

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Mlirip-rowo  
East Java  
Indonesia  
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Mr. W. S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

At least 60 million Indonesians live in villages which share some of the dimensions, problems, customs and entertainments of the village which we now call home, Mlirip-rowo.

Mlirip-rowo means "Mlirip-on-the-swamp", and a very pertinent fact about the lives of Mlirip's 1,345 inhabitants is falsified by this name. Mlirip was at one time swamp land but it is no longer.

The village lies at the tip of the Sidoardjo delta, not far from Surabaya, East Java. At Mlirip, the Brantas River, mother of the rich history of this valley, divides. Its two arms run sluggishly to the sea 30 miles away, cutting off a triangle of fertile land now



"Main Street", Mlirip



The Brantas at Mlirip

planted in rice and sugar cane. The heart of our village is an intricate and marvelous system of locks, weirs, dams and control gates which have harnessed the waters of the Brantas and apportioned them carefully to the village lands of the delta.

From the ninth century to the present day, great events of Javanese history have followed the course of the Brantas and strong governments have risen where its waters have been successfully controlled.

The first great East Javanese kingdom arose in the neighborhood of Malang at the headwaters of the Brantas. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the Hindu kingdom of Kediri grew powerful along the middle reaches of the river. The last and greatest kingdom of East Java was Majapahit, whose capital city fell in ruins over 500 years ago a few miles to the west of our home in Mlirip.

History moved even further down the Brantas with the coming of the Dutch. A water-worn stone at our front gate--probably from the foundation of the first major Dutch irrigation project here--bears the date 1846. For ninety-six years Dutch irrigation projects centering at Mlirip gave water and wealth to the sugar companies to the east of here and brought relative prosperity to the farmers of the delta.

The Japanese occupation government made Mlirip a military strong point, and during the Indonesian revolution, Mlirip was hotly contested by Dutch and nationalist troops. After the Dutch surrender of sovereignty on December 27, 1949, the people of Mlirip found themselves under the rule of Indonesian officials, and native irrigation technicians took on the task of controlling and using the brown Brantas.

Life in Mlirip has been changed by the successive waves of recent history. Old customs have worn away and new attitudes have flowed in to upset the measured pattern of traditional life. This process has been greatly accelerated in the tumultuous fifteen years just past. Tradition, however, remains the strong foundation of daily existence, despite the advent of national independence, political party life, democratic elections, and mass education.

In this letter I would like to acquaint you with several aspects of village political and economic life which illustrate the tug-of-war between tradition and transformation.

### Village Government

One of the staunchest exponents of change and 'modernism' in Mlirip is the young village headman, Sukardji. Sukardji had just been elected to his post the day my wife and I arrived. The next day Sukardji and a friend dropped in at coffee time to pronounce an official welcome.



The Mlirip mosque

Sukardji came into the living room in his shirt sleeves, radiating the appealing friendliness that usually pervades the Indonesian attitude toward Americans. We exchanged compliments about our respective countries and soon found ourselves making plans for the house-warming party (selamatan) which we are expected to hold for our neighbors.

As host, I was properly ignoring the cup of coffee set before me, and my guests were apparently oblivious to their cups. After five minutes had passed, I felt that enough time had elapsed; I could now take a sip without giving my guests a feeling that they were being rushed or being put in the position of men who put coffee before friendship. As soon as the cup touched my lips, they started on theirs, taking only a sip and leaving the rest for that final quick gulp which would later announce their departure.

My guests were enthusiastic about the selamatan and recommended that I hire the finest Ludruk (East Javanese folk opera) company in Surabaya for the occasion. I said that I would try to, if the lurah--as an Indonesian village headman is called--would assist me in making out the list of guests and composing a welcoming speech.

The final guest list was a cross section of the people who count in Mlirip:

1. Village government:

Lurah  
Petinggi (Assistant to Lurah)  
Tjarik (Secretary)  
Modin (mosque caretaker)  
 Irrigation chief  
 Assistant Irrigation chief  
Kebajan and Kapetengan (village police, 9 men)  
 Chairman of village cooperative.  
 School teachers.



Village market

## 2. Official guests:

The officer of our sub-district, Tarik.  
The Lurah and Petinggi of Lengkong, the village across  
the river.

## 3. Irrigation Work Shop:

Shop Manager  
70 workers

## 4. Irrigation sub-division:

Division chief (the locally-famous Papa Munti)  
50 workers

## 5. Organizational chairmen:

Indonesian Nationalist Party (the lurah's party)  
Permai (a small party based on mystical Javanese, with  
a strong Hindu-Buddhist flavor)  
Nahdlatul Ulama (the very orthodox Muslim party)  
Indonesian Communist Party

The guest list finished, we fell to talking about the  
government of Mlirip.

Lurah Sukardji had been  
duly elected in a free public elec-  
tion. Voters of the village had  
come to the polling place and dropped  
wooden tabs in the box of the candi-  
date of their choice. Sukardji of  
the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI)  
won by a comfortable margin, which  
would seem to indicate strength for  
the PNI in Mlirip. It does, but  
only indirectly. The lurah's father  
had been lurah before him for over  
twenty years. His uncle is the  
village secretary. Another uncle is  
lurah of the neighboring village to  
the north. Sukardji comes from what  
could be called a powerful and respected  
family.

It is arguable that the  
important question about the Mlirip  
village election is not "Which party  
did the people choose?", but "Which  
party did the most respected candidate  
choose?" There is every reason to  
believe that Sukardji was elected



All irrigated land in Mlirip  
is communally controlled.

lurah on the basis of his name and family reputation, and that he would have won whether he ran as candidate of the PNI, the Masjumi or the Indonesian Communist Party. The great advantage of the PNI in Mlirip is that young Sukardji is attracted by its aura of young nationalism.

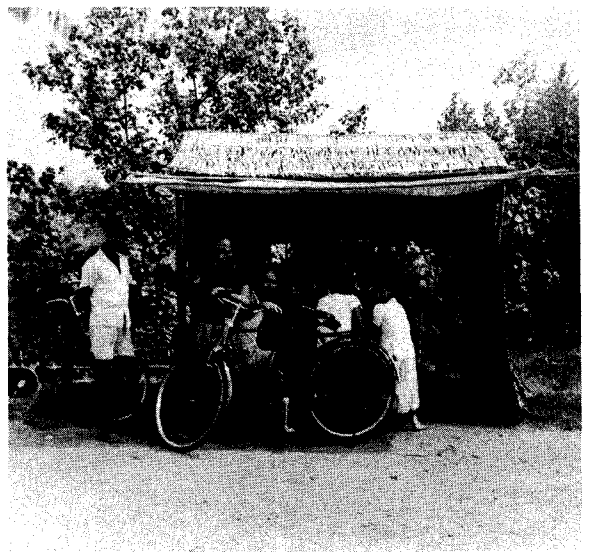
Like other Indonesian villages, Mlirip enjoys wide autonomy from the highly centralized Indonesian bureaucracy. The village government is selected locally, most of its normal budgetary needs are locally provided, and its officials are supported by the village as a whole.

As lurah, Sukardji is allotted ten acres of choice village land, the Petinggi and the Secretary have four acres each, and the remaining thirteen village officials are allowed to work one and a half acres apiece. Official land is all of first quality and produces two crops of rice a year, with an average yearly yield of nearly 3000 Rupiah worth of rice an acre.

Labor for village projects--canals, road upkeep, school or mosque construction, erecting granaries--is either contributed by the village citizens as a type of labor tax or carried out by workmen paid from the proceeds of the communal granary. The farm laborers who till the village "social security land" are paid in kind from the harvest, and the village irrigation foreman is paid a salary consisting of from five to fifteen pounds of rice from each household.



Most houses in Mlirip are small and neat, with tile roofs and cement floors.



Coffee shop run by the daughter of a gogol (see text).



Headquarters for the village night guard.



Close-up of iron clapper in picture on right. Election time is coming!

The village of Mlirip thus escapes the shackles of tight central government control through its virtual autonomy in questions of local finance and public appointments. The only central government official who actually works and resides in the village is the school teacher, who runs a school which has been built and largely financed by the village itself.

Despite its broad autonomy in many matters, Mlirip is subject to considerable central government regulation, supervision and paternal urging. In matters of public law--for example, the conditions established for the leasing of village land to the Dutch sugar companies--the lurah is bound to carry out the instructions of the sub-district officer (tjamat). When I visited Sukardji this afternoon, he was preparing to attend a meeting at the sub-district officer's house on the technical problems of the general election. The day before yesterday, he was carrying on negotiations with a central government official about a loan fund to combat the power of local money lenders. In each of these activities, the lurah and his village are bound and ruled by the Indonesian government.

It is not surprising that villages such as Mlirip begin to find their autonomy slipping away as the central government throws its energy into solving the most serious social and economic problems of the village. National elections have intruded on the isolation of Mlirip, as have free public education, government financed low-interest loans, government sponsored crop experiments or the government rice

buying monopoly. Yet these intrusions have not made village government in Mlirip a branch of the Indonesian bureaucratic hierarchy.

The other day, I saw an excellent example of the subtle line drawn between outright control and persuasion in the relations between central government and village. At the weekly sub-district meeting, the regent (Bupati) announced to the assembled village headmen that the rice quota for the government monopoly was only 59% fulfilled, although the harvest had been completed two weeks before. He urged, cajoled, advised and instructed his audience on the worth of the government rice buying policy, but he did not issue orders. It so happens that the government rice price is approximately 25% under the current market price, so it would seem safe to predict that the regent is not going to fulfill his rice quota this year. But he can go no farther than exerting the pressure of his personality (a powerful force in Indonesian government relations) or gentle persuasion.

I have heard government officials in East Java--from the governor down to the regent--describe the obstacles to national construction posed by the extreme autonomy of the Indonesian villages, but I have heard none suggest that autonomy be lessened to eliminate the obstacles.

### Village Land

Not long after my first chat with Lurah Sukardji, I went to see the village Secretary, Papa Soerowinoto. The Secretary is Sukardji's uncle, a meticulous man with figures and official letters who has served at his post for twenty-seven years. He confided that he is a conservative old man who believes in doing his job the right way. After studying his pile of official village registers I was inclined to agree.

His books showed that there were 1,345 citizens in Mlirip on July 22: 304 men, 307 women, 362 boys and 372 girls under sixteen years of age. He showed me neat figures recording marriages, deaths, sales of farm animals, transfers of private land, payment of government taxes, and payment of village duties.

The most absorbing of his books was on land tenure. There is no landlord problem in Mlirip, for all the irrigated land is owned communally by the village. I put down the figures in my notebook as 119.6 hectares\* of communal land, and 38 hectares of private dry land with 157.6 as the total. He leaned over my notebook and scolded me for abbreviating the figures. He was happy when I corrected them to read 119.665, 38.26, and 157.925.

When my figures were in order, he explained that 143 men constitute the select or "inner" group in the village, for they have full and equal rights to the irrigated land of the village. These men

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\* 1 hectare equals 2.47 acres.

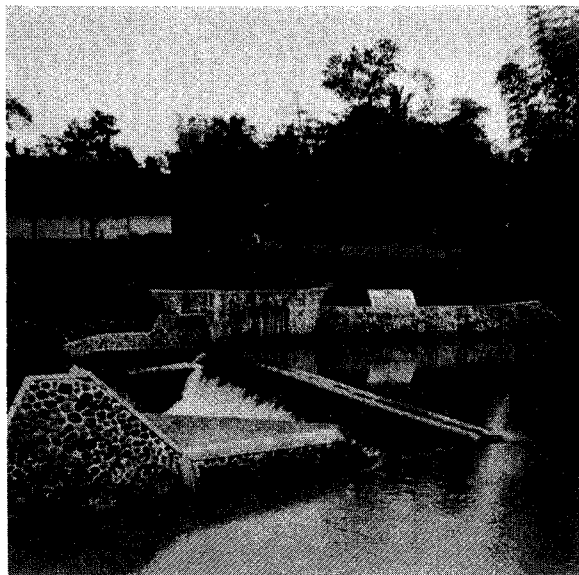




A farmer and his wife work on this year's meager rice harvest. Late rains have hurt production in Java.



Soy beans are a valuable crop. This farmer brought in a fair harvest despite last month's rains.



The most valuable inheritance of the Dutch period: irrigation works.



are called gogol in this part of East Java. As a group they form the Gogol Council, which acts as an advisory and semi-legislative for the village in matters of land tenure, irrigation, granaries, markets, roads, bridges and social security. In a sense the gogol are the village; only they possess the full rights and duties of village citizenship. The corporate nature of the group is seen in the periodic redistribution of the land which they hold in nearly equal plots.

With the rapid breakdown of village economic isolation, the gogol system of communal land control and periodic redistribution is threatened. The system has remained intact in Mlirip, possibly because the large irrigation pay-roll has been distributed rather evenly through the village. In other villages of the delta the system has been buttressed by the dealings of the sugar companies with the gogol councils as corporate entities. The general trend, however, is in the direction of decreasing communalism and increasing private proprietorship and landlordism.

Soerowinoto seemed proud to tell me that Mlirip had never in its history leased land to a sugar company. The present lurah's father had opposed the leasing of land on several grounds, among them a belief that rice was simply more profitable. Soerowinoto continues to oppose the planting of sugar, but he stands in opposition to lurah Sukardji who is negotiating with a nearby sugar factory in Krian. The decision to lease or not will finally be made by the Gogol Council. I hope I shall be able to report this decision in a letter soon.

The opposition between the lurah and his uncle on the sugar issue is an instance of the conflict between generations which splits Mlirip into two well-defined camps.

In its different phases, this conflict arises between nation and village, revolution and tradition, youth and the aged, cash and security, or school and superstition. The main troops of the revolution are the hundreds of Mlirip children now in school. Their battle has been started by men like Sukardji, who came home from the revolution with a profound feeling of discontent and a vague affinity for "modern" things. Sukardji's younger brothers and sons now have the task of finding the types of modern ideas and techniques which can be fitted into the traditional patterns which still persist in Mlirip after a war and a revolution.

I will discuss the youngest generation of Mlirip in my next letter about "Our House and its Visitors".

Yours sincerely,

*Boyd R. Compton*  
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