

Indonesian

"Why wouldn't you want to be"

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By Warren Watson

I wrote this from the perspective of a young Indonesian male I met hiking to a dam. I believe Arief would write the following...

I had to be a nice person not just because that's what's expected of the oldest son, but because the language makes us nice.

I was told it was an evolving language, recently created to give one a unifying language in the face of a thousand different languages in these isles of spice.

It would be a platform to exalt the leader. There were at least a dozen ways to say the leader is a wise and benevolent one.

There were not many words to describe bad things or bad people. My brother added a couple of words today by hitting his thumb with a hammer.

The seven deadly sins were not the seven deadly sins but the seven daily scenes.

The scenes depicted how normal life was to occur. It was only when I was writing this article that there were all these extra words. I now knew what I should have said to that inconsiderate driver who cut us off. Even cut us off was something not until now in my vocabulary.

The web is certainly a learning experience. I cannot believe people have all the things they have or want the things they have. Wealth seems to build walls.

There were also walls in my country preventing my travel to elsewhere. I had never been on an intercity bus. Once in a while, I had enough money for a becak ride. These bicycle taxis were great. It was a bicycle and attached to its back end was a seat

wide enough for two passengers. Some even had padded seats. I looked forward to those days because it meant I did not have to wash the mud out of my good clothes that evening.

When there wasn't mud, there was dust and lots of it.

It was sometimes difficult washing clothes because the stream beside our hobble (Indonesian for home) was filled with dirt and debris. We had to let the water stand in barrels in the yard so the mud could settle and then we filtered it.

For drinking, we couldn't use even the filtered water so bottled water was a weekly expense.

We drank anything that was sealed. My younger brother liked coke, and I once saw him asking a tourist for a half-finished bottle. I told father, and Mustafa sure got a scolding.

"Maybe we should give the tourist his upcoming dental bill." Muttered my father. Coke was more than a caffeinated bubbly acidic drink. It was symbol of American success that was so evident in every movie we saw. Coke was the West, and drinking it was acquiring a piece of the glamorous West.

Drinking coke and eating at McDonalds and learning English were the American things to do.

The becak driver moved to the side of the road. Up ahead was a narrow bridge. Our wash water flowed below. This bridge was a feat of local engineering mastery. It not only saved five miles of walking, it brought bus loads of tourists and their money and their sympathy or was it pity? I hardly care because it brought their money.

Imagine one dollar for a picture. Many tourists had my picture in their photo album way back where they came from.

I could just imagine where they came from. The brown water came out of taps. I didn't want to imagine where it came from. It was a lot easier to let the water stand and not think about it.

The tourists seemed to flock to me. They wanted pictures of my toe poking from my shoe and my brown leg showing through holes in my pants. The holes were not where rock stars had them. To get the holes just above the knees required pants I never seemed to own.

We had money for shoes and pants just not the rock star pants. Father refused to buy me new shoes and pants because tourists apparently paid more money the more holes there were.

One time a lady asked me why I wasn't in school. I was too old for school, but I said I did not have to be in school, besides my parents could not afford to have me in school. However, when I was in school, school was just half a day for every kid. My mother was a morning teacher, and my father was an afternoon teacher. There were not enough schools to have kids in school more than three hours a day.

"Cannot afford it? Doesn't your government provide it?"

Well, my parents could afford to put me in school but could not afford to do without the money I collected from the tourists.

The tourists could not tell I was too old for school. I looked really young, and besides anybody younger than old looked the same to old people. The tourists always seemed to be concerned I was not in school, but it was them and their generous gifts of money that kept me out of school when I was younger.

"well your father cannot spend candy. This candy is for you."

This always infuriated dad, sure he wanted the money, but he also wanted to know about paying for dental bills. "Why don't the tourists give money with the candy for that and give less money with no candy."

They were called wanitas. They always wore beautiful clean dresses and never walked. I often gazed at them wondering if they were so much different that they were rich, and we were poor.

Wasn't there enough to share? I should know my sister's nicest dress cost two chickens. We had rice alone for two weeks.

I liked rice. We could see exactly where it came from. We knew the money stayed in our country. Yes I liked the idea of rice. It was our land our food.

We were taught to be proud of such things though pride seemed to be a quality that accompanied money.

School when I was allowed to go was too short. We had three hours a day after the rising sun. There were three sets of students using the same facilities. School was good. It taught us to love the leader, the family, and the land.

To me the things we learned were good. They made us a good society, after all, we were to be like our parents because my parents were like their parents before them et cetera.

However, everybody should be like that but were not. One day, walking along the road to the dam, I met him. He was an American.

I could tell just from looking at him. I did, however, think it was strange that he seemed to take offense at being called what he was. He said "can I da." I replied "you may if you can."

Reading his face, I did not know what we had just conveyed to each other, but smiled my acceptance of his being an American.

There were other nonunited states, but America was the best united one. Why learn more than we needed to learn?

As I walked past him, I greeted him with "kemana" Translated literally it was "where are you going" but the English words that kemana replaced was more like, "Hi, how are you doing?"

I approached him with this word because although tall, he was not physically intimidating and the way he reacted to kemana was proper. He replied, "good and how are you?" This was quite unlike other Americans who said either "over there" or "none of your business." His reaction to being called an American quickly changed into a friendly one and I was at ease with this American.

I asked if I could walk with him, and he agreed. He didn't ask any nosey questions, he just wanted to practise my language. I liked that because I wanted to practice English.

I had some resentment toward Americans, but practising English was foremost in my mind. Although he said he wasn't one, I feared he would act the same.

"You Americans act like Kings." I blurted out feelings that had years of build-up.

"I am not an American, he said with a pleasant smile." I finally had to ask him, "why wouldn't you want to be." He said "we have a queen not a king and can I da?"

"Yes you may if you can." I replied again and he laughed with such a pleasant laugh.

I liked this American and decided to bring him home to meet my family. I knew Dad would love the opportunity to play chess against somebody who could challenge him more than his kids.

He agreed and mother used up half our dinner allotment of fuel to heat some tea for him which he did not even touch.

I thought that was rude, but he said his stomach was too sick. Isn't it fluids what the doctor, at least in Indonesia, recommends?

He was a pleasant enough guest. He spoke to my parents in Indonesian. When dad challenged him to a game of chess, he reluctantly accepted. Perhaps his stomach stopped him from concentrating because he lost quickly and easily. He was good at losing this king.

Dad was puzzled he did not get a good chess game and said to me in our native tongue that he thought Americans were smart. He seemed to understand Dad completely and said, "I am not an American."

All my father replied was "why wouldn't you want to be."