

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Muda Mudi

Asrama Mahasiswa  
17 Pegangsaan Timur  
Djakarta, Indonesia  
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Mr. W. S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York City, 36

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The pretty girl and the sad looking boy in the picture are doing the "Dance of Joy" or "Muda Mudi." This "Dance of Joy" is a mighty serious thing these days for some young people in Indonesia. They hope it will completely replace western dancing, which they consider sinful, sexually stimulating, and not at all in conformity with the beauty and refinement of Indonesian culture.

The only trouble is that the more westernized students won't be sold on the dance. In part, they resent being told what to do, but mostly they just laugh.

The Muda Mudi was created by Pangeran Prabuwinoto, a dance master from the Sultan's palace in Solo (Surakarta). It is a product then of the central Javanese area where students are notoriously anti-western and conscious of their own cultural heritage. Occasionally, these young students carry their search for refinement into action, and you hear of them breaking up western style parties and storing the shameless dancers.

Last week at the President's palace, I sat with some three thousand Djakarta students and watched a team from Solo demonstrate the Muda Mudi. The atmosphere was hostile as a young Javanese got up to introduce the dance. First he deplored western influences, then explained how easy the Muda Mudi is to do. But his manner was too condescending



and his speech too long. A good part of the audience broke into boisterous applause and chatter; he had to stop. His face turned red, he tapped the microphone severely with his forefinger, then waited for silence. Challenged, the student audience applauded and cheered again. Finally there was enough silence and the young man from Solo continued his speech. When he finished, four dancers in western clothes came on the stage, and the Muda Mudi began.

A boy and a girl constitute a dance team. The music starts--it may be a western jazz record or the haunting liquid music of the native gamelan orchestra--and the dance begins with great dignity. Graceful trained hands reach out slowly to touch every fourth or eighth beat of the music, and the boy and girl glide lightly around one another, never quite touching. The foot movements are painfully slow and unvaried, obviously a simple sort of thing that anyone could learn in no time. But the hand and arm movements seem to be taken directly from the ancient Javanese court dances. They have lost their Hindu-Buddhist symbolic values, but their elegant sensuality remains.

The dancers on the stage were obviously trained in Javanese dancing and did their job with competence and certainty. A much faster record was put on, and the same dance was done at apparently the same tempo. The next dance was done to gamelan music and looked much the same. The Muda Mudi session ended with polite applause. As we walked out, some students I talked with were bored, some resentful, and some just disappointed.

The Muda Mudi is admittedly in an experimental stage. The announcer emphasized this fact, and said that the dance would unquestionably be "perfected further" in the future. But the fact is that the Muda Mudi as danced for the first time in Djakarta was a conspicuous failure.

The pros and cons of the Muda Mudi are a common topic of discussion in Djakarta these days, so I will list a few of them here.

The first drawback of the dance is its Javanese origin; it is fundamentally a variation of the old court dances. A Sumatran student used the term "Javanese cultural chauvinism" to describe the dance, then related the dance to his theory of Javanese chauvinism in general. He spoke of Sumatran revenues building Javanese roads, Javanese officials deciding on Sumatran policy, and ended with several pointed remarks on the deficiencies of the Muda Mudi itself.

A second Muda Mudi problem is the unrelenting feud between the former revolutionary capital, Djogjakarta, and the present capital and international city, Djakarta. The feud has a complicated history. In 1948, and before, Djogjakarta was the center of revolutionary consciousness and nationalism, while Djakarta remained a symbol of Dutch rule and western influence. Gadjah Mada University was created in Djogja, while the former Dutch university in Djakarta became the main campus of the University of Indonesia. Gadjah Mada claims to be, and is, a more nationalistic and politically minded school. Dutch professors and the Dutch language are almost things of the past there, though still important at the University of Indonesia in Djakarta. Western customs admittedly have a strong hold on the university youth of Djakarta, a fact which is vigorously deplored in Djogjakarta.

I don't want to exaggerate the split between Djakarta and Djogjakarta, for in many fields the differences in attitude are merely differences in the degree of nationalism and the mixed pride and uncertainty that are quite generally evident in Indonesia's upper class. The difference in degree, however, becomes something like a difference in kind when emphasized by very articulate nationalists, whether they be writers or dancers.

As the Djakarta-Djogjakarta feud continues, a basic contradiction in the entire situation stands out. Djogjakarta was not only the revolutionary capital, but also the seat of the Sultanate of Djogjakarta, a remnant of the last great Javanese kingdom of Mataram and the center of ancient Javanese culture. Its revolutionary youth now rightly claim to be more anti-Dutch than their counterparts in Djakarta. But they often express their revolutionary spirit by harking back to the pure and golden days of Javanese empire. You can use the word "reactionary" in its literal sense in describing this particular kind of attitude. You can see this in a creation like the Muda Mudi, which can be traced directly back to dances which were the property of the small noble class at the ancient courts.

Of course you should judge an effort more by its intentions than its historical antecedents. The Muda Mudi will perhaps fail altogether as a national dance, but it certainly shows the effects of modern times on Javanese culture. As far as I know, it is the first Javanese dance to be performed by two people of the opposite sex, and the intention of its sponsors is that it be danced socially by the general public and not performed privately for a limited number of spectators.

I believe, however, that the contradiction remains; it is a failure to recognize that the irreverence and energy of Indonesia's more westernized youth has been a very essential ingredient in the revolution. Take President Sukarno himself as an example. Just before the Muda Mudi performance, a quiz contest was held on the stage in the Presidential Palace. On one side were Sukarno, the president of the university, and other dignitaries; opposing them were three men and two bright young ladies from the student body. It was a refreshing and revealing sight to see the President trading jokes with the young and unknown students. At one point, a student missed a question; Sukarno laughed and energetically thumbed his nose at the student. The President's turn came and he was asked a serious and tricky legal question: "I want you to name a certain crime. If you succeed in carrying it out, you are not punished. If you fail, you are punished." The President thought for a while, then smiled broadly and answered in perfect English, "That so-called crime is kissing a girl." It was a much better answer than the correct one (suicide) and the audience roared.

The President's performance in no way conformed with the refinement of Javanese culture. And it seemed to me a much more revolutionary thing than the Muda Mudi which followed. When Sukarno is in a comradely mood and irreverent enough to joke about kissing, he is perhaps typifying some of the western influences which acted to bring about the end of the Dutch rule and are now in such sharp conflict with Java's past. I might add that Sukarno is usually taken as the champion of those who laud the "Eastern Way." His personality combines eastern and western elements in perhaps the same proportions that they have been combined in the revolutionary movement as a whole.

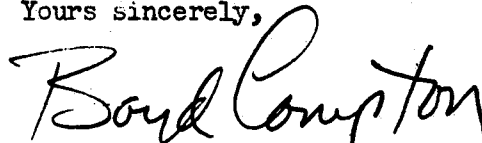
I think the idea behind the Muda Mudi is enthusiastically endorsed by most of Indonesia's youth, even those most influenced by western ways. As long as it remains a positive effort to enrich and develop Indonesian culture, there are few nationalistic Indonesians who would offer anything but praise. In this respect, the Muda Mudi is a creative and positive step. But insofar as the Muda Mudi represents Javanism, or an effort to impose an ancient refinement on lively young people, it will meet with a great deal of scorn. As one student put it, "It's a good idea basically, but I don't like their attitude and I don't like dance."

Islam also forbids western dancing, but the Muda Mudi debate is essentially between Javanese and western culture. It is perhaps significant of the failure of the Muda Mudi that many Islamic students in the audience were also bored and resentful of what they saw. These are students who would never think of fox-trotting and who agree that western dancing is merely the first step toward prostitution and free love.

Let me admit right off that I am writing this letter from a student dormitory in Djakarta, and that I have not yet visited Djogja. I believe I am right in using the Muda Mudi as an example of the conflict between Javanese and western culture. During my trip to Djogja next week I will have a chance to see how students there react to Muda Mudi. I have heard that it is not generally popular there either.

The Djakarta reaction to the Muda Mudi indicates that more positive, more lively efforts to develop and bolster Indonesian culture will probably be welcomed in the future. It seems, however, that these efforts will have to represent a broader interpretation of Indonesian culture than the Muda Mudi. There are unquestionably vigorous and democratic elements in this evolving culture, waiting to be synthesized and shared. A narrow and particularistic view of Indonesia's future only serves to divide the small ruling elite and remind the historian that Japanese youth who dared to fox-trot were also stoned back in the early thirties.

Yours sincerely,



Boyd Compton

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