

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

My "Village Notebook" hasn't received proper attention for a few weeks, and for good reason. I'm working outside Mlirip-rowo these days, collecting, cramming and collating various kinds of information about the government of the neighboring regency of Modjokerto. This material will appear very soon. Since it will broaden the picture of Indonesia that I've been sketching in these letters, I feel that my neglect of village life is somehow justified.

Still, life goes on as it will in Mlirip-rowo, and I want to keep on describing what I see in and around our house. If my more ambitious work on Modjokerto government strives toward system and scientific method, my observations here in Mlirip do not. That's just why I enjoy writing for the "Village Notebook"; and I suspect that is its chief value. I hope it will serve as a balance and check to my other work, by providing an informal picture of the human situation in which the government operates.

Before saying more about Mlirip though, I'd better state and defend my editing policy on its name. The official name is Mlirip-rowo, and I have bowed to things official by using the full title in the first paragraph or two of my letters. After that, I go along with everyone else and call it plain Mlirip. It is such a triumph of splurting to pronounce the first word, that it seems an anti-climax to add the tight-lipped "rowo" at the end. It so happens that the village just across the Surabaya road is called Mlirip too, with no "rowo" added. This could cause confusion. In fact, it did when a Modjokerto friend came out on his bicycle one day to visit, looking for our house in Mlirip. He naturally went to the wrong village. He was quickly directed over here to our place, and little time was lost.

This confusion suggests, in a diagonal way, a very pervasive attitude out here in the Javanese countryside. I mean the avoidance of concrete expression in sociable conversation. Americans sometimes feel that their Javanese friends are either purposely or unfortunately

vague in their statements and identifications. Our place is called "Mlirip-rowo", "Mlirip" and "Lengkong" interchangeably. Although two of the names are dead wrong, no one seems bothered.

Another example is better. We asked friends to dinner in the late afternoon. I was a newcomer here, so I stated the time for dinner: "Will you come to our place for dinner at seven?" The answer was, "We certainly hope so." They did not come, but fortunately some other friends dropped in unannounced and Darmadji popped in from Malang, so dinner got served and eaten in good style out on the veranda. It was all quite normal.

My third example comes closer to what I want to say, but I'm afraid it shows how illusive this subject really is.

A few weeks back, we were treated to a night of such beauty as to drive all questions from even the most hopelessly inquiring mind. After dinner we walked along the levee road which edges along the rice fields toward the dam, strolling through one of those superb Javanese scenes which the moon etches every month. The tangle of growth hiding the village huts was all silvered banana leaves and inked palm silhouettes. Down in the dark, cheap kerosene lamps showed orange here and there. The murmur of voices gave way to croaking frogs as we passed beyond the houses.

The frogs were doing their croaking in a flooded rice field, and their chorus is a good omen. It means that the fields are flooded and the rice is in the ground or soon will be. But just beyond the flooded field, we passed a communal granary and scared up several mice heading in the direction of the stored grain. I had heard that nearly a quarter of Mlirip's rice crop for the past season was destroyed by the "mouse plague", so I decided to ask more about the problem when the opportunity arose.

The opportunity came as soon as we returned to the house. The lurah (village headman) was waiting there for us with one of his subordinates. When we had settled our business, I asked about the mouse problem. My interest was concrete and my questions were specific: "When do the mice come? What and how much do they eat? Can they be killed off? Are there fables and stories about them? What parts of the village do they ravage?" By spacing the questions and cushioning them with general comments, I thought I could avoid appearing too direct and rude. I failed and the lurah was soon trying to escape from the conversation about mice into some more comfortable inconsequential subject. I finally gave up and we spent a happy half-hour exchanging the standard jokes and puns about number-two wives, Javanese food and movies (the lurah is very modern).

Before he left, I was back at it, this time by necessity. The lurah's assistant had told us the day before that all guests in our house should be registered with him, so I felt obliged to learn the concrete facts about my responsibility in this matter. I wanted to know specifically what types of activities and situations should be reported to his office. So I asked his advice. He spoke for awhile about our good relations and about the efficacy of good relations in general, then about the importance of solidarity in village life, and finally of his pleasure if, as a contribution to village solidarity, I would be kind enough to report the coming and going of overnight guests. When I pressed further about whether I should report our servants' guests too, he shrugged off the question politely and began to take his leave.

These inconclusive incidents are permeated with one of the important flavors of Javanese culture. I've reported them negatively as flights from the concrete. Seen positively, I think the cases hint at something broader: the great emphasis among Javanese on a harmonious blending of styles of conduct rather than on the dialectical exchanges which we Americans so often enjoy. Properly, a Javanese conversation doesn't appear to "get at" anything. It is a graceful thing to watch and hear, for it demands such a harmonizing of hand gestures, eye movements, voice pitch and politeness of address. Social life becomes something like a ballet in which grace and movement are more important than the story. If I approach the lurah in search of some specific favor or information, I jar and break the rhythm of our relationship.

Of course, too much abstraction about Javanese style could obscure the fact that information can be obtained or interests defended without breaking the social equilibrium, provided the person concerned knows what he's about. Take this matter of registering guests as an example.

Last Saturday night, we threw a little party for some Americans from Surabaya. It was held in the big pavillion in the back courtyard, well hidden from public view. At seven, four big cars pulled up in front of the house, and our neighborhood kids ogled as the guests entered. We ate and drank in the din normal to such a party, then turned on the hand-wind phonograph. After a few dances, the guests left for Surabaya. My wife and I were sitting alone among the usual party litter at eleven thirty.

The next morning, Saleh, the local communist leader, came with a message from the lurah. He wanted to know if I had remembered to report my guests. I obviously hadn't thought it necessary. With the serious and sympathetic frown which is his mark, Saleh told me I might go see the lurah to explain. This was an interesting departure; usually the lurah comes to see me when something is up. I went.

When I got to the lurah's house, he had his guest book ready. He suggested that we pacify the police by filling it in now and letting him take responsibility for handing the report in late. It was a typically gracious offer, but I couldn't accept.

I headed off through the rainy season mud toward the police headquarters at Tarik, laughing with the bystanders as the jeep skidded along the edge of the irrigation ditch. When I got there, Karto, the local police commandant, made his explanation friendly but to the point. He had heard from several sources about our party and our guests. The lurah was not one of the sources. He merely wanted to admonish me for having so many overnight guests without reporting the fact, and for having "dancing" without first checking with the authorities. It didn't seem wise to him. I amended his admonition slightly for accuracy and accepted it.

Now, the lurah and the local police have made it perfectly clear how I should act in the future, and they have done this without giving a direct order or using the word "must". Like any other person in the village, I am being bound in a huge net of proprieties which I myself accept. The net is all the tighter because it is pulled so gently. The eccentric or individualist would stand out in Mlirip like Groucho Marx in the Roxy chorus; he would simply have to leave.

The people we know conform to village standards in varying degrees, but they all conform.

Saleh, the communist, is a good example. His outlook is actually extraordinary, if you measure him with proper communist standards. First, he's not a fire-breathing materialist. He says he believes in God; if it were known that he didn't, his communist branch would have trouble growing. In his respect for village custom and style, Saleh is a conformist, not a revolutionary. What's more, he is enthusiastically friendly with me. This is very improper communist conduct in Indonesia, but it is quite necessary village conduct. I am considered a guest and must be treated as one. Saleh is so deferential to me that I get uncomfortable; his chiefs in Surabaya would be uncomfortable too if they could see it.

I think one of the big reasons for communism's recent expansion in Indonesia has been that its moderate policies have permitted so many neo-communists like Saleh to operate. If Saleh were a communist by belief and training, he would be less effective.

His record has certainly been good. Organized communism came to Mlirip in December, 1954. Nine months later, his party came within

ten votes of winning the local election. On December 15, 1955, it won the second election. Last week, Saleh was made chief of the Village Youth Defense Corps. He confided in me that this corps really runs the village these days. This is not true, but in view of the surprising authority of youth during these post-revolutionary years, it seems quite probable that Saleh will expand his party's influence even further through his new position.

Why has Saleh succeeded so well? The real answers are probably too far hidden in village life for me to extract. Some reasons, however, are apparent.

A village like Mlirip is split along a natural cleavage into two groups. There is the religious Muslim group, and there is the group which combines a much diluted Muslim belief with many elements of traditional Javanism and animism. In Mlirip, the cleavage is sharp. The religious group--those who actually pray--is loyal to the Nahdlatul Ulama. Their loyalty is fixed and I suspect that it would be strong in an emergency. The rest of the village has really only two choices of party allegiance: The P.N.I. (Indonesian Nationalist Party) or the P.K.I. (Indonesian Communist Party). The other parties have a few supporters, but only these two have power. The P.N.I. won the lurah's support by what appears to be natural affinity, though it is interesting that most of the central government officials who command the lurah are also from the P.N.I. The P.K.I. entered the village partly through reputation and partly with money; Saleh is paid a salary to organize.

Within the non-religious group, the split between P.N.I. and the communists is defined by at least two considerations.

The first is wealth. About half of the male adults of Mlirip have a communal share of land, but many of these are impoverished and in debt. A communal share is only enough to live on when the breaks are good. Advertising itself as the party of the poor, the Communist Party attracts support among the landless and the poorer landholders, partly by vague promises that far-off plantation lands will someday be divided among them, but mostly by just adopting a sympathetic attitude. The lurah is also sympathetic in manner, but he happens to be the biggest local money lender and land leaser. The more well-to-do landholders tend to follow the lurah and his P.N.I.

The second separator is place of residence. The people of Saleh's hamlet voted overwhelmingly communist. Pilang, the lurah's hamlet, gave the P.N.I. a big majority. This pattern suggests a type of solidarity within the hamlets, but it also might delineate the areas in which the two leaders did their most intensive door-to-door campaigning.

Saleh's communist movement in Mlirip is thus "proletarian", but it is not revolutionary. Conforming to patterns of proper village conduct, Saleh organizes his party in a proper way. He avoids conflict and concrete claims, so that it is a painless and apparently inconsequential act when the village poor identify themselves with his group.

In the meantime, Saleh is gaining power rapidly in the village, though his power is not yet a moving, positive force. He now has time to consolidate the collection of people who follow him and weld them into a real organization. He made an excellent move in this direction by getting himself elected chief of the Village Youth Defense Corps last week. The revolution created a situation in which youth is given special license to be "spirited", "revolutionary" and "consequent", and these are characteristics a local communist operation must have here if it is to become really useful to the party.

I assume Saleh will now receive more training and indoctrination from his superiors. Then he may understand the historical necessity in my refusals to contribute to the local communist political fund.

In contrast to Saleh, Mat Moeljono actually comes close to non-conformity. Mat is an excellent mechanic with fifteen years experience at the irrigation repair shop next door to our house. With only a few years vernacular school to build on, he has become a first-rate technician through pure native talent. He has a devoted following of four apprentices who work with him in the repair-shop and on outside jobs.

My relationship with Mat and his friends has centered on my old 1942-1946 jeep, which needs constant nursing and fixing. When the engine goes on strike, Mat and his coterie come into the back court in their off hours and perform miracles of knowledgeable and inexpensive repair.

They had a field-day Sunday when I showed movies in front of the house. We have no electricity out here, so I had to borrow a generator for power. Just as I started to rig up the generator, sound system, projector and line transformer, Mat's boys appeared at the front door with their wives. We finished off a few bottles of orange crush in the living room, then left the women to chat while we set up the projector.

Over five hundred children were packed in front of the house into a giggling, chattering mass which extended an average three feet in height and entirely filled the large space between the house and the river. No wonder the police demand that all public performances be reported and controlled by guards! Somehow, the crowd was maintaining

its own kind of order and there seemed to be no danger of kids falling into the river or getting trampled. Mat and his friends quickly made room for the equipment, then watched sharply as I started the generator and rigged up the lines. Mat took a reading on the voltmeter and adjusted the generator down a bit. Then, they gathered around to study while I loaded the projector and adjusted the sound.

During the next three hours of movies, they continued to watch me. By the third reel, I was getting accurate advice every time the film stuck. Mat and his number one apprentice would have been able to take over from there.

I'm impressed not so much by the technical aptitude of Mat's group as by their interest. They are fascinated with mechanical things and avid to learn. Mat summed up his position like this: "If you can get movies on technical subjects, we want to see them. We would stay all night to watch. But I don't think the other people would be much interested, so maybe you'd better just show general films like these tonight."

Mat has all the politeness and deference to the "general will" that a good villager should have, but he and his little gang are cut off from their neighbors by their passion for machines. This passion and the resulting experience have affected Mat's outlook. He is extraordinarily exact in setting schedules to work on my jeep, he tells me how much he thinks I should pay him, he is fairly open in showing whom and what he likes or dislikes, and he is happiest when all instructions and arrangements are worked out in concrete detail. His side-kicks emulate him.

The third villager I want to talk about is Papa Wongso. Right now, he's lying on a mat in his house, recovering from a serious leg infection. Three weeks ago, Pak Wongso was carrying two baskets of kangkung (a water vegetable) into Modjokerto on his bamboo shoulder bar. He stubbed his toe on a sharp rock on his way. The next day, the foot began to swell, and in four days his leg was bloated like a long balloon.

I learned of the infection accidentally when our monkey got loose and decided to roost in the rafters of Papa Wongso's little earth-floored house. Wongso's son helped us catch the monkey, then asked if I would come in to see his sick father. One look at the fevered old man, and I ran for the jeep. I went directly to Dr. Husman in Modjokerto who promised to send the ambulance out the next morning. In the meantime, he prescribed a dosage of penicillin and gave me some sulfa powder for the great open ulcers on Papa Wongso's foot.

The next morning, Papa Wongso refused to go to the hospital. In a small rasping voice, he told the male nurse that he was dying and wanted to be at home when it happened. There was nothing to do. His son advised us that the old man was afraid of the western style hospital and doctors. He had more faith in the local dukun (village medicine man), despite his higher fees.

Fortunately, the old man responded well to the penicillin tablets and was out of danger in four days. He should be well again soon and will presumably be happy in the knowledge that he was right about staying home.

Dr. Husman later told me that only the villages closest to the city have real faith in western-style medicine. Generally, the dukuns still reign supreme with their concoctions and spells, charging up to fifty times as much as the well-equipped little hospital in Modjokerto. A sick person can stay in the hospital free if he has no money, and a complete prescription of medicine can be obtained for one rupiah. But it's custom rather than expense that keeps the people away.

One interesting thing about this case is that Wongso's sons disapproved so severely of his refusal to go to the hospital. They explained apologetically that the old man was hopelessly conservative and would probably never change. They themselves, however, express confidence in modern medicine and assure me that they are not kolot (old-fashioned) in their views.

Much of what I've said in this letter hinges on the words people use to describe their values, so I'd like to end on this subject.

It should be clear from these letters that Mlirip is an exceptional village. It has been fairly bombarded with outside influences through proximity of the busy asphalt highway, the big irrigation service repair shop, and the intricate system of irrigation control locks which centers here. And it is only a short walk to Modjokerto with its market and movies. Mlirip was already subject to revolutionizing changes in its ideas before the revolution. After 1945, the emergence of Mlirip as a highly contested battle objective certainly brought in a new flood of transforming notions.

You can almost see the consecutive layers of change in the key words used. From the older generation--men like the village secretary--you often hear words like segan (deferential, reticent), sopan, (socially proper), halus (refined), or even the embarrassing zaman normal (normal times), referring to the colonial period.

A younger man, like the lurah, is also concerned with the proprieties, but his speech is littered with references to the rakyat (the "people"), repot (slang for "too busy"), kolot ("old-fashioned", used detrimentally), modern, pengetahuan (knowledge) and semangat (spirit, drive).

Heard often enough, these and other key words sketch out a pattern of generations which are separated by more than just age. Mirip's little world is being twisted into a whirl of change. Some tenacious Javanese qualities persist, and the people of the village seem determined that today's changes will not destroy their social solidarity and style. The men who are bringing the changes about--the lurah, Saleh, Mat Moeljono--are most successful when they exhibit the style and social values of their fathers. But the transformation in village economic and political life must have their effect, and it will be a miracle of solidarity if village conflicts continue to be as well hidden as they are.

Sincerely yours,

Boyd Compton

Boyd R. Compton

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