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Berninghausen | Kerstan | Soeprapto-Jansen

## THE MANY FACES OF INDONESIAN WOMEN

Reflections on Cultural Change in a Multi-Ethnic Society

**Kellner**  
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# **THE MANY FACES OF INDONESIAN WOMEN**

**Reflections on Cultural Change  
in a Multi-Ethnic Society**

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## Introduction

This book has been written for all those who are interested to explore the changing cultural patterns in Indonesia from women's eyes. Based on a series of interviews conducted in 2006 and 2007, it offers unique insights into the multi- archipelago's social fabric and the challenges Indonesian women face today. Embedded into analysis of the specific social-cultural context, the portrayals of women in different parts of the archipelago shed light on many central themes of everyday life in Indonesia: love and marriage, the economic struggle of those in poverty and prospects of the young middle class, political openings in the reform era, values and norms governing family and community, religion, life style and personal choices.

Our interpretation of women's personal accounts and life stories draws on the insights gained during more than 25 years living and working in Indonesia. In 1986 we (Jutta and Birgit) moved with our children from Berlin to a small village in the vicinity of Klaten in Central Java. For eighteen months we conducted fieldwork for our PhD thesis, exploring women's roles in the family and community with a particular focus on their personal autonomy. Ever since, both the country and the topic have not let us go, during which time we have spent more than half of our lives in Indonesia. Nena, the third member of the team, writes about Indonesian women from a different perspective. As she was born a daughter of Indonesian parents, grew up in Germany, worked for 20 years in Indonesia and then returned to Germany, she crossed the lines between Western and Eastern cultures many times. All three of us experienced life and developed relationships in Java, Sumatra, Bali and Eastern Indonesia not only as professionals – consultants, researchers, leaders of international teams – but also as mothers, community members and, most significantly, women. Our relationships with village women, NGO activists, academics, professionals, business people, neighbours, street sellers, household helpers and many others became our entry points for looking under the surface of everyday life and exploring women's identities in different social, economic and political settings.

References to publications and newspaper articles support our line of argument, but are not exhaustive from a scholarly point of view.<sup>1</sup> The book is

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<sup>1</sup> Different aspects of women's changing roles have recently been analyzed in academic texts published after this book was written and are therefore not explicitly referenced, i.e. Jones 2007, Smith-Hefner 2007, Parker 2008, Rinaldo 2008, Ford/Parker 2008, Blackburn and Syamsiyatun 2008, Nur-mila 2009, O'Shaughnessy 2009, Robinson 2009, Smith 2009, Blackburn 2009, v. Wichelen 2010.

not an academic text, but invites the readers to reflect on critical issues and questions concerning women's roles in society. What problems do young women reaching adulthood have to deal with today? Which life choices do they make, and what are their answers to issues that concern women the world over? How can the diverging expectations in their different roles as mother, in a partnership and marriage, or in a career be met? How is gender equality possible in a culture deeply embedded in hierarchical and collectivist structures? How can gender equality and religion be reconciled?

Even if the answers differ from culture to culture, the questions are the same. The patterns of culture, as they shape human values and drive our actions, are changing. The world appears to be shrinking in this era of globalization. Trans-cultural realms are growing in which cultures clash and converge. Sukarno's declared national philosophy of »Unity in Diversity« has made the still novel Western concept of »managing diversity« the primary challenge for political leadership in this multi-faceted land, Indonesia. The parity between religions and ethnicities was a matter of survival for the burgeoning national state, but at the same time, Indonesian culture was always known for its ability to persevere against foreign powers by absorbing and assimilating new influences into their traditions, without forsaking the old. This capacity for »as well« and not »either/or« seemed to be the Indonesian culture's secret recipe which the Indonesian Jesuit priest Frans von Magnis-Suseno wrote of twenty-five years ago.<sup>2</sup> Today, his evaluation is not as optimistic, and he fears that the centuries-old tenets of cultural and religious pluralism in Indonesia could fail. A commercialization of values and life styles is flooding the globe accompanied by consumerism that quickly infiltrates traditional lifestyles. Just as the commercialization of culture is conquering hierarchical societies, so are universal humanitarian ideals, stemming from globe-spanning discussions on, most prominently, human rights and gender equality. At the same time, fundamentalist Islamic movements have been growing stronger; some of them defining themselves as the fight for moral legislation against the hedonistic lifestyle of the West. Rising concerns are being voiced in Indonesia, fears that the traditional cultures of the archipelago will be lost in the tide of global waves.

The public appearance of Indonesian women reflects these influences. The image of a Javanese Ibu<sup>3</sup> wearing sarong and kebaya, was propagated as official dress code by President Sukarno for his wives, to which the *slen-dang*, a cloth thrown over the shoulder traditionally used to carry babies

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<sup>2</sup> Magnis-Suseno, Franz von: Javanische Weisheit und Ethik. Studien zu einer östlichen Moral, München, Wien 1981.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibu*, the Indonesian word for mother, is used as formal address for women.



was later added.<sup>4</sup> The latter, meant to suggest motherly concern for society was also worn by Ibu Tin, President Suharto's wife during his 30 year presidency, and Indonesia's first female head of state, President Megawati. More recently, a new trend for wearing Islamic dress is intensifying: the jilbab headscarf with a long-sleeved, knee-length blouse and trousers. Clothing is influenced primarily by Javanese culture and religions, further proof of this island's dominance over the rest of the archipelago, not only politically, but also culturally and ethically. The changing trends also mirror how values in Indonesian society are in transition.

The book does not intend to provide a sociologically representative picture. Instead, we focus on the fault lines where cultures meet, overlap and chafe against each other. We are interested in the fracturing that occurs there: ostracism, value dichotomy, ambiguity, the search for a niche, for individual expression and diverse life choices. We have researched how women are coping with the social changes occurring around them, and how they find answers to these shifts in values and norms. We discovered that their strategies differ greatly from the picture traditionally presented in the media. We deliberately looked behind the scenes, because it is there – and this applies to all societies – that the deviations, the violations and the extravagances are hidden from public view. Contrary worlds and subcultures tend to develop with more vehemence the stronger and more extensive the pressure of repressive societies tends to be. This is clearly visible in art and literature. If we, on our search for the identities of Indonesian women, have uncovered such deviations, it is not with the wagging finger of morality, but in empathy with the very human ways of dealing with the double standards of normative structure and the realization that order and disorder, movement and anti-movement, adaptability and opposition are always only two sides of the same coin.

In the course of our observations and reflections for this book, we have continually come back to what we wrote during our earlier stays in Indonesia, in 1982 and from 1985-1988<sup>5</sup>, comparing things now to what we saw and also how we looked at them at the time. In the course of two decades, not only has reality changed, but also the observers themselves. The differ-

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<sup>4</sup> Bemmelen Sita van/Grijns, Mies: What has Become of the Slendang? Changing Images of Women and Java, in: Antlov, Hans/ Hellmann, Jorgen (Publisher.): *The Java that Never Was. Academic Theories and Political Practices*, Münster 2005, p.97–133.

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Berninghausen, Jutta/ Kerstan, Birgit: *Die Töchter Kartinis. Berichte und Reportagen aus dem Leben indonesischer Frauen*, Berlin 1984.; also: Berninghausen/Kerstan: *Wer die Wahl hat, hat die Qual. Mütter und Töchter – eine Geschichte über die Veränderung von Lebensbedingungen und sozialen Normen in Mittel-Java*, in: *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, No. 21/22, Köln 1988; and Berninghausen/Kerstan, *Emanzipation wohin? Frauen und Selbsthilfe auf Java*, IKO Publishers, Frankfurt 1991.

ences to back then are as equally interesting as to what has remained unchanged, as this shows the cultural imprints and values engraved into the deeper layers of our beings, both on the part of the observers as well as those observed.

In the first part of our book, we highlight the different regions of Indonesia and the varying issues that affect the lives of women.

After 20 years, we returned to our research village in Java. We had the distinct impression the world had barely turned since then. Based on the example of two mothers and their daughters, we describe typical life in rural Java: the classic division of labor, the female scope of activity and the proverbial power they hold behind the scenes.

Bali, Island of Gods, revered by Western tourists as the »Land of Smiles« and a life of ease, has a much darker side to it. In accordance with the accepted tenets of Balinese Hinduism, women on this island have far less influence and decision-making authority than in most Muslim communities in Indonesia.

On the neighboring island of Lombok, income-earning opportunities in the local economy are so limited that many women leave as migrant workers for Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Their search for a better life often leads to a situation devoid of rights and prone to abuse that in many cases comes close to human trafficking.

On Sumba, the »poorhouse« of the Eastern Indonesian Islands, a feudal system is still in place in which families can keep members of the lowest social class as bonded labour handed down to them by birthright. At the same time, however, there are emancipated Sumbanese women who vocally claim their right to equal opportunity.

Aceh became known to the world after the devastating tsunami, which took nearly 200,000 lives in 2004. It is a region closely tied to Islam and has been known as the »Terrace of Mecca« for nearly a thousand years. Aceh suffered through two decades of civil strife before the tsunami struck. Today, elements of Islamic law have been introduced, and public whippings of women found guilty of adultery has commenced. How do women feel about their subjugation under such sharia rules? How have they dealt with the trauma of the recent natural catastrophe? How have they coped with death and destruction? What fateful stories do they have to tell?

The second part of the book explores how political, economic and social changes in Indonesia are reflected in women's roles in family and society.

How do Indonesian women participate in public life, and how has their involvement changed over the last few decades? Has the reform process fol-

lowing Suharto's fall in 1998 had any effect? Has democratization and decentralization led to more gender equality? What is a woman's place in the family and community? Are women who pull the strings from behind the scenes the true leaders, their men only figureheads? Interviews with women in public office: mayor, councilor, member of parliament, portray how these women perceive their roles, who their role models are and how they are accepted in their communities. Our conversations with activists in the Indonesian women's movement indicate how feminist ideals are connected with the objectives of other social movements.

With regard to the private sphere, our short biographies of women from different social groupings and classes shed light on how rationale figures in the process of choosing a boyfriend or husband. Although pragmatic reasons for entering steady partnerships do play a role in Western societies, they are usually discounted in favor of love and passion. In Indonesia, however, marriage for love is still a relatively new development, though gaining in popularity. The mix of emotion and rational thinking in relationships between men and women can take many different forms in Indonesia today.

How important is gainful employment for the identity of Indonesian women? In Western countries, women have worked very hard to gain equal standing with men in their careers, often at the cost of carrying a double, or even triple social load. Indonesian women have always been expected to contribute to the family's income, despite the propagation of the ideal of the »housewife« by the Soeharto regime in the 1970s and 1980s. In Javanese tradition, worrying about economic security has always been considered a profane and base pursuit, happily left to the womenfolk, while the men focused on politics and civil service jobs.

Globalization has altered the economic situation in Indonesia, as it has almost everywhere else. The rift between rich and poor remains intact despite the emergence of a new middle class. Outsourcing by Western industries to cheap labor countries has created jobs, but the pay is seldom enough to support a family. Women are particularly disadvantaged with incomes at the lowest end of the scale. In the informal, micro-entrepreneurial sector, many are still battling for subsistence. On the other hand, there are some very successful Indonesian businesswomen who, with their proverbial business sense, have outdone their husbands.

Torn between antagonizing ideals – the personal freedoms idealized by Western consumer society on the one hand, and mainly Islamist morality and fundamentalist role models on the other – we look at how women find their own identity in this charged atmosphere of divergent values. The

great pressure to yield to Muslim ideals also spurs resistance. Feminist activists and NGOs are battling the enforcement of the Islamist sharia in many districts of Indonesia, the strict codes of conduct ruled by Arabic-Islamic norms. They are fighting against violence against women in the home and society, against female circumcision, for better working conditions, for equal income and more opportunity for women in public office. Interestingly, some of the Muslim women's organizations are particularly active in pursuing these goals. Can Islam and gender equality go together?

The second part of our book ends in an interview with the Indonesian author in our triumvirate, a woman who grew up with her family in Germany, but spent most of her adult life in Indonesia. She has embraced those elements from both Eastern and Western lifestyles she deems right and fitting; this cultural mix has shaped an unusual life journey. Where does she see the advantages and the drawbacks for women in such different environments?

Women in Indonesia, as do women all over the world, yearn for fulfilled lives. In every society different paths and formulas lead to happiness, love, security and prosperity. Each follows its own logic, reflecting individual economic, cultural, historical and personal factors. Of course, these strategies are by no means interchangeable, and there is no ideal way. We are often such captives of our cultural systems that we are unable to look from a different perspective, unable to expand our field of vision to include other possibilities. It is only once we begin to understand and appreciate answers to life's most important questions that differ from our own, that new perspectives open up before our eyes.

## **I. Women's Lives in the Archipelago – a Cultural Kaleidoscope**

Indonesia is a multicultural nation, a conglomeration of over 300 ethnic groups and languages. Each region has its own traditions, customs and peculiarities and an Indonesian woman will usually prefer to identify with her native culture: she will call herself Balinese, Batak, Minang or Sundanese. Nevertheless Indonesian national values are deeply rooted in the central philosophy of Pancasila, which is based on the principle of »Unity in Diversity«. The efforts to create unity from numerous and diverse social groupings is exactly what the nation of Indonesia is all about. However, during the struggle for independence and the years of nation-building, putting this principle into practice has presented a continuous challenge.

The principle of »Unity in Diversity« is extremely important for a country like Indonesia. Social critic and professor of philosophy Franz von Magnis-Suseno<sup>6</sup> explains in a 1995 interview that the formation of the Indonesian nation was not based on ethnic, but rather ethical unity, and more precisely the wish to be united. This wish stems from a sense of common history, not from natural factors such as a common language, ethnic background, culture or religion. A multitude of ethnicities and faiths in Indonesia were unified by a common history under colonialization and the ensuing struggle for independence, fuelled by the hope of living together in a sovereign nation-state. This view is also expressed by Dwi Winarno in his 2006 civic education manual for universities. He believes the idea of a unified Indonesian nation was formed and gained momentum only with the prospect of a national identity at the time the republic was formally established.<sup>7</sup>

The management of pluralism in Indonesia's democratic political system has become an important issue of public debate after the rigid centralistic control of ethnic and religious diversity ended with Soeharto's downfall in 1999. However, the roles and social position of women in different cultural settings in Indonesia hardly feature in public discussion inside Indonesia. Our collection of interviews and stories from Java, Bali, Lombok, Sumba and Aceh explores the diversity of the roles and position of women in the Indonesian archipelago. Is there an overriding image of »the Indonesian woman«? What are the role models of younger women? What makes Indonesian women different from women in the West?

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<sup>6</sup> Ref. Chapter 1: Interview with Franz von Magnis-Suseno.

<sup>7</sup> Winarno, Dwi: »Paradigma Baru. Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan«, Jakarta 2006, p. 44.

We look into women's decision-making powers and their concepts of personal autonomy. How do rural Javanese women use their proverbial power behind the scenes? How strong is the position of Balinese women who can be seen as temple dancers, caring mothers and hard-working labourers? What does Sumba's clan culture mean for women of the nobility and members of the slave-like lower class? How do women in Lombok cope with the increasing pressure of migration to make a living? And how have the political changes in Aceh, after the tsunami, affected the position of women?

## **The Power Behind the Scenes: Mothers and Daughters in Rural Central Java**

»Can you please tell us where we must turn to get to Gentuk?« They stand there with guarded looks. »Gentuk? No idea. Why do you want to go there?« »We want to meet with Ibu Broto.« »Ah? Ibu Broto in Gentuk! Are you the two German ladies who lived here years ago? I am from the neighboring village.« Their suspicion is suddenly gone and they show us the way to Gentuk. We pass green rice paddies and sugar cane fields. We are driving to »our« village, the one we stayed in with our small children for more than a year. Today, Birgit and I are on a trip into the past and we are very curious about what has changed during 20 years since we were last here.

Gentuk is a village in the middle of Java, near the small town of Klaten. Seventy families lived in Gentuk back then, most of them working in the surrounding fields. My oldest daughter Charlotte, called Lolo in the village, was only two years old when we came here to do our research project. Birgit's son Max (nicknamed Makromo by the villagers) was born here.

The house we rented from a neighbor featured two rooms with a cement floor, a dirt floor kitchen behind it outside, and a small tub to have a wash in. We had 20 watts of electricity, and that was a luxury indeed!<sup>8</sup> There was one communal toilet in the village square which had been built with a grant from the government. It was more or less our private privy, since the villagers preferred to use the river as they always had – and for washing and bathing as well.

Village life was a paradise for Lolo. Early in the morning, she ran barefoot out of the house to where the other children were already waiting for her. We had to drag her back at dusk, squealing in protest. Sometimes she had already snuggled into the family bed at her best friend Sisri's house. We never had to worry about Lolo. The social net was so densely knit in the village that we knew she would be looked after. There was no automobile traffic to worry about. Only one family with a metal workshop had a small van. Every few days they drove into town and returned only at nightfall.

Baby Makromo was carried around in a *slendang* (traditional shawl) all day by the women of the village, gently rocked to sleep. Our children soon

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<sup>8</sup> The rent for this little house was 30 euros annually. We accepted, finding the price extremely reasonable but the other villagers were unanimously of the opinion that the landlord was overcharging us.

became beloved village mascots and through them we gained contact to the women in the village, soon becoming involved in the large and small dramas that occurred.

Our research was on the question of what effect the economic strength of the women, their bargaining power, had on their sphere of influence within the family. Cutting to the chase: we found our original thesis of a woman's influence in family affairs as directly related to her economic position to be unsubstantiated. Over two-thirds of the village women actually earned more than their husbands, but that didn't mean that they made the decisions.<sup>9</sup> There were cases in which a woman paid for her husband's motorbike from her own earnings, but she continued to walk to market carrying her heavy load. We discovered that economic leverage was not the only factor in determining a woman's influence in the family. Our results supported a truth Indonesians have known for ages, that a person's status is more important than monetary wealth. Status is determined only in part by economic clout while normative gender roles, education and social function are other decisive factors.<sup>10</sup>

Status played a major role in our farewell party, for example. The entire village was involved in the preparation for days. It was a huge feast. No expense was spared, and the event was talked about for years afterward. The women cooked for days, the girls practiced dances to be performed on the stage the men had built. As our own contribution, Birgit and I hired a theater group, known for its critical take on society, to rehearse and perform a play featuring the village's youth. There had been games and competitions all afternoon for the children, and in the evening there was food, song and dance. Even we white lady researchers were gently forced on stage to sing the German national anthem to an enthusiastic audience. Late at night, the young men of the village danced to Dangdut<sup>11</sup> music, while the girls stood nearby and watched them with smoldering eyes. We were deeply touched by all the trouble everyone had gone to, but at some point we also recognized that the village had greatly benefitted by our presence in the village as well. For the first time in the history of the village not only the Lurah (village mayor) and his wife had come to Gentuk to partake in the festivities, but also the Bupati, the district head, who had been a revered and powerful man ever since Soeharto's government. The villagers were only too happy to spend their hard-earned money on such an honor.

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<sup>9</sup> Kerstan/Berninghausen 1991, page 158.

<sup>10</sup> Kerstan/Berninghausen 1991, page 243.

<sup>11</sup> Dangdut is a music of Arabic origin often accompanied by erotic dancing and singing woman and enjoyed by Indonesian men at village festivals or by young urban men in special discotheques.



So although Birgit and I had received so much from the gracious villagers, they greatly benefited from our stay as well, and not only in form of the cow we presented the women's organization in gratitude, and whose calves were named Bromo and Lolo. Through our presence the village had gained considerable status. Even the local women's group garnered more attention from the financiers of their projects. Our final farewell was a tearful, sad parting, proof of how much the friendship with the two white researchers had meant to them.

We came to the village with the help of the LP3ES<sup>12</sup>, a non-governmental organization (NGO) which supported the small, local women's credit and savings clubs. Gentuk also had its women's and young women's associations. Among other things, they had installed a communal fish pond and vegetable garden.

The members of these clubs deposit small sums into a group savings account on a weekly basis. As their joint capital grows, they are able to apply for small loans they can use for daily expenditures or things they need to run their small businesses with. There are countless such savings and loan clubs all over Indonesia. They evolved from a traditional lottery system called *arisan* in which members regularly pay a fixed amount into the pot. At each *arisan* meeting, lots are drawn and the winner receives the entire pot. This cyclical savings scheme enables rural women to purchase higher priced things they would otherwise never have been able to afford. LP3ES, like many NGOs in those days, built on this older system to help villages establish revolving savings and credit schemes and to make sure that the group leaders received the training necessary to efficiently distribute the micro-loans to their members, sums so small that normal banks would never consider dealing with them.

These women's co-ops are quite common in Indonesia. Many were started in the early days of the Republic and they often function better than the male-run credit associations.<sup>13</sup> This is partly due to the fact that Javanese women traditionally handle the money. »Men are no good with money« is a statement that everyone on Java will agree with. According to the traditional Javanese ethic, the finer higher spheres in life (*halus*) are distinctly

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<sup>12</sup> The non-governmental organization LP3ES (Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial - Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education and Information) was started in Jakarta in 1971. From 1979 on, it had a branch office in Klaten which did research in the classic areas of community development in rural areas and the establishment of self-help and income generating projects with foreign aid financing. The success of the women's savings and credit program was a prominent feature of the organization. Ref. Kerstan/Berninghausen 1991, page 278 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Ref. Kerstan/Berninghausen 1991, Chapter III. Jutta Berninghausen also worked in a co-op project of the ILO from 1998 to 1994 promoting women's groups and co-ops.

separate from lowly work (*kasar*), to which money and the material security of the family are counted. Day to day household management is a female domain, and thus the men can devote themselves to spiritual and political issues. As Nils Mulder explains it, prestige is much more important than having control of the pocketbook.<sup>14</sup> Even today it is not uncommon for a man to hand over his earnings to his wife, who then pays him an allowance.<sup>15</sup> The allowance is often much more than she keeps for the family or herself because social norms influence her behavior more strongly than her economic status.<sup>16</sup>

We were happy to hear, even before our renewed visit to Gentuk, that the small savings and loans clubs of the women in and around Klaten had joined forces to form a autonomous, economically viable women's co-op. That is why we decide to stop in at the co-op headquarters on our way, where the chairwoman and one of her five employees proudly report on their success. The woman's cooperative Setara (Equality) supports women's rights so that they can achieve equality alongside of men in society. The cooperative has existed since 1998 with a legally approved charter and boasts 11,370 female members. Sixty-six smaller divisions are responsible for repaying the loans to the co-op. This system of *tanggung renteng* (mutual responsibility) ensures timely repayment. Each member can take out a loan of up to 800 euros; the interest rate is 2% per month on average. This is higher than the usual 17% per annum of a bank loan, however easy access makes it attractive. Most rural women need only modest sums, perhaps to pay school tuition or to make a small business investment. The co-op is a real alternative to the banks, which require securities the women do often not have. The co-op also arranges training seminars for its members on various business skills.

Shortly before our visit in June 2006, an earthquake had destroyed a large number of village homes in and around Yogyakarta and Klaten and had killed almost 6000 people. The co-op Setara alone had lost 40 of its own members, and with them a total of 200 million rupiah (around 16,000 euros) in unpaid loans.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mulder 1996, page 84.

<sup>15</sup> Ref. Wiludjeng, H./Wibawa, D. S./Habsyah, A.: *Dampak Pembakuan Peran Gender terhadap Perempuan Kelas Bawah* di Jakarta, Jakarta 2005, page 48.

<sup>16</sup> Ref. also to research results already discussed in this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> When we heard of this tragedy, Birgit recommended to the coop than an aid package from the GTZ Deutschen Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit - German Agency for Technical Cooperation be integrated in the program. This support helped members who had become insolvent because of the destruction to their economic infrastructure. According to the GTZ the program is still a success today.

When we finally reach Gentuk, we find to our great surprise that time appears to have stood still there. Every house is the same as it was 20 years ago, nothing new has been built, nothing torn down. Only the metal workshop has been expanded and remodeled into a furniture manufacture. At the entrance to the village, a woman and her husband have started up a Kapuk<sup>18</sup> processing facility, and if the well-kept facade of their house is any proof, it must be going quite well.

The same green paddies surround the village with men and women working in them. Even the bare »ghost« tree on the horizon still threatens the villagers with its reminder of the horror of 1965, when the village chief came to dubious fame by having several communists murdered. Their corpses were buried under the tree and villagers have been keeping their distance since. The tree is haunted by child-eating monsters, so it is said, even today.

We have barely left our car when our old friends surround us. Ibu Upik, Ibu Mina, Ibu Broto...can it be that they are untouched by time? Or is it only that we, too, have grown older? Their children have grown up, but they seem as lively and healthy as they were 20 years ago. More villagers arrive to shake our hands. Everyone is laughing and shouting. We mistake some of the daughters for their mothers, so close is the resemblance. Most of the women over 50 speak only Javanese,<sup>19</sup> and none of them are wearing a head scarf. We ask if more women are wearing head scarves than 20 years ago, but they say, no, everything here is pretty much the same. They only put on veils when they visit the mosque. They don't know that sharia elements have been adopted by some districts and have never heard of the controversial Anti-Pornography Law.

We walk from house to house to visit, and are offered food and drink at each one. Our younger children start complaining about having to sit still everywhere, but are fascinated at the same time with the place their mothers lived for a time before they were born. They drink the first coffee of their lives, gagging, and gasp as their cups are politely refilled. Normally, no one drinks coffee in Gentuk; the villagers have brewed it in honor of their foreign guests. They are very disappointed that neither Lolo nor Makromo, our eldest children, have come with us. They are both at university, and when the women hear that Lolo will be a doctor soon, they insist that she come to give them all a shot once she has graduated. Injections are magic medicine, and only a handful of villagers has ever had one.

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<sup>18</sup> A kind of rough cotton, also used to stuff mattresses.

<sup>19</sup> We had taken two Javanese students with us for a few months as research assistants and translators for the interviews. We still have close contact with one of them, Marlin, today.



In Gentuk, there are only three known kinds of cures: obat (pills), suntik (injections) und opname (hospital). The hospital is of course the very last resort, for the wealthy, and one that a patient rarely survives. The three cures complement the three kinds of illness known to the villagers: pusing (»dizziness«, which refers to feeling unwell for any reason), masuk angin (»invaded by wind«, which can be a cold or other mild to semi-serious illness) and angin duduk (»trapped wind«, any serious condition ranging from influenza to death).

Our old friends fill us in on the gossip, the weddings, deaths and divorces. Ibu Warni has left her husband, Jeki and Bambang are separated, but their parents have reunited. We hear that Sisri, the clever girl our Lolo used to play with has become »crazy«. She runs around in the nearby town with torn clothing and unkempt hair. After finishing school she went to Jakarta, where she worked in the textile industry. She supposedly had an affair with the foreman in the factory and went crazy after he »broke up« with her. What a horrible truth must lurk behind this story! We have heard so much about the exploitation of young women in the textile factories. Long hours, insecure employment and minimal wages are the norm and, more often than not, they are the objects of sexual harassment, or worse, by their employers.

We ask Ibu Broto if she thinks the general situation has gotten better or worse for the villagers in the last two decades. She says that life has gotten

better. Most houses now have a toilet, most families have a motorbike, three even own a car. The kapuk manufacture and the furniture workshop each have their own van and the man who once owned a horse-and-carriage now has an automobile to taxi people around in. Many of the younger villagers have a cell phone and the furniture workshop even has a computer, she thinks. The farmers can now rent a motorized plow instead of using a water buffalo to prepare the fields. It is cheaper, but perhaps not as good for the soil and crops as in the old days, she muses. But otherwise, everything is pretty much the same. Everyone works either in the fields or sells their produce and wares at market.

We think the reason things have not changed is because even 20 years ago Gentuk's income from agriculture was already slightly above subsistence level, so that the villagers did not have to worry about additional means of income. In other districts of Klaten, which depended on crafts and manufacture even back in 1986, the developments have been remarkable in comparison. Entire families are now producing furniture for the world market. Traditional smithy work has become exportable as well, since many of the table and chairs manufactured with rattan and wood have wrought iron elements to them. However, there is no trace of this jump into global economy in Gentuk, where small-scale agriculture continues to dominate. We also see that small-scale trade is still in the hands of women in Central Java. The markets are populated 80% by women, both as customers and vendors.

Barefoot, Ibu Broto leads us out of the village. She wants to show us her beautifully kept rice paddy. No one has better plants than she does, she boasts. Most villagers in Central Java own about 0,2 hectare of land and can produce enough rice for their own consumption. Traditional female work is planting, weeding, harvesting and winnowing. The men are responsible for irrigation and plowing, but since the introduction of a special sickle for short-stemmed hybrid plants, the men now often help with the harvest as well. This has caused women to lose a lucrative side-business as harvest helpers to their neighbors. Many women also plant vegetables on the sides of their paddies and they still try to find extra jobs in the fields or sell vegetables and homemade snacks in the markets.

Twenty years ago, some of Gentuk's women earned some extra cash with embroidery work on wedding dresses. We meet some of them again on our walk around the village, as they sit in front of their doors and show us the beautifully embroidered scarves that a market vendor regularly buys from them.

Ibu Broto reports that the kapuk manufacture employs four young women and eight young men of the village, for a daily wage of 1–2 euros. Other

men have found work as carpenters, or jobs in the nearby tobacco factory, or they ferry people around on motorbikes in a taxi service in the nearby town.

We visit Ibu Mina in her home. Years ago, she and Ibu Broto were the two most influential women in the village. Ibu Mina even more so, because her husband had the prestigious position of foreman in a state-owned sugar cane refinery. Now her eldest son lives in her house with his family, while Ibu Mina and her husband have moved in with their daughter Ira in a neighboring village. She has hastily powdered her face for the visitors in a show of urban sophistication. Ten years ago, Ibu Mina had, once again, separated from her husband and gone to Jakarta, where she had a hard time until she decided to return to the village and make peace with her husband. Far from a shameful return, she has earned great prestige as first the woman of Gentuk to have actually lived in the big city.

Both women tell us how life has treated them. Back in the mid Eighties, their daughters were young women, but are now both around the age of forty. We are interested in how the lives of the daughters differ from those of their mothers. Have they been able to do everything their mothers had hoped for them? In 1986, the wedding of Ibu Mina's daughter Ira was the first big event in the village we experienced, and one that kept tongues wagging for months.

A wedding in Java is not necessarily a happy event. The bride and groom are subject to a very specific ritual and ceremony, and are required to sit on a dais with throne-like chairs. Invited guests, seated as an audience of rows, observe the proceedings as the couple sits for hours under heavy make-up and brocaded wedding garments.

Ira's wedding was a scandal, not only because she had been living »in sin« for months with her groom in his house, but mainly because she chose him against her parents' will, whereupon Ibu Mina and her husband disowned her. It was impossible for Ira to stay composed throughout the lengthy ceremony. We remember seeing her sitting on her throne, sobbing and dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief so that her make-up would not get ruined. This day marked a grave step, one for which she could not yet anticipate the consequences. Every time new guests entered the room, she saw that they were not her relenting parents, and she started to cry again.

In a small village of only about sixty families, this rejection was a harsh penalty indeed. Every time Ira came out of her husband's home she saw her parent's house, not ten meters away. Though they ran into each other constantly, not a single soul in her family would speak to her. She was shut out from festivities and other events in the village, since nearly everyone sided with her parents.



Her girlfriends did continue to meet with Ira and admired her courage, mixed with a bit of pity, but none of them gave her open support. Ira was the first girl in the village who had dared to oppose her parents, even though all the young ladies were equally skeptical of the traditional arranged marriages and would have preferred to choose their own husbands. Ira had had to wait for several months before she could legalize her union. Though eighteen and exempt from her parents' permission to marry, Indonesian Islamic law stipulates that any women of any age must be repre-

sented by a wali, a legal guardian from her family. At long last, an uncle agreed to be Ira's wali, and her grandmother offered her house for the wedding.

Why was Ibu Mina so severe with her daughter? Could she, only eighteen years older than her daughter, not empathize with Ira's wish?

At the time of her daughter's wedding, Ibu Mina was thirty-six and already belonged to the older generation in the village. Three of her five children were adults, her eldest son was studying for a business degree at the university of the nearby town Solo. Ibu Mina's handshake is as definite as the woman herself. She is not the small-boned, pretty Javanese often depicted on postcards. Years of hard work have left lines in her broad face. She is compact and strong, her hair bound in a tight bun, while the smile in her face emphasizes the energy she exudes. It is not easy to ignore her. Ibu Mina has worked hard all of her life, but she can be proud of what she has accomplished. Though she went to school for only three years and speaks only the local dialect of Javanese, as wife of the village provost and chairwoman of the women's association she has been one of Gentuk's most influential women. She and her husband owned the largest house, and her income, not least from the sale of eggs, was about 60 euros more a month than her peers. Together with her income from land leases, she could have supported her family, in a pinch, even without her husband's sizeable income.



Married off at fifteen by her parents, Ibu Mina moved to her new husband's village, as is customary in Java. She felt out of place there. She had nothing of her own, save the small coconut grove her parents had given her as a dowry. The house she lived in belonged to her parents-in-law. She was accepted, but only at the lowest rung of the family hierarchy. She was lucky, though, because she had known before her marriage who her husband was to be, and he was even an attractive man, she thought. Most of her girl friends had seen their husbands for the first time at their weddings. Whenever she had an argument with her husband, which was fairly often in the first few years, Ibu Mina packed up her few belongings and moved back to her own village with the children until he came and begged her to return. Ibu Mina was always a temperamental sort who resisted any kind of pressure and wasn't afraid to show her displeasure. Her husband was never faithful to her, but then most of the men she knew weren't. It never really bothered her, as long as he treated his mistresses »like a used banana leaf the rice was served on, after eating.« However, eventually he began staying with them, and once even fell in love so badly he didn't come home for months.

Ibu Mina had done all she could to cure him of his infidelity. She had even spent a whole night on the grave of her ancestors, where ghosts abound, to gain the strength to show her husband that she wasn't afraid of anything. One day he brought his mistress along to a festival in her home village. She went berserk and attacked him with a knife as he was walking through the village; a long scar on his cheek is now a memento of that night. The religious leaders in the village rejected her petition for divorce because she was pregnant with her fourth child.

Researchers usually describe the emotional relationship between married couples as loose with clearly defined gender roles. Where work and leisure activities are segregated, the contact between a man and woman is often reduced to a few minutes each day. Contacts with friends and neighbors of the same gender tend to be more intense and intimate than with the spouse. A strict division of roles in the marriage intensifies this effect.<sup>20</sup> These days, even if couples in the middle and upper classes are working toward an ideal based on partnership, most marriages still function on a certain level of detachment.

Jealousy wasn't Ibu Mina's only worry. How should she care for her children and herself if he was not there for her? As any woman in the village, she couldn't imagine an entire life of sitting at home, washing clothes, cooking and caring for the children. Besides, it was also extremely boring. The problem was, her children were still too small to be left alone all day.

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<sup>20</sup> Mulder 1996, p. 90.



So she decided to sell eggs at market. »The first time, I took a whole basket of eggs to sell in town,« she remembers, »I'd bought them on credit. At the entrance to the market, I tripped and fell and all of the eggs broke! I had no idea how to pay back the loan!« But she quickly adds that she never gave up. Today, she is proud of the fact that she is a shrewd business woman, well-versed in the ritual of bargaining. A contemptuous look at the goods for sale is as equally expected as the more-or-less contemptuous toss of the agreed upon sum of coins on to the table.

In the women's savings group, Ibu Mina also took care of the kitty and the ledger with the same mercantile passion and shrewdness. She was the first chairperson of the group. If she didn't need her ballpoint pen to calculate something with on the palm of her hand, she kept it stuck into the bun on the back of her head. The cash box was actually just a plastic bag safely stowed away in her brassiere. Collecting the dues was a hour-long ceremony filled with joking, laughter and little arguments that could be heard in every hut in the village. The total was always off, because although the women desperately needed money, they were also careless with it, hiding it here and there, and only finding it crumpled in a sarong-fold or under a mat after a long, wailing search.

Ibu Mina made most of the financial decisions for her family even though her husband had a wider range of contacts. He was literate and could speak Indonesian, not just rural Javanese. He negotiated with officials and had more confidence in dealing with superiors and outsiders. Society expected this of him, but in her small world of the town market and the surrounding villages, Ibu Mina had the greatest possible freedoms and she was well-known and liked.

Women are a common sight on the streets in Indonesia, not the exception as in many Arabic countries. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the way women are often considered fair game in the sexually more »promiscuous« industrial countries, Indonesia women are highly respected for their roles as married woman and mother. The most extreme disparity between genders in Indonesia concerns leisure time. Women's activities are restricted to necessary tasks, while the men have lots of time to enjoy themselves in countless ways. Women may leave the home after dark only in the accompaniment of a male relative and only for an acceptable reason. This means that if Ibu Mina had gone to a warung (a food stall on the street) in the town, and had sat there like the men, eating and drinking, possibly even conversing with others or playing cards, she would immediately have been called a whore by all self-respecting mothers. Of course the village women had fun with each other, though mostly during the day, while washing the clothes in the river, preparing festivities or at work in the paddies and fields.