

Six Case Histories Illustrating Perpetual Poverty in Indonesia

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Abstract Recent studies have shown that a “happiness index” correlates with economies that do not show excessive gap between rich and poor. In other words, even rich people cannot really be happy when surrounded by extreme poverty, no matter how strongly they ignore or deny such destitute conditions. Accordingly, we need methods of securing much better results from “throwing money” at poverty problems than have heretofore occurred. Some Achenese of my acquaintance feel that perhaps 80% of the tremendous amount of post-tsunami disaster aid was lost to corruption and thievery.

Keywords: Xenophobia, gotong royong, post-colonial mentality, money ethics, “Bantu Ibu”, communal conformity

1. Introduction

This paper presents a few of the technical obstacles to poverty alleviation, collected from my personal experiences living nine years in Indonesia. Our objective is to provide NGO’s or individuals some warnings of the security problems of their well-intended charitable efforts.

We need means of securing the safety of donors’ contributions as provided by Social Scientist judgments, rather than the collateral required for bank loans, which is simply not available to the vast majority of the poor and hungry of the world who are nevertheless strong, honest, and eager to work. In short, small amounts of capitalization, micro-financed, may be a more effective solution to the world’s poverty problems, than aid programs involving millions of dollars.

An overview of some of the Social Science problems as presented here would be: 1) money ethics, 2) “gotong royong” or village mutual assistance, 3) the “beggar mentality” and its derivation from colonial survival tactics, 4) “Bantu Ibu” (the felt need to stay at home to help mother), 5) xenophobia (“the foreign devil”, according to projective testing), and, 6) the role of IQ.

2. Case Histories

The following case histories are all based upon years of observation and interaction with the families involved. The study is justified by the extreme difficulties encountered in alleviating one of the perceived primary causes of terrorism, which is hopeless destitution.

a) My first observation concerns the ETHICS OF MONEY, a matter that is clear in the Sunnah (“way”) or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), and yet which seems unknown to Indonesia’s poor villagers. The ethic to which I refer derives from a Hadith (teaching of the Prophet, as distinct from revelation in the Qur’an) that states that money which is given to you must be used for the purpose for which it is given. Observing this single element of the Prophet’s Sunnah would render poverty alleviation so much easier and more reliable. The problem is, a certain Indo-Malay custom known as “gotong royong” often contradicts this Hadith in actual application.

A humble Javanese couple, Bapak Tin Harto and Ibu Sutini, had a single, very beautiful daughter named Artin. I picked up Artin’s school expenses when she was just graduating Junior High School in Yogyakarta and longed to continue to high school, even though her parents did not have the Entrance Fee, or the monthly school fees for that matter, which are no small obstacle for literally millions of Javanese children. There is no free public education in Indonesia, one of Suharto’s many crimes against his people.

The family lived in a traditional kampung house within Yogyakarta city, complete with a Javanese “pendopo” (guest pavilion) in front, in which they arranged Taraweh prayers for the neighborhood every Ramadan evening. Nevertheless, Bapak Hartin had no savings and a government servant’s pension that was woefully inadequate.

Eventually, Artin graduated high school successfully and I then promised her tearful mother that I would see her through until she had her college degree. So I identified a new, private institution in Yogya that trained its students for employment in the media – radio and TV broadcasting in particular. I felt Artin would do very well in such a field. She easily passed the entrance exam for this course. An American Muslim who was known in Hollywood’s movie acting circles reviewed Artin’s photos and biodata and agreed to put her through college. He sent the first year’s expenses.

About this time, Artin’s father, who was very bored with his retirement, decided to try driving a taxi to earn extra money. Everyone begged him not to do so, as it was felt he did not have the character or skills to be a successful taxi driver. Indeed, within a few weeks, he was involved in an automobile accident that put him in the hospital.

Here is where their “money ethics” broke down. Without even asking my permission, Artin gave her entire first year of college expenses to her parents to pay her father’s hospital bill. In a single stroke, Artin’s college education was destroyed. This should not have happened. There were other resources in the family, which, with a little effort, might have paid this expense.

However, apparently primarily in order to avoid embarrassment, Artin’s parents more or less extorted her college funds to pay this bill, which had no part in my arrangement with the American donor. Pressures on Javanese children to care for their parents are universally intense, and Artin probably cannot be exactly blamed for sacrificing her only chance to move socio-economically upwards. On the other hand, social embarrassment is often a big factor in the breakdown of Islamic money ethics, which clearly require that gift money be used for the purpose intended by the donor.

Artin went to work as a housecleaner in a local hotel, and is now married with one small child, operating a roadside foodstall at the lowest level of Yogyakarta economic life. This in fact was exactly what her mother was doing when I first met Artin at age 14. There was absolutely no change in Artin’s destiny. At least, it can be said that Artin never again asked me for money. She understood full well the position she had put me in. Muslim donors should be aware of weaknesses in the Islamic ethics of their recipient communities in order to avoid such abortions of good intention.

b) My second case involves the consequences of ignoring “Gotong royong”, as mentioned above in the matter of donating cows (actually water buffalo) to a Javanese village rice farmer. This farmer did NOT spread our donations about the village. We gave him nine or ten cows for working the fields, as well as for breeding purposes. The main issue in his case was his loss of social status due to the gap between his growing wealth and the more or less destitute level of the other villagers, precisely because of his failure to practice “gotong royong” (which may also be loosely translated as “share the wealth”). He was ultimately forced to sell all of his cows save one, as mentioned. At least we saved him a bit of physical strain in his later years, but the end-use of most of the contributions collected on his behalf remains unknown.

The social balances of very-low-cash-flow villages are extremely delicate, and it would be very helpful for social scientists to study this issue and come up with policy proposals for charities who wish to operate among such communities. What we know from the case of Bapak Karjono, the rice farmer, is that you cannot safely give a poor farmer much more than his neighbors already have. Artin’s case demonstrates that funds donated to raise children to a level of education higher than their parents must be very rigidly controlled to avoid the danger of confiscation.

c) My third case study exemplifies a very pervasive problem in modern Indonesia, as I am sure it is in any self-perpetuating poverty area of the world, which is the “beggar mentality”. It appears that in order to plunder Indonesia’s inherent wealth for his own purposes, Suharto placed his country into a position of begging from the international community. How he did this is not the subject of our inquiry, however, one of its consequences has been to unlink economic reward from personal effort, a very dangerous departure from the Sunnah of Rasulullah (s.a.w.), which teaches that even carrying wood is better than begging for money.

Hartini Sulastri gave me a shy smile on a local train between Solo and Yogyakarta. That smile cost me years of effort and frustration. She was the fatherless daughter of a very sweet Ibu in Kampung Ngasinan near Solo, in Central Java. I used to take my breakfast with Hartini and her mother before my daily PhD fieldwork within the Solo Palace. Hartini was very faithful to her Javanese tradition of paying attention to older people. She often used to visit me, or accompany me shopping, and so on, with total propriety, exactly as a dutiful daughter might do. She said I was her only real father.

To make a long story short, together with my son in the USA, we paid off Hartini’s indebtedness to her neighbors (which was considerable) and set her up to trade in batik fabrics, one of Solo’s major industries. However, the income from this trading activity was seldom enough for anything more than the monthly price of meals. Another problem was that her mother fell and broke her hip, a problem common to old people. Since Suharto also failed to provide any safety-net healthcare for his people, the bills always came to me.

Then Hartini committed one of her cardinal sins against me personally (and not the only one of my charity recipients to do so), she married someone totally without consulting me or asking my permission, even though she had given me to believe that I was “as if” her true father.

Dilemma – what responsibility would I have to subsidize a marriage contracted without my knowledge? My answer was the Javanese answer, that is, none. Inevitably, my pity for Hartini’s wonderfully sweet Ibu caused me to relent, and my son and I continued to help, but always with the proviso that she ask her husband or his family for funds before asking us.

It was then that I began to recognize Hartini’s begging skills. Although I was later living in Malaysia, Hartini made sure she had a handphone and used it relentlessly to report her trials and tribulations. And her timing was ingenious. She always sent her little messages and prayers for my wellbeing at moments when I was most “down” or depressed with my own life, and this is one major reason I continued to care for her to some extent.

Indeed, this one example of a difficult charity project is only one of many symptoms of a whole cluster of problems that still await a professional analysis

of what we might call the “post-colonial culture” syndrome. Aside from their endemic poverty, formerly colonized people throughout the world tend to resemble each other in certain evasive or indirect power tactics that are still in place and insufficiently understood. They behave as if the “colonial master”, or someone, still owes them a living. Such behavior may even border on pathological lying or betrayal of trust which derives from the difficulty of maintaining local privacy when surrounded by powerful, unwanted colonizers. Such prevarication may be no longer necessary, yet it has been deeply instilled in the behavior of the local people, even against outsiders who now wish to help them.

d) My fourth case study is Ismawati, a tragic victim of “smother love”, truly a major factor in perpetuating family poverty in Indonesia. Isma was another schoolgirl who needed help to complete her high school education, which I provided along with an Australian friend then residing in Jakarta. She was the eldest of six children whose father had passed away, leaving only an uneducated and unemployable mother to care for the family. In the end, we got Isma through high school and a six-month intensive English course. The English course was a compromise forced upon us by her mother who needed her to earn money as soon as possible and vetoed the idea of her going to college for four years. The English course did not help very much, although most Indonesians imagine that it might.

Later, when I was residing in Malaysia, I urged Ismawati to come to work in a local factory, by means of which she could help her mother and younger siblings in a much more substantial way than she could from the 300 ringgits per month she was earning by clerking in a Jakarta pharmacy, which, being Chinese owned, required her to open her aurat (discard the scarf and long dresses she had always worn until then). When she lost even this employment, like Hartini, she married someone her mother urged upon her. Ismawati might have married well, had she been more obedient to me, due to a startling set of clear blue eyes for which she cannot account. However, her mother chose for her an unemployable local boy who ended up fathering a child with only half a brain, the burial of whom was my last donation to Isma’s cause.

By means of this disastrous marriage, her mother guaranteed that Ismawati would never leave the country. In addition, the man had apparently married Ismawati on the expectation of financial help from a foreign “Bapak Angkat”, namely me, which I could have warned her against had she informed me of the marriage plan. After the defective baby was born and buried, with my final donation, the husband got mad and ran away. Nevermind. Isma still has her mother and her “smother love”.

Here again, my Islamic rights as an adoptive parent, namely, to participate in the marriage of my own daughter, were totally ignored by this otherwise Islamically devout family. Ismawati does not ask me for money now, although she stays in contact. Her mother, like Artin's parents, has completely sabotaged any chance Isma might have had to raise the destiny-level of her entire family. She is now alone and unemployed, complaining of mice nibbling her toes while she sleeps due to leaky housing and the absence of governmental water supply or waste management infrastructure (another Suharto sin).. There is no money to repair this house, and I refuse to sink further funding into the "black hole" situation of her mother's stranglehold upon her.

e) My next nomination for this list of largely self-imposed obstacles to economic and social progress among the very poor, is "bantu Ibu" (helping mother). A former secretary to Indonesia's Minister of Religion was confronted some years ago by the daughter of a certain "itinerant preacher" (*da'i*) under government employ, with the challenge to do SOMETHING about her father, who insisted that she and all her younger sisters remain at home to help their mother after graduating from high school. This ministerial secretary referred the girl to me, then in Malaysia.

This young lady, whose name was Ratna Fauziah, spoke English with such intelligence that I agreed to put her through college. I also warned her that she must retain her virginity until graduation, which she did, although not without much travail along the way. Midway through Ratna's college career, her father, this so-called preacher or "*pencerama*" of Islam, abandoned her mother and family altogether and married a second wife, in a typical abuse of the polygamy option.. So Ratna became her family's only hope for success.

After continuing social and moral support, Ratna graduated with high marks in Information Technology and then married well, and now has a small family while working as a technical writer for a Jakarta company. Although her husband, like many of Indonesia's male youth, is not stably employed, she neither complains nor asks me for more money. Her younger sister also graduated from college, and then of course the other siblings made every effort to meet this new standard in the family's intellectual life. Ismawati's younger siblings might have done the same, had she not been so thoroughly sabotaged by her mother.

I consider Ratna one of the minority of successes among my personal charity efforts, but it was achieved mainly by means of her personal "spirit" which correctly identified her father's demand that she stay home and "bantu Ibu" as an evasion of his fatherly responsibilities. Ratna may have liked to have come to Malaysia for college, or perhaps even for marriage, but her father's

orders to “bantu Ibu” still functioned as an obstacle. It often seems a thankless task, trying to make up for the cruelty of mothers, fathers, or corrupt leaders, toward their own people.

f) A “failure of spirit” can also account for much personal suffering, and this is my fifth example. We’ll call this obstacle “xenophobia” on our list, although every form of this fear can be overcome with a little spirit. This obstacle is very common in perpetuating poverty around the world, since a lot of richer people and their NGO’s are really quite kind-hearted but are thwarted by the suspicion common to lesser educated folk, and many third-world governments as well.

Endang showed up in an English class I was endeavoring to conduct at the Masjid (Mosque) Syuhada in Yogyakarta. She was eager and already rather clever in her English usage. She confided to me that she needed the English for Islamic outreach work, as she loved her religion very much. After a few weeks, Endang disappeared. As she was one of my best students, I visited her village on the outskirts of Yogyakarta city to find out what had happened. Her brother greeted me suspiciously at the door, sat me down in the living room, and then disappeared in the back. When he came back, he pushed in my direction a card with the name “Allah” written on it in big Arabic script. He approached me malevolently and more or less pushed me to the door and out of the house.

Evidently, I, the “foreign devil”, was being exorcized. I never saw Endang, although when I visited a neighbor to find out what was happening, I was informed she was sick at home and was in fact being treated by a psychiatrist. This did not make any sense. The village appeared to be prosperous and well-educated. They could not be referring to the girl in my class. So I asked the neighbor for the name of the psychiatrist and went to visit him the next day at Yogya’s main government hospital.

This man told me a frightening story. He did not even recognize Endang’s name. His case load was so huge, 70 or 80 young people, he could not remember them all. The family had requested sedation and he had prescribed it. I asked him if he had examined the girl. He said that the power of the Javanese family in these parts was such that parents could request such medication, and usually get it merely by describing their child’s symptoms. His case load was full of young people breaking down and treated in this manner.

Later that day, I consulted with a psychology professor at Gajah Mada University, who confirmed this psychiatrist’s assessment of the situation. She outlined five conflicting demands upon the Javanese young people’s loyalty and obedience: 1) Javanese village culture, 2) the Islamic mosque, 3) Indonesian nationalism, stringently enforced under the name “Pancasila”, 4)

liberal western-style campus life, and 5) the global culture as seen everywhere on TV, in the movies, and advertising. Since I did not have a formal “research” status at that time, this Professor advised me not to concern myself with these matters to avoid being thrown out of the country.

Here is a primary research need for social scientists. These five influences, which also operate here in Malaysia, are very often at cross-purposes with each other. One of the main theories of the etiology of schizophrenia was suggested by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his famous “double-bind theory”. Those who cannot cope with the conflicting loyalties and attractions of these influences, break down. We urgently need honest and forthright analysis of these cross-purposes. “Cultures of poverty” sometimes win out in these struggles, as in Endang’s case, in which her aspirations as a young Muslimah were in fact the struggle of her own personality to transcend her village background. Then again, sometimes village culture or Mosque culture comes to the rescue of wayward college students who have gone to the big city.

When I was visiting Central Java about ten years later, I met one of Endang’s village neighbors along Yogyakarta’s famous Jalan Malioboro (named after the British General Marlboro, whose triple consonants the Javanese could not pronounce in its original form). She said that after Endang had been forcibly removed from my influence as a “foreign devil”, she had been forbidden from further education, forced to give up her Muslim clothing, and still sequestered in the family home. In other words, her spirit had been completely broken. Village Muslims dared not interfere. And neither did I, even though I had foreseen trouble reflected in the three diamond-like tears with which Endang told me that she had been summoned to see her family about continuing her studies. What untold misery lay behind those shy tears.

What is the solution to such legal cruelty, in which this “family pressure cooker” enjoyed exemption from charges of medical malpractice, criminal negligence, or even intervention by government social workers? Endang had an older sister who had found perhaps the only solution. Her spirit had evidently been strong enough to run away and completely break communications with the village family.

3. Analysis and Recommendations

One of the conflicts which Endang had been unable to resolve was the use of her native intelligence, otherwise known as “IQ”, as against her exorcist brother and a grossly overworked psychiatrist.

MENSA International operates out of its headquarters in London, and is devoted to the identification and nurturing of human intelligence. The

measurement of IQ has resulted in remarkably invariant results over the past hundred years, which have nothing to do with education or memory. IQ may best be likened to computing speed, a genetic inheritance like skin color – your gift from Allah swt. Use it well, because its numerical value has no relevance on the Day of Judgment, only how you used it.

The tests used by MENSA are culture-free. They are all graphic, involving no language items at all. Therefore, they cannot be said to favor left-brain verbal skills. MENSA went quickly into the former communist nations when they opened up to the modern world. And MENSA also tried to come into Indonesia in the 1990's.

Preliminary testing was done by London specialists whom I assisted in Jakarta, and we found a surprising number of high IQ's in Indonesian village youth. They were often unaware of their capacities because of seriously inadequate IQ tests used by the local schools, or, more interesting to us, to cultural priorities on communal harmony and cooperation in which individual initiative is systematically discouraged.

Our understanding of IQ is still not matched by any persuasive research in these other so-called intelligences (EQ, SQ). We know, however, that if the quantitative difference in standard IQ scores is greater than 20 points, young couples may have communication difficulties after marriage, such as not recognizing each other's humor, among other things. This is very stable data in an area in which EQ and SQ usually claim superior knowledge. We may say that, in the support of developing IQ resources, MENSA is equally sincere as many other well-intentioned NGO's engaged in human resource development, and has many social upgrading interests as well.

To make a long story short, after we had begun our testing program, the government closed us down. The official excuse was that MENSA-Indonesia refused to subscribe to Pancasila as the national ideology. Indeed, MENSA is forbidden by its own constitution to ally with any such ideology. What we knew full well, however, was that the Javanese social class system could not allow identifying IQ in the President's house maid that might be higher than his own. Our Indonesian experience suggests that IQ-phobia can be quite disruptive to economic and social development programs. However, under Indonesia's more recent democratization, MENSA has finally been legalized and may be used for identifying and supporting newly emerging intellectual resources, whether rural or urban in nature.

4. Conclusion

In closing, I can only assert the absolute necessity of loving all these young people. However, here in Malaysia, I wonder what is becoming of the

manhood upon whom our Muslim sisters are taught to find their love and protection. It may be increasingly difficult to aid and succor young families in the face of the increasing dominance of women in university and professional life, due to the default of their men.

To end on a local note, the Malaysian Islamic University has explained the dominance of women students (now approaching 80% of the student population) as the direct result of an entirely correct refusal to discriminate on the basis of gender. In other words, if more women appear in our classes, it is because more women score higher on entrance tests. This phenomenon also raises urgent questions as to the relevance of our tertiary curriculums and methods. Where ARE the young men? They will always be genetically more or less 50% of the population, yet they are not appearing in Malaysia's major universities. We need to know why not, and in order to assess this issue, we need a great deal more flexibility (and, dare we say it, less ego) in higher education ministries and administrations than is presently on display.

Education is surely the key to narrowing the poverty gap everywhere, and it is the intention of this paper to contribute in however humble a way to clearing the obstacles away from the life-paths of our young village children in their search for success in life, and in their very heavy burden of raising the destinies of their entire families.

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