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Kantor Pos
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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Perhaps our house-warming selamatan (feast) should not have been held four months late, but mistakes of time are not always crucial in Java.

The fault was not with the villagers who would be our guests; the party was their idea in the first place and Mlirip was eager that it be held. The fault was not ours, for I was anxious to cement relations with my neighbors so all of us would feel free to start creating that network of visiting, borrowing and helping which would bring us closer to the community of Mlirip.

Actually, the blame should go to the folk opera troup (ludruk) in Surabaja. For awhile I wondered why I'd let the villagers talk me into hiring the ludruk for the gala night. I had gone first to the manager of the famous Marhaen troup in downtown Surabaja. That was in June and they were booked solid until December, mostly political work for the PNI election campaign. I tried the second-ranking ludruk, Irisno Enggal. They had one summer date free, August 30, so we made a deal. I went home to tell our disappointed friends to wait two months more.

The next week I told a Surabaja official about the selamatan and he looked shocked: "Oh, not on August 30! That was Queen Wilhelmina's birthday. It used to be the year's biggest celebration at the sugar mills in your area."

I discussed the problem of Wilhelmina with the lurah (village headman) and Moesari. Neither remembered right off to connect August 30 with that formerly famous event, so I decided against postponement. I would give a little introductory speech to my guests when the big night came, telling them emphatically that the Comptons come from America, not the Netherlands. Such emphatic statements are the stock-in-trade of Americans here, though I'm afraid they usually mean very, very little to unsophisticated villagers. I would then add force to my declaration by asking Suwati, the hilariously funny Information Officer from the Sub-District government office, to translate my

remarks into appropriate Javanese, so the older folks would understand.

So Wilhelmina was forgotten and the great day approached quietly and inexorably. The young lurah thought it was coming a little too inexorably and began to fidget about preparations. Finally, he could contain himself no longer and formed an ad hoc committee to assist me in planning the celebration. The next night, six committeemen were on our veranda drinking wine (I think only the members of the Indonesian Nationalist Party or communists drink here) and talking in that fine, highflown Indonesian that officials use with guests. As indirectly as possible, the headman explained that I was a newcomer to Mlirip and understandably ignorant of local customs. He felt it was his responsibility that I make no bad mistakes in custom and etiquette. If any villagers were to take offense at the selamatan, he would feel deeply ashamed. He was thus taking the liberty of making a few necessary provisions. "First, I have made a provisional guest list." He took out two closely typed sheets of paper, legal size. I looked over the two hundred and twenty invitees.

We talked about guests, invitations, food, prayers and security and arrangements for the stage, pavillion, tables and chairs. The lurah thought we should eat from plates with spoons and forks. Kerto, our house manager, thought we should follow the simple village custom of eating from banana leaves with our right hands. I decided that Kerto was wrong in this case, since so many of our guests were village notables and minor officials from the Sub-District offices at Tarik; they would lose too much face if I identified them as ordinary villagers. Plates and forks and spoons it had to be.

Responsibility for the physical layout of the selamatan was taken by Pak Moenti, the fierce old irrigation section chief. I've heard Moenti called "the most feared and respected man in Mlirip". Actually he lives across the river in Lengkong, but his reputation reverberates for miles in all directions. At sixty, his powerful six foot frame is not yet stooped. When I talk to Moenti, I see ample handlebar mustaches and eyes that look straight at their object. If it's a joke, his mouth is a cavern and the immediate area shakes with his roar. He can accomplish any reasonable task with powerful purpose and little direction. I think of Moenti as a superior master sergeant. His personality is unique in this gentle atmosphere.

Moenti had a few words to say about his part in the fiesta. How much money could I spend? How many guests? What date? He took my information perfunctorily and said, "Don't worry; everything will be ready." Then he riveted me with his eyes and got more personal: "Have you invited all my men? I mean all of them, not just the foremen. And where are they going to sit? I don't want them segregated from the 'mighty guests'. And I don't think it would be a good idea to give them less food or drink than the mighty ones." He thought that too many parties were arranged so as to discriminate against the

lowborn. He would have none of it. I assured Moenti that it would be an equalitarian party.

On the twenty-ninth we were ready. Now we would get a good night's sleep to prepare for the all night performance on the thirtieth.

But we were all too innocent. Pak Kerto let me know at four p.m. that a small preliminary celebration would start in three hours. He had it all arranged.

The First Night

The first night, I learned, is the real selamatan, a true feast of prayer carried on in strict accordance with ancient forms and customs. The second night of entertainment and formal invitations is a well-loved modern innovation. Each has its place.

A little pressed for time, I changed from sarong to trousers and strode down the lane, past the one-bench coffee stand, across two canals and into the modin's house. The modin is a prayer man. In other villages, he might be a shaman specializing in spells and charms. But Mlirip has become almost completely Muslim in its tentative, gentle manner. Its prayers are Muslim. The modin promised to come at eight to say the first prayers. I thanked him and left quickly for the mosque. I found the kiayi (Muslim teacher) in and he too said he'd be pleased to come. Before I got back I had invited fifteen of our closest neighbors.

At seven-thirty, Kerto put the plaited mats on the dark veranda. A single kerosene lamp was hung on a nearby pole and a little pot of incense was placed at the end of the mat. I came out in sarong, sandals and white shirt and tossed six packs of kretek clove cigarettes on the mat. Mat Moelijono and Saleh joined me, then the modin, Kiayi Mukimun, Ramelan, Sukir and the others. Where was Pak Moenti? We waited and talked, sitting cross legged in a loose circle. Mary peeked out the door, then ducked back to the kitchen where she was supposed to be on this first evening.

Finally Pak Moenti came loping up the path between the banyan trees and through the gate. I sat him beside me and offered him a kretek. He took one and pocketed the pack.

Pak Moenti, with his delicate social sense, started a booming conversation about topics which he thought of common interest.

"Now tell these men how big a farm in your country is. How many crops of rice or whatever you grow? Are the people of your villages stupid and easygoing like we are?"

I told them something about crops, farms, farmers, marriage, birth, death, sex and the emancipation of women, careful to make my puns in clear Indonesian and acting part of the time as straight man for Pak Moenti's gags.

The laughs kept coming fast until we got to science, then everyone stopped and listened. Mat wanted to know about flying saucers. I took a long breath, crossed my fingers, and launched into my theory.

Mat, a brilliant young mechanic with almost no schooling, took it all in and answered, "Perhaps you're right, but I think people are more apt to misread things than to create things they never saw. A friend of mine saw a flying saucer in Malang. I've heard of flying saucers in Surabaja. I think that what people see is star fragments. You can see them clearly enough at night when they go 'whoooosh' across the sky. Maybe when you see them during the day, you think they're flying saucers." Mat looked thoughtfully at the group when he finished.

"We must thank you for your elucidation, Professor Dr. Mat", chimed in Suwardi. Everyone hooted at Mat and his theories and the comedians took over again. Finally the conversation came to a halt. We were quiet as Kerto brought in the food on banana leaves and pots of coffee.

In the silence, the modin took out his tattered little book and read the first prayers from the Arabic script. The prayer was short and the men answered "Amin". We turned to Kiayi Mukimun, who now held his open hands to the sky and led my guests in prayer. They responded several times to the sonorous melody of his Arabic, then the prayers were finished. Our neighbors had asked that our house and its people be blessed with good fortune and well-being.

We all rinsed our right hands in the nearest water bowl and started reaching enthusiastically for the covered banana leaves. Kerto put a huge bowl of hot rice in the center, scooped out a pound on a leaf and handed it to me. It was fragrant "new rice", just harvested. There was dried fish, nangka fruit boiled with leafy vegetables, soy-bean cake and hot peppers, and a small chunk of curried water-buffalo meat for each. We ate rapidly for five minutes, heads down in that attitude of mixed shame and purpose that characterizes Javanese meals. I was just getting through my first leaf-full of rice when the party suddenly broke up. Each man grabbed a clean banana leaf and made a bundle of as much food as he could reach for the people back home.

The living room of the house which was honored and blessed. Dozens of villagers have sat here to pass the time of day (or night), many of them wondering what Picasso was getting at in that print on the wall.

Soekardji, the lurah (village headman). Formerly a clerk in a nearby sub-district, he came home to be elected to his father's job.

Here Pak Moenti's men are putting up the stage for the ludruk show. They work fast and well under Moenti's steady gaze.

The cigarettes disappeared into pockets, and the guests rose to mumble their "good nights" before I had time to rinse the grease from my right hand. In a few seconds I was alone on the mat.

No sooner was I inside the house than the second contingent arrived on the veranda. The men of substance had left and the dandies had arrived. Kerto threw four packs of domino cards on the mat. Change and tattered rupiah notes appeared in little piles, and the gambling had started before I took my place again. I was finally seated with one foursome, trying to push my long legs down into a reasonably comfortable cross-legged sitting position, when Sukir reappeared with several of the earlier guests. The chanting of the fables was about to begin.

I got Sukir a pillow as a rest for the large album-sized book in his hand. He leafed through the pages of Old Javanese script until he reached the beginning of the wonderful tale of Djoko Moestopo. His delicate fingers were trembling with tension as he marked his place and began to chant in a resonant, sweet baritone. The wind was rising slowly in the giant banyan trees overhead, brushing the broad muddy Brantas into ripples in the full moon. Sukir's voice rode proudly out over the hushed village:

ONCE LONG AGO, ONCE LONG AGO
ONCE LONG AGO, THERE WAS A MAN
LONG AGO THERE WAS A MAN WHOSE NAME
WHOSE NAME WAS DJOKO
WHOSE NAME WAS DJOKO MOESTOPO
ON THE ROLLING SEA HE PLIED HIS TRADE
OUT ON THE SEA.....

Sukir was singing out the old tale with the slow cadence and somber melody he had learned from a master chanter of Mlirip many years ago. Now he was creating his own style and fame under the banyans, stretching the words and offering up the syllables with his own composition of the rich nasals of Old Javanese, his voice swelling and wavering to a peak, then continuing upward in a falsetto until the syllable broke and fell with a dramatic break at a glottal stop.

But this was a gambling party too. We were sitting in an air of too much beauty and ceremony and it was obviously time for a pun. Sukir sang on of the great ruler,

AND THE RAJA'S NAME WAS HAYAM WURUK
AND HIS NAME WAS HAYAM.....

Suwardi broke in with mock intensity,

AND HIS NAME WAS AYAM
AYAM GORENG (fried chicken)

Sukir is deep in concentration and as unruffled as an artist should be. He delivered a superior low note, and Kerto responded with a fine imitation of a goat bleating. We all laughed and talked freely over our cards, while Sukir ploughed slowly through the fantastic adventures of the famous fisherman.

The coffee kept coming from the kitchen. Suwardi was keeping his money under the edge of the mat, hiding from us the amount of losses which his wife would eventually know. Sukir's voice was growing stronger, and the moon was falling lower over the river until it was a pale disc behind the palms. It had just disappeared over the shoulder of Ardjuna volcanoe which guards our river valley when a stranger walked up to the mat as if he expected to speak with me. The party grew tense and Sukir stopped.

The stranger smiled ingratiatingly against the silent welcome and spoke up in Dutch. I told him he was welcome, in Indonesian, and asked him what he wanted.

"I would like to work for you, Tuan. I have many letters of praise here. Would you like to see them? I've had experience working for foreigners. Now if you'd like to see these letters..."

I told him that I had plenty of help. We exchanged stiff, polite questions for a few minutes, then he came to the point of his visit. He was a rain-maker. He was also skillful at preventing rain. He had been uniformly successful, using his own private method of fasting and prayer. The price was usually quite high, in keeping with the excellence of his results, but as a special honor to me he would ask only one hundred rupiah. "Would Tuan accept this favor?" He said he would begin fasting and praying sharply at five the next morning. Although it would impose considerable hardship, he would keep the fast until ten the next night. If rain fell, even one drop, he would gladly refund the price.

It was an interesting contest. Here was an unpopular man. He spoke Dutch nicely, and smiled down at the ignorant villagers while he did it. He bragged of his contacts with 'foreigners' and his popularity in foreign circles in Surabaja. No one liked him. But still he was a rain-preventer of some reputation and my guests were almost as worried about rain as I was. A thundershower would turn the open-air party the next night into a sloshy social disaster. And he had traveled outside this little world of Mlirip to such faraway places as Hong Kong and Manila. He was an unpopular man with influence and an aura of power. It was a type of power that clung vestigially to him,

The gamelan orchestra warms up, the outside spectators gather outside, and the first guests arrive inside.

for it was nothing more than the power won by a clever villager who once got on the right side of the white rulers. The rulers were gone; his influence was actually gone; yet his position was made ambiguous by mixed and very recent memories.

Finally, I asked him to have some coffee and sit with us on the mat. I showed some interest by offering him an insulting fifteen rupiah. The games started again, and Sukir finished his page. He had been singing for four hours now and was in need of a break. Sukir's idea of a rest was to switch to another song. He chose the story of the prophets. By two a.m. he had sung quickly through Adam and skipped to Daud (David) and Suleiman (Solomon). The rain-maker went home. At three, Sukir picked up his book and left. By four, the mat was empty again and it was time for bed. In the kitchen, Martinah and her many, many relatives had finished cutting, dicing and marinating the foods that would be cooked for the next night's meal. The house went to sleep for a few hours.

The Big Night

Visitors kept coming all morning. Outside, Pak Moenti and the lurah directed the workers as they put the tinsel and streamers on the completed bamboo pavillions. Ox-carts came up to the front gate with loads of chairs and tables. Martinah's women were busy cooking the rice and cookies in big pots over several fires in the patio. On clean mats in the kitchen, five women were wrapping the sweet-rice cookies in banana leaves. It was a gay, noisy morning and several dozen nervous people were wondering about the success of the coming event.

At four in the afternoon, a big two-ox wagon pulled up with the gamelan orchestra instruments. At five, the ludruk troup arrived in a bus and went immediately to eat their first meal of the night in the large dressing-room shed Pak Moenti had built near the stage between two old mango trees. A gang of village youngsters were bouncing up and down on the stage, evidently testing the breaking point of the strong woven-bamboo floor. We chased them off, and they took positions at the gamelan instruments which had been laid out on mats. Surprisingly, they could play. We listened for two hours to the gay, inventive music of the Mlirip children, while the loud speakers went up and the Youth Security Guard took their places along the road. Several dozen vendors had already set up their little stalls on the grass where the uninvited spectators would sit until dawn. By six o'clock, near and distant neighbors began to stream in, drawn by the liquid strains of the gamelan and the party news which had circulated through the village grape-vine.

Moesari--mystic, herb expert and earnest Information Officer--

arrived at seven o'clock with his wife, who was to help Mary entertain and organize the women's section. Suwarno joined us, then the lurah and the other members of the ad hoc selamatan committee. We divied up the various tasks for the evening and carried on nervous last minute conversation. Mary came out in her Javanese costume.

Just at eight, the flood of guests started coming. By nine, three hundred of us were seated at our places, sipping orange crush and munching on Martinah's cookies. The chatter was subdued and polite. Unavoidably, the "mighty" guests were segregated slightly from the irrigation workers (Pak Moenti had decided at the last minute that his men would be happier by themselves, up front where they could see the ludruk), but the seating was mixed sufficiently so that high and low were hard to pick out. Outside the guest area--along the road, on the bridge and on the park-like little island beyond--the faces of three thousand spectators were highlighted mahogony in the light of our twelve kerosene pressure lamps.

I walked around shaking hands and cracking jokes with the irrigation men, trying to keep Javanese etiquette in mind. Then I slipped and made a bad faux pas. I was greeting four policemen who were sitting in a small circle, their carbines resting on their knees. I thought of a question I'd been meaning to ask the corporal and half-squatted to ask it. My eyes went lower than his. The audience broke out in a quick laugh. The policeman flushed in embarrassment, and Suwarno was over in a few seconds pulling up on my shoulder until I was in a higher position. It had been hilarious but embarrassing to see the "tuan" lower than an ordinary cop. High and low can mix freely in Mlirip, if only they remember the forms and behavior appropriate to their positions.

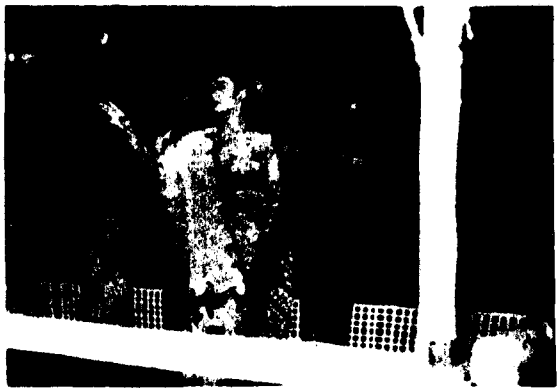
For a few minutes, I circulated around the group, mulling over my average American reaction to rigid class distinctions. Pak Moenti saved me from the error of generalizing too far. He came over with a wink and said, "Say, what's this? There are three day laborers over here you haven't greeted." Sitting next to them were several well-educated young officials from the Modjokerto irrigation office; they were literally rubbing shoulders. I forgot my easy cliches about "feudalism" and began to think more about the remarkable period of social transition we're experiencing here in Java.

Back at my chair on the veranda, I chatted with the two "mightiest" of our guests, the wedono (district officer) of Krian and Pak Soehoed, the chief of the Irrigation District in Modjokerto. Pak Soehoed is an aristocrat from a wealthy Jogjakarta family, a man of ability and a wonderful talent for low and high comedy. He kidded me about having a ludruk show, and several of the Central Javanese informed me of the superior "refinement" of the opera and language of Jogja and Solo. We launched into a Javanese-style debate, in which both sides

The women guests are segregated from their men.

Laughs in the kitchen.

"First add chilis, then onions, then bean sprouts, then more chilis.



One of the ludruk boys.

In a minute, the clown will lose his wig.

make their points as if they agree with the opponent's remarks completely, but wish to add a few afterthoughts. I wasn't quite careful enough to support our little "united front" on the veranda; it was quite clear that disagreement was present and that actual verbal conflict might be lurking around the corner. I had never heard naked disagreement expressed in a Javanese conversation and had no wish to break precedents at this party; we changed the subject almost frantically and found our solidarity again.

The loudspeaker was working well and the speeches went off quickly. Moesari went up on the stage to introduce me. I followed him, and the sea of faces grinned as I adjusted the microphone up a foot to the level of my head. I started by shouting the Indonesian national greeting, "MERDEKA!" (freedom) and the audience shouted back "TETAP MERDEKA!" (freedom forever). After a short introductory paragraph, I thanked all my guests for attending and begged them to pardon all our errors and shortcomings, trying to peg my apology somewhere in that uncharted zone between traditional Javanese self-effacement and revolutionary Indonesian directness. The wedono followed me with a short greeting on behalf of the government. We were ready for the ludruk.

The ludruk of Surabaja is truly less refined than the operas, dances and songs of the court cities in Central Java. In its robust and earthy humor, it expresses the vigorous personality of the port city which sits on the boundary between the cultures of Java, Madura, and a dozen foreign nations. Like its counterpart of other Javanese areas--the ketoprak--the ludruk speaks easily and directly to the workers and farmers in language they can understand. It is full of puns, slapstick, murder and politics. Our village friends are quite ready to admit the superiority of the more refined art forms, but they prefer the ludruk. Perhaps another generation of Indonesians will consider the possibility that the folk arts of Java are superior in vitality, creativeness and attraction to the moribund arts of the court. So far I have only heard that judgement from communists.

The first hour of the ludruk is something like burlesque. The female impersonators come to the stage one by one, swaying in all their padded glory while the audience hoots. Each does a flirtatious dance and sings a short introductory song in high falsetto. The last impersonator is always the dowdy old woman in faded batik and orange wig. Her voice cracks into a basso, her wig falls off, and she stumbles over her big feet. A successful gag is worth repeating, and the wig falls again while the spectators roar. The girls perform a little skit, then mince off the stage to the humorous accompaniment of the gamelan.

The second hour is also comedy, but comedy mixed with very serious politics. Most folk opera troups speak for one political party or another, many of them for the PNI or the Indonesian Communist Party.

Our troup was non-party and therefore free to lampoon all the rich and mighty. The dead-pan comedian took the center of the stage and began his patter about ridiculous big-shots, with their Cadillacs and girl friends. The villagers applauded his bitter satire and howled when he carried on a dialogue conversation between a Chinese merchant, an Arab, an Indian and a Dutchman. There was no envy in his criticism of the rich--just bitterness at their loss of humanitarianism. He laced his humor with serious asides to the audience, urging them to vote in the coming election, to learn Indonesian well, and to support the government in its worthwhile efforts.

The political act finished just before midnight and it was time to eat. While the gamelan played through a quiet intermezzo, Kerto and his helpers began bringing out the trays of food. Then Martinah's worried face appeared at the door. She frantically gestured me and Moesari in for a conference. There simply wasn't enough food. The twenty village guards were ready for their second meal, as was the ludruk company. Kerto had just counted the guests and made a rapid calculation that we would be short one hundred meals. I looked through the door and saw our salvation: the local Chinese store keeper was our man. In a few minutes, I had borrowed enough rice, coffee and sugar to see the party through until morning.

At midnight, the opera started while we finished off our main meal. For the next six hours, the audience sat enthralled by the story of Sarip, a legendary bandit of Sidohardjo who was invulnerable to violent death. In six varied acts, Sarip was shot, stabbed and knocked about by a variety of assailants. Each time his gentle old mother came along and he arose from death at the sound of her voice.

Most of our "mighty" guests went home before Sarip's second death, with apologies about the necessity of going to their offices at seven the next morning. The bulk of the villagers stayed on. More coffee and cookies came from the kitchen.

At dawn, Sarip's mother committed suicide and the forces of order and humanity triumphed. With Sarip permanently dead, the ludruk spokesman delivered the epilogue. The sun was up when the last guests asked permission to leave. Many of them went directly to the fields or to the irrigation work shop next door for another day's labor.

Two nights later, I heard the shuffling of many feet in front of the house. I looked out and saw a procession of men,

women and children walking along the road toward the source of distant gamelan music. Kerto came up beside me and said, "There's a selamatan in the next village. They say there's going to be a ludruk from Surabaja!"

Yours sincerely,

Boyd R. Compton

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