

II. INDONESIA — Part A

THE CUSTOMS OF INDONESIA

by Molly Bondan

With such a different historical background and such a different cultural pattern, of course the customs of Indonesia are very different than those of Australia. But this is not a fact that should be a deterrent to any visitor. The art of making friends depends basically upon a very simple recipe: be friendly, be interested in other people and be considerate of them. Differences in customs then become unimportant.

Indonesians are friendly people and very hospitable, and are prepared to meet Australians more than half way. In spite of all the ups and downs in the political relations between the two countries in the last four decades, there are some very basic reasons for Indonesians to receive visitors from Australia well. Although the memory of the actual events is now fading, Indonesians remember that Australians were friendly and supportive of the Republic of Indonesia when it was still fighting to maintain its hold on independence at a time when there was much international hostility. This fact of history has created a lasting atmosphere of goodwill and has been furthered in several respects in the ensuing years.

From the mid-fifties onwards, a number of Australian university and college graduates, often just past their graduation day, have come to work for at least a couple of years in Indonesia under conditions very similar to those for Indonesian civil servants.

Although many Indonesians find it difficult to believe this fact, those who do spread their admiration for this very genuine attempt to help a civilised people long denied progress. Further, from the time of the government-to-government aid schemes, Australians have been known to pass their know-how on to Indonesian colleagues willingly and to depart gracefully when their time is up, without trying to hold on to a cushy job with fantastic fringe benefits, as others have more often tended to do.

Australians can take advantage of this store of good-will. They will do well to maintain it, especially by showing that they are aware of the historical background and by continuing the sympathetic attitude.

From the Indonesian side, there is a readiness to accept differences of custom, which springs from different factors. First of all, there have been Europeans living in Indonesia for several centuries, so their ways are generally known among those circles of society with which they more or less mixed. It is worth remembering that, besides the Dutch, the Portuguese and also the British had varying degrees of hegemony over one or the other part of Indonesia in the past. Secondly, Indonesians themselves differ very widely in language, style of dress, food and the like, so that, whilst the underlying culture is indeed the same, people are accustomed to the fact that other people have different

ways, and so they more readily accept the foreigner.

With all of this as the general background, Australians have no need to fear giving deep offence if they break some Indonesian custom, provided, of course, that they are of good intent. With patent friendliness, Indonesians will readily overlook any lapses from even deeply-imbedded customs.

Nevertheless, it does no harm to be aware of a number of customs that are important among Indonesians, so I propose to introduce several in the following paragraphs.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable of Indonesian customs is the ever-present habit of shaking hands. Hand-shaking is not at all reserved for the special congratulatory occasion when hand-shaking — or perhaps back-slapping — may appear in Australia. If jovial back-slapping can be said to be more or less absent from the Indonesian scene, shaking hands is the normal greeting and farewell for all visits, whether for business or pleasure, and this applies even between quite close friends. I do not mean that one shakes hands with office colleagues every morning. But if a friend were to come visiting an office for office purposes, then a hand-shake would certainly be in order, and the same would apply at home, while farewells under similar circumstances will also be accompanied by the shaking of hands.

Hand-shakes may be said to be *de rigueur* upon an introduction, whether that introduction is performed by someone else or is the self-introduction that is very common and a custom in its own right. Of course, it often happens that two people are introduced by a third, but self-introduction is even more common. Provided that two people talk to each other and commence a conversation, then it is usually felt to be more comfortable to know each other's name and probably also background in work, education and so forth. It is very easy to talk to strangers in Indonesia; people who don't like to talk are apt to be

considered very odd and stand-offish. This is certainly an expression of the general friendliness of Indonesian communities. To sit, stand or otherwise be close to another person, even for a few minutes, is quite excuse enough to begin a conversation. I have watched two men in a bus, first commenting about football news, going on to a general conversation and an introduction like this: "I'm Hamzah from the Post Office" — "My name is Johannes; I'm a mechanic in the flour mills", and the two men immediately shook hands. I doubt whether those two would shake hands if they met on the bus again next day; but if they were to meet on some social occasion, perhaps that very same evening, almost certainly they would greet each other with a hand-shake.

Any foreigner in a public place will very quickly be asked "Where do you come from?" "Are you an American?" and the like. "Where do you come from?" is often the opening gambit for a conversation. Indonesians don't as a rule comment on the weather, certainly not in order to break the ice and open a conversation with a stranger. After the where do you come from question, they are likely to go on to questions that foreigners sometimes feel are very personal: Indonesians very often ask "How many children do you have?" Indonesians are very fond of their families and expect that everyone else has similar sentiments; with that assumption, then talk of each other's families makes a common bond that is a useful jumping-off ground to other things. The talk is usually about children and grandchildren, much less often, at least in the first place, about husbands and wives. I think I should emphasise that these questions are not really the inquisitive personal advances that foreigners sometimes think. To Indonesians, such questions relate to common ground and at the same time lead to a more friendly knowledge of the other person.

Incidentally, the "where do you come

from" question can be a little confusing, since it is not always clear whether people are asking about national origin, employment, or even where a person was a moment ago. This is another question that the foreigner often feels to be impertinent, almost as much as to say "What were you up to just now?" In reality, however, the question is the equivalent of "How d'you do?" or "How are you?" — a matter of greeting that is answered very casually, often with little relevance to fact. In various parts of the country, that introductory "Where have you come from?" is answered quite satisfactorily by answering (in the local language) "From the south" — or "east" or "west", or whatever fancy decides.

There is a point about this question that has already appeared in the preceding paragraph. In Indonesian, there need be no difference in words or grammatical structure between the English sentences "Where did you come from?" and "Where do you come from?" — both questions can be covered by the simple "Dari mana?" which will translate into either of the English sentences. So there is a tendency to think there is no difference in the meaning of the English sentences either.

Two habits to be avoided are standing arms akimbo and half-sitting on someone's desk or table while discussing some point.

In Indonesian tradition, the arms akimbo stance is that of the rough person confronting the gently-born. It is to be seen in the wayang plays and in dance dramas when the ogre or demon challenges the knight. And, please note, it is the gentle character or the knight who always wins in the end.

Sitting on the edge of someone's desk is an offence against the person of the desk's owner. First, it is the misuse of his table and, more importantly, it means that the person lounging on the edge is sitting in a position higher than the man behind the desk. This question about being physically higher than a person of greater status, either in business or social relations, stems from the customs

of the old courts. In days gone by, people in an audience hall, for example, must always sit cross-legged on the floor, with heads bowed, never looking the ruler in the eye. If the ruler were already seated in the hall, they had to enter it crouched down and bent over, even if not on their very knees. There is actually an old court dance in which the dancers never rise from a crouching position and dance mainly on their knees. From all this, the higher and lower position even in modern society is somehow still linked to rank and social or official status. Certainly, things are not quite what they were in the old days, but nevertheless it is Not a Good Thing for a foreigner to sit on the edge of an official's desk while talking to him, no matter how friendly they may have become.

People's heads should not be touched. Ruffling someone's hair feels to an Indonesian as though his very personality is being invaded. Perhaps only babies are free from this rule; even children often duck away.

It should be explained that Indonesians give and receive things only with their right hands, not with the left. Indeed, the left hand is to be taken as banned from polite society. From the time that a child is five or six months old and begins to handle things, he is trained to use only "tangan yang manis" — the nice hand, the sweet hand. In consequence of this very early training, there are no left-handed people in the country. Should you see a left-handed Indonesian you may be sure he was brought up abroad. To allay the fears of child psychologists, I may add that insistence upon right-handedness does not appear to produce the strains of which we are warned in Australia. I hazard the guess that the reason for the lack of ill effects is the early age at which right-handed training begins, before the brain has settled down.

The reason for the ban on the left hand is very simple: the left hand is used for washing the body in the toilet. As with many

other Asian peoples, Indonesian toilets are equipped with water, even when toilet paper is available, as it is not in villages outside the big cities.

The custom of using the right hand for everything can be somewhat of a nuisance to an Australian who uses either hand for many purposes, such as receiving bus tickets, for instance. It means that it is better to carry parcels, briefcases, handbags etc in the left hand in order to leave the right free for giving and receiving, to say nothing of hand-shaking. Nevertheless, although this is such a strongly ingrained custom among Indonesians, the foreigner will be readily forgiven if he manages to get himself caught with a full right hand and required to give change in a hurry, for instance. It will help if he gestures his difficulty, or even apologises "maaf, tangan yang salah" — excuse me for using the wrong hand.

Another point that I should mention is that there are different social taboos in Indonesia. Noticeably, bodily functions, save for details of the sexual act, are easily mentioned in polite society, even if not shrieked at the top of one's voice. You will embarrass nobody by asking your way to the "kamar kecil", the toilet. There are some amusing examples.

For some years now, Indonesia has been conducting a widespread family planning campaign in an endeavour to reduce the rate of population increase. Although, when I first came to Indonesia 40 years ago, birth control was held to be definitely un-Indonesian, and was severely frowned upon, the family planning campaign had to break down that attitude. So, in the first months of the campaign, they put up glass shop counters in the main bus terminus of Jakarta — an

inexpressibly busy place — and filled them with displays of literature and the equipment, chiefly at that time in the form of IUDs and condoms — complete with diagrams. A couple of years later, there was an amusing event in Central Java. The family planners held a competition to see who could persuade the greatest number of people to be 'acceptors'. The male winner of the competition was enthroned with a crown decorated with condoms; the female winner had a crown adorned with IUDs. The occasion was reported in the local press and copied by the national press. Everyone laughed very happily, quite without sniggers.

In contrast with this openness, however, there has been no sex revolution in Indonesia. Premarital sexual relations are frowned upon, and much more severely than upon the multiple marriages contracted by many young people hardly out of their teens, that are arranged in defiance of the law. Disapproval is usually expressed, sometimes very severely, of young foreigners who bring what Indonesians call 'free love' habits with them. The cases that do appear among young Indonesians are said to be due mainly to inroads made upon the Indonesian culture from adverse outside influences.

This leads to a final remark. Indonesians feel sure that their cultural behaviour is much superior to that of all foreigners. Besides the fact that such an attitude is surely correct for everyone — since who is there to wish to be ashamed of his nation? — there are certainly good grounds for a sense of superiority about behaviour: Indonesians do have very nice manners indeed — except, of course, among some of the cheeky young that every nation seems to be producing these days in reaction to the modern world we all share.