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Family life in Indonesia between tradition and change

topics:

- tradition and modernisation in Indonesia
- traditional concept of marriage
- relationship between parents and children

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Indonesia is a developing country in Southeast Asia which has not less than 13,667 islands. The land area of Indonesia covers about 735,000 square miles, or about 5.3 times as large as Germany or 6 times as large as Poland. The total land and sea area of Indonesia amounts to nearly 4 million square miles.

As a heavily populated country, at this time Indonesia has approximately 190 million people. They are very heterogeneous. There are more than 300 different ethnic groups and more than 50 languages spoken. Besides, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Indians, and the Eurasians live in Indonesia; and some of them have lived in Indonesia for many generations. The majority of the population, approximately 88%, are Muslims. Christians, Catholics and Protestants, are approximately 9% of the population. The rest are Hindus, Buddhists, etc.

Although Indonesian people are heterogeneous and diverse, they are also a unity. They have a national motto “*bhinneka tunggal ika*”, that means: various, yet one; diverse, but united. As a member of an ethnic group, an Indonesian has a certain sub-culture and region language. However, as Indonesian, he or she lives in the Indonesian culture, speaks the national language, “*bahasa Indonesia*”, and holds the country’s national ideology, “*Pancasila*”.

For Indonesians, *Pancasila* is very important, because the unity and the diversity of Indonesia are manifested, sustained and guarded by *Pancasila*. This country's national ideology consists of five basic principles, i.e.: (1) One Lordship, (2) Just and Civilised Humanity, (3) Unity of Indonesia, (4) Peoplehood which is Guarded by the Spirit of Wisdom in Deliberation/ Representation, (5) Social Justice.

Tradition and change

Since a long time ago, people in Indonesia have had their own tradition and culture. They keep their ethnic-group tradition as well as their national one. People

living in the villages and elderly people often keep their tradition more strictly than people living in the big cities and young people.

Although people in Indonesia keep their own tradition, it does not mean that there are no changes in Indonesia. The influences from abroad coming to Indonesia have changed Indonesian people in a certain sense. The Indian culture, Islam, and the western culture have influenced people in Indonesia.

A long time ago, the Indian culture, through Hinduism, came to Indonesia and influenced people in Indonesia, especially the upper class. In the 13th century, through traders from Gujarat, Islam came to Indonesia and has influenced the majority of the Indonesian people. Islam was quickly absorbed by the mass. Several hundred years ago, the western culture came to Indonesia through the coming of the Portuguese, Spanish, English, and Dutch. Although the Dutch colonised Indonesia for approximately 350 years, the influence of western culture was mostly limited to externals.

At this time, modernisation, globalisation, and modern information and communication have influenced people in the world, including in Indonesia. This causes changes in many aspects, including in family life in Indonesia. The national development program of Indonesia also facilitates the change. Of course, this change is accepted as long as it does not damage the Indonesian culture.

Marriage ¹

Marriage is an important event for Indonesian people. According to the Javanese² tradition, to marry and to become parents are the facts of nature and the obligation to the order of life. Not to live up to this task is considered strange and un-javanese. For the Javanese, it is reprehensible for a man not to marry; for a woman it is even worse and considered to be a shame (*isin*) for the family.

This is a confession of a young women to Niels Mulder:

“I have to marry in order not to feel *isin*. Whatever marriage brings, I do not know, but for a woman self-respect is to be married and most males do not appreciate an advanced education. I want to finish my studies but having studied may prove to be an obstacle in finding a husband. They do not want us at the same level as they are; they still want to be served by their wives. Yet I hope to meet a modern-minded man who will respect me, who will see me as his partner in terms of equality”.³ This young woman may have been living in a traditional society, and she wanted to be free from the tradition.

Traditionally, marriage is an act not only between two persons, but also between two families. Formerly, parents made the marital decisions for their children. A lot of parents chose a spouse for them. However, at this time, this tradition is almost gone. There is a freedom for young people to choose their spouse.

This is the result of the research of Diana L. Wolf in a rural area in Central Java in 1986. Parents of married women were asked: “In Java, who usually chooses a daughter’s husband: parents, the daughter, or other people?” Twelve of the nineteen parents responding felt that daughters should choose their husbands, while two felt that it depended upon the child – some daughters could choose on their own and others would need more help from parents. Only two parents felt that daughters should be matched by parents, and three parents believed that parents and daughters together should make the decision.⁴

Usually Indonesian people make a wedding feast when their son or daughter marry. The religious ceremony is very important up to now. Besides, some traditional ceremonies are also done.

The relationship between parents and children ⁵

Traditionally, the relationship between parents and children is based on the vertical relationship pattern. In this pattern, parents are “paternalistic” in the sense that their guidance should be accepted by children without discussion.

In the Javanese tradition, parents are ritually and morally superior to their children. Children are dependent on their parents not only in material care but also in forgiveness and blessing. In this tradition, children should honour and respect (*ngajeni*) their parents. Ritually, children demonstrate their honour and dependence on parental blessing at the occasion of “Lebaran”, at the end of the fasting month of Muslims.

The obligation to honour parents is supported by the widespread belief that “parents send punishment” (*walat*), irrespective of their personal will. Such retribution follows from the disturbance of their feeling and is brought about by their children's criticism and disobedience, or other actions that cause shame to them, such as arrogance and obstinacy. If the children's opposition is strong enough, they may be thought of as sinful and rebellious (*duraka*). Such children may be repudiated, no longer being acknowledged as belonging to the family.

This is a confession of a modern middle-forty man to Niels Mulder: “A few years ago, when my father died, I had to prepare his body for burial. It was then that I realized that it was the first time in my life that I touched his head and I felt rather shocked because of it. He was a real old-fashioned Javanese father, somewhat aloof and at a distance from his children, whom we awed and deeply respected. But now all this has changed; in my family my wife and I are close to our children; they address us in Indonesian, I play and talk with them, and all of us are really intimate.”⁶ This confession shows an example of change which has happened in the family life in Indonesia, especially for educated people who are living in the big cities.

A university lecturer in Yogyakarta also confessed to Niels Mulder: “All of us admire my father and respect him; all children, even the youngest, address him in *krama* (respectful form of language). When I speak to my mother I also use *krama* such as do my two eldest younger siblings; the others speak *ngoko* (jovial language) with mother. Personally I do not care; my children speak *ngoko* with me, although they should address their grandparents in *krama*. Well, things have changed”.⁷ According to this man, his relationship with his children was intimate and relaxed, while he, as father, should be the protector of their welfare and spiritual development.

A university graduate women confessed: “At home our relationship with the children is very different from my relationship with my parents; we are close together, more open, and far less authoritarian. We never hit the children, but try to develop mutual trust and their right initiative. They address their father in *ngoko*, but since I am their stepmother they address me in polite language (*krama*)”.⁸

Nowadays, many middle class and educated parents want to break the hierarchical distance that existed between themselves and their children. They like to have a

closer relationship to each other. On the contrary, children dare to express their opinions and sometimes to oppose their parents.

Niels Mulder wrote a case of his Indonesian friend in Jakarta who is not satisfied to his parents and opposes them openly. This man is a highly educated man who knows the world, a descendant of a well-known '*priyayi*' family whose father held high positions in colonial days. To him, his father had always been a distant person whom he did not much appreciate. When he was young, he did not experience much family life. He was brought up to feel himself a member of the widespread extended family and at the age of five he was given into the care of a Dutch family for the sake of his education. When the war came to Indonesia, he came back "home", doing his middle school in Surabaya where he became infused with nationalist ideas. All the time, however, his parents remained staunch supporters of the Dutch and could not understand the sign of time. In his opinion, the experience of a warm family life was a rare occurrence in the circles of his birth and he sees it as his ideal to develop more spontaneous and intimate relationship among the members of his family than he could experience in his youth. For a long time he remained unmarried, refusing to consider the well-born marriage partners his parents suggested. When he finally decided to settle down, he married a "Batak" girl which seemed to highlight the rupture between him and his parents. It was only upon his having children that a measure of normal relationship was re-established. Emotionally, however, he rejects his milieu of origin and has developed an aversion of its cultural manifestations. Even though his mother is still alive, he refuses to visit the grave of his father.⁹

Of course, not all of the Indonesian people do as that man. A lot of them still adapt to the tension between tradition and the demands of modernity more gracefully.

The role of pastoral care and counselling

The role of pastoral care and counselling in family life, especially in the process of change, from traditional to modern life, is very important. At this period, people need to be helped to develop their own identity and to act in a way which is suitable with the situation. In this matter, the function of pastoral care as guidance is important.

In relation to marriage, young people can face two main problems. First, if they have a freedom to choose their spouse, sometimes they are not ready to do it, yet. In this case, the role of guidance and pre-marital counselling is very important. Second, if the parents still keep the traditional value and they do not agree with the spouse chosen by their children, conflict can happen. If this happens, the function of pastoral care as guidance and reconciling is very important.

Tension and conflict between parents and children can also be happening in the family, especially if they have opposite perspectives and opinions. Although at this time parents want to break the hierarchical distance, they often still keep some traditional values while their children keep the modern ones. In this case, pastoral care and counselling is needed; and the function of pastoral care as guidance and reconciling is important.

Notes

- ¹ This part is based on the results of the research of Niels Mulder, an anthropologist in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1979. See: Niels Mulder, *Individual And Society in Java: A Cultural Analysis*, Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1994.
- ² The Javanese is the biggest ethnic group in Indonesia. In 1984, the Javanese was about 47% of the total population in Indonesia.
- ³ Mulder, *op. cit.*, p.33.
- ⁴ Diane L. Wolf, "Industrialization and the Family: Women workers as mediators of family change and economic change in Java", in *Women and Mediation in Indonesia*, ed. Sita van Bemmelen et al., Leiden: KITLV Press, 1992, p.102.
- ⁵ This part is also based on the result of the research of Niels Mulder.
- ⁶ Niels Mulder, *op.cit.*, p.78-79.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.81-82.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83-84.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.79.