibly evaporating. One of them sparked it again, "But that man Sukarno is Anti-Islam. Can we Muslims accept this?"

The leader spoke again, "If you don't like Sukarno, wait for the elections. Vote against him. Vote for anyone you like. But be patient. Don't let your spirits overflow. Use your intelligence."

The youngster answered, "But if the government oppresses us, we must fight."

"If you want to fight, go join the Darul Islam. We (Masjumi) will have nothing to do with you. You are like my children. Would I give you wrong advice? If you wait for the election, we can build a Muslim state legally. Do you really want to go into the jungle?" ("To go into the jungle" is the popular euphemism for "joining the rebels.")

"No, papa. We will try to be patient. But it is difficult to bear insults without fighting."

As impressive as the fighting spirit of the Muslim villagers, was the apparent ease with which my friend brought their rising anger under control. They seemed to accept his paternal authority naturally, and their arguments melted less before the weight of his

rebuttals than the strength of his position as papa.

Looking back, I think that day's experience illustrated quite dramatically the feeling of segan which a powerful leader produces in his followers. My definition of segan was growing. The small word seemed to be bringing me nearer an understanding of a widespread Indonesian attitude toward authority and rank.

To test my enlarged view of segan, I asked a local Muslim politician a question, pointblank and without preparatory explanation: "Say, is it true that the feeling of segan toward leaders has begun to disappear since the Proclamation of Independence?" He answered without hesitation, "Certainly it has. There are still remnants of the feudal attitude, but they too are disappearing."

My study of segan came to a temporary halt last night after a long discussion with a high Indonesian Nationalist Party official. This particular official is well-known for his hard work and lack of snobbery. After two hours of friendly conversation about cooperatives and rural credit--his special field--I asked him to define segan.

"It means 'timid'. For example, if we had just met, I would be segan to point out what I think are your faults."

I asked him if a common person would feel segan before President Sukarno.

The official answered in the offhand, familiar manner which is so difficult to reconcile with the feudal tone of so much current Indonesian political thought. He explained that only a great leader gives rise to a feeling of segan. "Bung Karno's greatness is his gezag, as the foreigners say, or his pribadi (personal character), to use the Indonesian word. Because his character is so great, common people feel segan before him. They have to recognize his greatness, and thus cannot speak as they would to an ordinary person."

He elaborated, "Have you heard of the noisy discussion following Bung Karno's second marriage? It is generally known that the women's organizations are against the second marriage. Well, a delegation from a women's organization went directly to Bung Karno to express their feelings. And the result? When they saw him, they couldn't speak. They were segan. His personality is so great that they could not criticize him to his face."

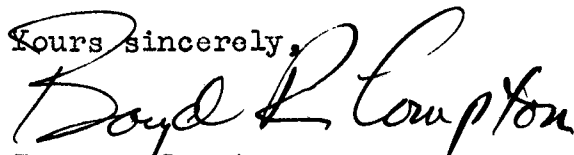
I asked him if any other Indonesian leader was great enough to engender a feeling of segan, for example Hadji Agus Salim or Sultan Hamengkubuwono. His answer was a startling indication of the load of political meaning the word segan contains.

"Hadji Agus Salim, no. He was not up to the level of greatness. The Sultan, perhaps for the people of his own Djogjakarta, but not for all of Indonesia. He is respected, but not considered

great. It seems that in modern Indonesian history only one man has had that greatness: Sukarno. It is as if a hand had reached down from heaven and touched Sukarno. Perhaps when Sukarno is no longer with us, another person will be singled out from above."

On my way home that night, I tried to piece together what I had learned about segan. The literal translation lies somewhere between "averse to" and "awed by". The word takes us directly into the world of personal relations between the high and low in Indonesian society, or between the leader and the subordinate in politics--a world in which proper attitudes and forms of address are carefully stipulated and deeply accepted. To forget one's proper place gives rise to a feeling of discomfort, confusion, and uncertainty, which can be described as segan.

The revolution may have destroyed part of the social foundation for the word segan, but the memory of a static, rigidly-compartmented caste society is strong. It is still an extremely useful word.

Yours sincerely,

Boyd R. Compton

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