

# Us in Their Shoes



Everyday lives in Indonesia

Vol. 1

## Where our stories came from



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## An Introduction to this book

Usually, the Reality Check Approach (RCA) team writes up their field experiences from particular RCA studies in conventional report format. However, the team felt that over this last year, they had much more to tell about the everyday lives of the families who allowed us to stay with them for several days and nights than these reports could contain. 'Us in their shoes' is an anthology of stories of just a few of the more than 150 ordinary families across Indonesia with whom the RCA team has stayed this year. The stories are put together from the personal diaries made by the RCA team members during RCA thematic studies. They reflect the closeness achieved in the relationship between the families and the researchers and highlight the insights gathered by actively joining in their everyday lives. Each one of the stories has been written because the author felt moved by their 'family'- their optimism, their wisdom, their humour, their warmth and sometimes their sadness. They are stories of resilience, endurance and aspirations but also ordinary human shortcomings and foibles. The intention is to share some of the multiple and contemporary perspectives of people living in poverty, or as most of them prefer to say, living simply.

We say a big thank you to the families who opened their homes and hearts to us and shared their lives for a short while. We hope that those who read this anthology will be engaged, provoked and inspired.

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# *Over Burdened*



This collection of stories describes people who have had to take on caring roles without help. They are tired and have little time for themselves but they manage to remain strong and retain optimism for the future.

## Grandma's Devotion

A mother's love never dies as long as blood still runs in her veins. This is the case with Grandma Ati who is still working hard for her children and grandchildren, their lives still very much connected. Her husband passed away 23 years ago. Her first son, Adi, now in his forties, has been divorced by his wife due to his permanent disability as a result of three motor accidents that happened while he was working. Adi and his ex-wife have two boys (18 and 14 years old), both having left school before junior high.

Adi and one of his children chose to move back to his mother's village after the divorce, bringing with them almost no assets. He hopes eventually to live in a simple shack that was recently repaired by a Government assistance programme. Grandma Ati's house is so full that, for now, Adi has chosen to sleep outside, between his mother's house and the neighbour, on a long table without any roof or covering.

Grandma Ati was happy to take in Adi and her grandchildren, who all stay without contributing any money to her. Her grandchildren often scold Grandma Ati when she advises them to work diligently and help each other. "*Stingy Grandma!*" they say, often loud enough to be heard by the neighbours.

During my four day stay with them, they cooked and ate cassava leaves which are continually reheated to avoid spoiling. The leaves come from the neighbour's garden, which they take for free. This is the daily food shared between grandma, father, and grandchildren.

Grandma Ati also provides a home to the two grandchildren from her second son. He and his wife lost all their assets due to debt, which has led the wife to work in Malaysia while the husband works various odd jobs in Kalimantan. Then there is also the child of Grandma's stepdaughter, who is mute. The child was the result of a rape, the perpetrator having run off. The step daughter and her child are an additional burden for Grandma Ati especially after her husband abandoned her

Grandma Ati works as a housemaid and babysitter for the owner of a grocery wholesale store. The owners are a Muslim couple - a Batak wife and her husband from Pandang. Their one year old baby is often brought home to Grandma's house when the parents are busy. The husband often goes to do *khuruj* (preaching) while the wife travels to sell cosmetic products.

It seems each of Grandma's children have their own difficult stories. Adi, the elder son lived in the city with his wife until four years ago when he was left disabled after a series of accidents. The divorce was one-sided — the (ex) wife simply presented Adi the divorce letter, having used a forged signature for the supporting documents and court administration. The ex-wife even took the ownership documents for Grandma Ati's land, and every time they ask for her to give the documents back she says that she '*couldn't find them*'. Adi's second child lives with Adi's ex-wife and stepfather in the city.

Grandma's second son worked with his wife selling vegetables, but they ended up in huge debt because of goods bought on credit and gambling and drinking. . This included debt with the local credit union, cooperatives, and neighbours, some taking interest of 20-30%. Their house was eventually seized and his wife decided to find work in Malaysia. The son chose to remain in Kalimantan although no one knew actually what he does (Grandma Ati said he works *moco-moco* (odd jobs)).

When I stayed with them, Grandma looks very tired babysitting the child of her employer, trying to 'earn some rupiah' in order to send the grandchildren to school. Not a single social assistance has been extended to this family as Grandma's Family Card indicates the head of family as the now estranged husband of her mute stepdaughter. With no Family Card in her own name and all these relatives continuing to come to stay without their own documentation, they can't be processed for assistance 'from central', according to the Head of the Village, who is not particularly sure how to deal with the situation.

The result is that Grandma is somehow supporting three children and five grandchildren with an income of IDR 700,000 per month. Grandma wants her grandchildren to pursue higher education in order to lift the family from poverty. She does not want them to have to work as domestic workers like most of the people in the village.

According to Grandma, poverty is "*generations of not having enough money for food, school or medication when you are sick.*" When I asked about hope, she said passionately, "*to get out of poverty through the education of my grandchildren, education as high as possible, this could remove the poverty from the family and they could work in a higher paying job.*" But doubt shrouds her hopes as the grandchildren have consumer tastes. They love their gadgets but these incur a huge expense of phone credit. Peer pressure demands them to be *'fashionable, and the children like to perform in events which require them to rent costumes'*. Grandma could not refuse because the grandchildren keep rebuking her as *'old-fashioned'* and *'stingy'*. Loans are a temporary solution in order to pay for the lifestyle of the grandchildren. The children make their demands, without considering the burden this has on Grandma. Grandma's dream for good education may die as the children's priority for fashion and gadgets ranks far above their education.

## Single Father

It is impossible to tell from this father's face how old he is and he does not know for sure. We jointly guess he is in his forties. He is a widower with two teenage girls. They live on the first floor of what used to be their family home but now the man's nephew and his family occupy the lower floor. The space is small, about 6m x 10 m, comprising of two bedrooms, living area, kitchen and wash room with toilet and a balcony where the family sometimes relaxes for a chat and to watch passers-by. This is a village on the edge of a bustling town in Sulawesi.

Mornings at home are chaotic and start early. The elder daughter wakes up everyone including the neighbours by reciting out loud the revision texts for her upcoming exams. While I am staying there it is maths formulas over and over again. Her father loudly recites the Koran and nobody can sleep after 5 am. The girls fight every morning about who will do which chores and their father seems unable, or unwilling, to intervene. They continue to shout loudly until finally it is time to go to school. At this point the father goes off to his land in the hills where he spends the whole day tending to his farm and chatting to other farmers even when it is not the busy agricultural season. He worries about the unpredictability of the crops and the price fluctuations. Sometime his cacao gets a good price but sometimes it is really low. All his friends agree that farming is risky but they have few other skills and few opportunities. They all say they need additional income to get by, especially for transport and education costs. Most are also in debt to moneylenders. Some work as ojek (motorcycle taxi) drivers, some work in the farms of those who have left for the cities, some sell petrol and this father also gets paid for undertaking some religious rituals. *'We do whatever we can do to raise some cash'* to pay for day-to-day needs.



Often the relatives who live below them share food with the family, augmenting their two daily meals. But there are also many social obligations to meet and required contributions to make for weddings, circumcisions and funeral events. Father had thought about extending his farm but this would mean higher costs for fertilisers and rent. He also worries about theft of his cacao.

It is not easy for this family especially as the younger daughter has a congenital heart condition and will need lifelong medication. They have a health card which entitles them to care but the treatment is only available at the provincial capital and visits require a journey by boat and overnight stay which costs more than IDR 1-2 million. The elder daughter has ambitions to study information technology at college and tells me, somewhat assertively, that her father *'will have to find a way to support this'*. The father finds it difficult to provide for the needs and demands of his two teenage daughters both economically and pastorally. At one point, he re-married in an attempt to alleviate his loneliness and provide a mother for the girls. But the girls explained to me with some satisfaction that they had sabotaged this and the woman had left.

The father sits each evening on the balcony in silence. Sometimes he is writing. The book he writes in is protected by a small, tattered cover. One day I take a look - it is a book of prayers all written painstakingly by his own hand.

- Uki -

## Things Not What They Seem

Ibu Pratiwi lives in the house the others in the village envy. It is brick, plastered and painted yellow. It has a tiled roof and ceramic tiled floors throughout. It is pretty. She even has her own well with a pump to flush the indoor toilet. Walking past one would assume a certain level of affluence. But you would be wrong.

Ibu Pratiwi is a retired high school teacher. When she worked she lived quite comfortably on her salary and additional benefits which amounted to about IDR4 million. She also had the possibility to take loans from the Teachers Cooperative. But then her husband left her and their two children to manage by themselves some time ago. He was in the military and she thinks he is in Jakarta but she has not heard from him in years and he never sends money. She is not sure if he has retired or is still working. When he first went he would say that his income was all consumed by supporting his brother who suffered mental disability and his asthmatic sister as well as his own needs. She said she *'did not mind that much'* and was managing. But circumstances have changed.

Her daughter should be in Grade 1 of Junior High but has had to repeat several years of primary school and is only in Grade 4. *'I never forced her to study if she did not want to'*, Ibu Pratiwi explained. Her son is 24 years old and *'in between jobs'*. He was sure to hear any day soon of a job opportunity in the big city, she optimistically enthused. He had refused to go to college when she had the money to support it while she was still working.


The girl will enrol in a sewing class when she completes primary school and then, *'will work in a factory'*. Everything was really well planned for, Ibu Pratiwi assured me. But in the meantime she struggled. Her pension is half what she formerly earned and she barely manages from one month to the next.

For the entire four days I stayed with the family, they ate modestly; just rice, a few vegetables and tempe. If there is a little extra cash, she said, she says she likes to treat her daughter to fried chicken or meatballs. But when money is short they rely on handouts from village celebrations such as weddings or housewarming parties. She bought food from the local kiosk on credit, paying back in instalments. She mostly bought instant noodles, *'they are cheap and my children love them'*.

She had no savings and had built up considerable debt building her pretty house. She had no choice but to build the toilet as she has gout and it had worsened recently, making trips to the river for toilet purposes impossible. This ailment was also costing her a lot in medicines. Of course, as a former civil servant she is not entitled to Government social assistance. And people in the village did not understand her predicament because as far as they are concerned she does have this pretty house. And in theory, she is still married. But the reality is she is trying to support two children on a paltry pension, struggles with her gout, with her debt and can barely put food on the table.

On the last day I stayed with Ibu Pratiwi she announced she was going to cycle into the city to buy medicines for her gout. *'But,'* I protested *'that will take you at least an hour'*. Since it was downhill into town I envisaged it was going to be a strenuous uphill return journey. *'I am used to it. I cycled back and forth when I was still teaching, remember?'*, she said, tossing aside my concern. But her daily commutes was several years ago and before the gout became painful and debilitating. Off she went nevertheless, still putting a positive spin on her difficulties, turning again to her own resourcefulness, as there really is nobody else to turn to.

# Changing Times

A photograph of a row of various shoes lined up on a concrete ledge. The shoes include sandals, sneakers, and dress shoes. The entire image has a blue color cast.

Here the stories illustrate the rapid changes in context, circumstances and opportunities which people face. Foremost is the increasing need for cash for everyday needs such as food, toiletries, phone credit, electricity and transportation as well as services such as health and education. In order to meet the demands for cash the old ways of subsistence farming are gone and people look to wage earning opportunities, often multiple ones, and loans. Increasing consumerism propels people even further into finding ways to earn cash. Another significant change that emerges is the disenchantment with farming—particularly considering the risks, the increasing unpredictability and the hardships. Families want to invest in education so that their children can have better lives and, ideally, avail salaried work.

## Going Down The Mountain

We started that day at the top of a mountain. I was there with a family from East Java, a 70 year-old grandpa with his daughter in her mid-thirties. The three of us cut fresh mountain grass for feeding the cows and sheep. The grandpa and daughter usually cut the grass twice a day, every day, walking back and forth to the top of the mountain. *“If we stopped, who would feed the cows and sheep?”*

Fattening cows and sheep has always been grandpa’s livelihood. But most of the cows and sheep belong to ‘*people from the city*’. If a cow gives birth to two calves, the first will be given to the owner, while the second will belong to him. Although grandpa has been doing this for years, he had only a cow and four sheep left. Every time he got his own calf or lamb, he would sell them to extend his brick house or to buy electronics or gold earrings for grandma. *“I spent IDR 2 million to install the electricity, IDR 5 million to build the toilet. Where would the money come from if I didn’t sell the livestock?”* Even though he cuts and collects the grass every day, income from this job is still considered as a ‘seasonal bonus’ to buy ‘*big stuff*’.

For daily needs, the son-in-law works down the mountain in town as a construction worker. He transports cement from a shop to buyers around the sub-district. Every morning, while grandpa and mama prepare to go up the mountain, the father prepares to go down. There is no opportunity to work as a construction worker up here. *“We can get food from the mountain but no cash”*. That is the reason he works in town for daily wages of IDR 60-80,000. With this he can buy rice, salt and MSG, cigarettes and other foodstuff. Sometimes he also saves to pay the electricity bill and buy mobile phone credit.

In this way, the family gets a seasonal and a daily income. The construction work doesn't earn much but it is daily and predictable, while selling livestock can achieve a bigger return but is seasonal. I also observed that there weren't many younger men heading up the mountain anymore. When I asked grandpa about this he said "*young people are lazier now!*" His son in law said, "*work up the mountain is more tiring*" compared to his construction job.

While walking with their eleven year old son, he told me that he had decided to leave school and start work. When I asked whether he would "*cut the grass or do construction work?*" he frowned and said, "*I'm not that strong. My body might crumble!*"

For this young man, the third generation of the family, both options are tiring jobs and earn minimal cash. "*Daily wages are not sufficient*". He said that he is being trained by his uncle to sew shirt buttons and was offered work in a small workshop in Bali. With that job, he could earn IDR 1.5 to 2 million per month. Compared to his father's wages, the amount is actually not that different. If the father works for example 20 days in a month, he can earn IDR 1.6 million. "*But construction is an uncertain job, it's not always available. And the daily wage is easily spent only for that day!*" This young lad feels that monthly wages are better than daily wages and for these he will be going down the mountain even further.

Living in a house with three generations gave me a unique perspective on changing aspirations. Grandpa, whose '*only*' option was to collect grass on the mountain, had less opportunity to earn daily cash that he needs more and more. He worries about the relatively high risks, "*What if the cow doesn't give birth or dies?*" The father, aware that the family needs cash daily, prefers to go down the mountain to work in construction. He feels he has the security of knowing that he can always earn cash even though there are never any savings.

His son is already planning to save from his hoped for income as a waged employee to buy a '*cool motorbike*'. The permanency of employment enables him to access credit, even though his earnings are no more than his father's. Besides, as he described, the workshop job is '*less tiring*' compared to the work his grandpa or his dad does.

The family also talked about their cousin now working on a ship for a company based in Jakarta. Grandpa said young people are all leaving the mountain for higher education and better job opportunities. He described our home village as a place without opportunity. No universities, no factories, no nearby markets.

That evening after we collected the grass, there was only three of us on the top of the mountain. We walked in a line with big sacks of grass on our shoulders. Yes, it was a very tiring job. I felt we were all hoping it was worthwhile and that the cow would be giving birth to a healthy second calf.

- Rizqan -

## There Are Struggling Farmers And There Are Big Farmers

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*'We are one of the poorest households in this area,'* says the mother of my household. She is 44, but looks much older than her age. She has a wrinkled face, dark skin, a lean figure, and seems permanently tired. The only time I see her eyes smile was when my translator translated for me in English; a language that neither she nor anyone in her household could understand much. Her daughter, 14 years old and in the second year of junior high occasionally picked up words and repeated them playfully as we spoke. Each time it made her mother burst out laughing. As our eyes met, she melted into a proud grin from hearing her daughter speak in a foreign language that she couldn't understand.

This seemed like a good moment to move the conversation to the aspirations that she had for her children, and what aspirations the two children had for themselves. The family exchanged glances. The son, 19 years old and a high school graduate, stared at his mother for a while and looked down immediately as I eagerly tried to catch his eye, hoping he would answer. He turned his face away, stretched his legs and gazed beyond the wood house to the cloudy sky. The father, who had been busy smoothing *Lontar* leaves with his sickle, and rolling tobacco in locally grown leaves, spoke after a long silence.

*'We are in debt due to crop failure around 5-6 years back. We have to pay back a loan. We repay with a few bags of paddy every year, which sometimes means we do not have enough food ourselves for the year.'*



The son took out a cigarette from a packet and lit it, as his father continued. *'My son works in a school as a night guard from 6pm to 6 am every night, and earns IDR 500,000. Either he goes for further studies and his sister has to stop school, or he can work until he earns enough for his further studies. That's the choice.'*

The joyful moments we had been enjoying turned quiet. I waited, embarrassed, for somebody to say something else. The daughter spoke up, *'Most rich people in this area are teachers, health workers, restaurant owners, store owners or traders, with knowledge and education more than that of farmers. Although all sixty-four families here say they are farmers, some are large farmers while some like us are small farmers. Even they have someone in their family who is not a farmer. Some families can even employ labourers to work on their farm, without having to work in the field themselves. We have no other option than to farm. My parents also work on other people's farms, sometimes I and my brother also help. My only aspiration after completing my education is to leave farming. Farming is tiring. Working under the sun all day since early morning is not what I want to do.'*

*'Not every so-called farming household is poor then, are they?'* I ask, more for confirmation than anything else.

*'Not all!'*

*'We on the other hand only have slightly more than one hectare of land, three cows, one chicken, and one pet bird to support our family of four, that's all',* added the mother.

- Hritika -

## One Rung At A Time

Nothing much seemed to happen in this village when I first arrived. People were resting on their front porches to escape the searing heat of the equator sun.

I am in a village in West Kalimantan, looking at rows of brick houses neatly lining the main street. The road is paved and all the houses are connected to the electricity grid. There are some larger houses. Most have motorbikes and some have cars. The lush tropical rainforest surrounding the village is slowly disappearing. Locals still farm their ancestral land. Those with a water source grow rice - a staple considered sacred by these Dayak people. Large swathes of land are barren and abandoned. Farming is not what it was. It requires costly inputs nowadays and profits are unpredictable. The old practice of slash-and-burn farming is now prohibited and violation leads to a jail sentence. And yet, large palm oil companies owned by outsiders are in full expansion mode. Huge trucks carrying palm fruits regularly crisscross the village, often at full speed. But no one in the village wants to work there. The pay is too low and working hours are too long.

So, how were people able to support their families in what seemed relatively comfortable ways, I wondered. I walk past five small grocery shops along the main road. Judging from the fresh paint and leftover construction materials, some of these shops are recently built. There I meet with Kak Novita, a young mother in her late 20s. She has just opened her shop selling snacks and drinks two months ago. With this, lie all her hopes for staying in the village after nine years of working in Malaysia.

She tells me she originally had dreamed of going to university and becoming a teacher. But her father abandoned her mother and her three siblings. Her mother then left to work as a housemaid in Malaysia to support the family. She saved only IDR 8 million and was duped by her agent for half the money. She never went back and he never returned her money. But Kak Novita, the eldest daughter left for Malaysia first as a dish washer in a Chinese restaurant and then a variety of other jobs. She managed to send some cash to renovate the family house and bought her mother clothes, furniture and electronics.

She met her husband, Bang Domi, in Malaysia soon after. He worked in construction mostly as an electrician and, occasionally, a construction worker on call. In a good month, their joint income was 2000 RM so they could save 300 – 500 RM. Kak Novita came back to Indonesia to give birth to their son, Jupri, a year later but brought him back to Malaysia a few months after that. Kak Novita and Bang Domi would take turns looking after young Jupri. Bang Domi often took night shifts so he could look after Jupri during the day. Occasionally, Kak Novita would bring Jupri to the restaurant where she worked and give him toys to keep him amused while she was working.

Without a passport, Jupri had to return to Indonesia when he turned 5 years old to be able to go to school. For a year, Jupri was left with his grandma. Both Kak Novita and Bang Domi needed to stay in Malaysia longer to save enough for their dream house back in the village. They finally started construction a couple of years ago and Bang Domi quit his job in Malaysia to move back to oversee its construction and look after Jupri. Kak Novita continued working in Malaysia to ensure a regular cash flow. After spending almost IDR 100 million, the house that they had planned for such a long time is now complete. All their savings are gone.

The house is small. It only has one bedroom. Yet, each of the rooms is well equipped with electronics, furniture and kitchen utensils. Kak Novita has converted a small room in front of the house into the kiosk I first spotted.

Bang Domi, meanwhile, tried to set up a timber business with a few friends. It started well but just a few months ago there has been a massive crack-down on illegal wood logging. He tells me, "*We could have been prosperous living here and not have to go to Malaysia , but everything... everything has been made illegal; we cannot even chop down durian trees we planted; we cannot dig earth to find gold; and we are not even allowed to plant palm trees.*" There is little demand for electrical or construction work in the village and, anyway, having been away for so long his network of contacts is limited. He only has a few drinking friends who come by occasionally. Kakak Novita also knows few people; business is slow at the kiosk with only some school children buying snacks from her in the morning. The rest of the day, she earns nothing.

Bang Domi now only stays at home, not knowing what to do. Unlike their older relatives, they don't know how to farm. Anyway, rubber prices are plummeting. They are afraid to plant palm because of the lack of official papers. The local plantation work is dominated by people from other islands. Locals, with decreasing options for work that pays, are beginning to return to Malaysia.

Their dream to stay in the village is in jeopardy. Kakak Novita says she is planning to go back to Malaysia to earn some cash soon. When Jupri is 10 years old, Bang Domi will follow. Malaysia is not a dream place for them to live but they feel there is no option. Jupri who has got close to his mother these past few months will have to say goodbye again after his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. They still have their dream to be together in their dream house but with Jupri's education costs to pay for, it is slow progress. One rung at a time.

## There's Lots Of Work Here

The last night I was with 'my family' in Western Sulawesi, one of the sons borrowed a guitar and started to sing. The father followed by grabbing an old bucket from the well and starting to drum. The youngest girl shouted, '*Stop it bapak, it sounds horrible*' but the music continued into the night and I felt surrounded by warmth and happiness.

This family with ten children, two of whom are adopted nephews, live in a small simple house and *manage their lives* by exploiting new job opportunities as they come along. They live very modestly but because they have some cash they do not feel they are poor. They think that social development programmes to construct roads and provide wells are better than those which provide cash directly to families. It is these public facilities that are important for everyone.

The six boys, all in their late teens and twenties, feel that there are plenty of ways to make money here. They are following a long tradition of exploiting new opportunities to make money. In the past, their grandparents had opened the land in the area to coconut farming. Then, they changed to cacao and more recently a palm oil company has offered another appealing alternative. With abundant opportunities for work regardless of education, the boys all left school early. This was partly because the secondary schools were a long way away. The mother had condoned their decisions to leave school early when a peer of theirs was attacked and eaten by a crocodile on the way to school.

But the decision was made easier because she knew there were a range of attractive earning opportunities such as harvesting clove trees, working in a palm oil plantation, construction work, agricultural services, petty trade, working at kiosks, or house to house sales and transport provision.

Although the village had a history of taking advantage of new opportunities by changing to different crops, farming is now the least favourite means to make money. People feel it is unpredictable and the price of their produce can fluctuate greatly. As a reflection of this changing dynamic, the family has gradually sold off all its land. It was subject to flooding and the price of their latest crop, chillies, could sometimes dip so low it was pointless to continue growing.

Meanwhile the four younger girls, all teenagers, are sticking with secondary school. There is a new one nearby which was built at the time their brothers were school age. They want to become civil servants and point to role models in the village. These people have brick houses and status, they explain. Opportunities for income earning determine how people feel about pursuing education. The decisions being made by the family members were simply pragmatic. If the jobs need education then they would invest in it, but if not why bother?

- Rizqan -

## The Breadwinner

The only time Kakak Caleb gets to draw a breath and talk to us is late in the evening, when he has returned from whatever it is that he was doing that day. And he does a lot of things - from going to the island at night to fish, to collecting coconuts so Mama can make coconut oil for the extended family and friends for Christmas. His days are full of mental to-do lists. Shy and reticent, he will only speak to us when spoken to, and he does so with a gravity that extends far beyond his age. It is this seriousness that compels us to add the *Kakak* (older brother) before his name, even though we are both older than him in years. He is only 19.

Having a father who is bed-ridden (no one explains what exactly is wrong with him), and five siblings who are all in various stages of school, means Caleb is the *de facto* bread-winner for the family. Mama does her bit by making cookies and coconut oil to sell in town, but she too has her hands full looking after the three younger children. It is Caleb who works from dawn to dusk.

But within the family Caleb is considered the *black-sheep*. His younger brother is a high school graduate who will be going to the University this year, Mama tells us proudly. We hear the word 'University', like it is typed out in bold letters. She is proud of her children, because unlike a lot of those in the village, hers are still in school. Even Marice, who likes to sing, would rather go to the University than pursue music because '*Mama says so*'. For Mama, being in school means an eventual well-salaried government job, just like the health worker job her niece has.

Caleb, on the other hand, dropped out during the third year of Junior High School. Mama speaks of this resignedly and brushes us off when we hint that there are sometimes more important things than education.

On our last night, a friend of Caleb's came to the house. He works in construction to pay his way through University. He acts like a bit of a 'know-it-all'. In his presence, Caleb grows even quieter than he usually is. We talk of city life and how different it is there and because the friend is at University, he wants to talk to us about everything that is right with higher education in Indonesia. We hear him out patiently. Then my interpreter looks at Caleb right in the eye and says what we both have been feeling all this while, *'Yes, we went to university too, but even after four years there we could never fully understand or do what so many of you do-day in, day out.'* And we see Kakak Caleb crack a smile.

- Neha -



## The Family Investment

Patrick was an investment for the family. They sent him to Yogyakarta for higher education and they hoped that he'd come back to Papua as a successful man. Most of his cousins are now becoming civil servants, nurses, teachers and one uncle is even a very successful businessman with hectares of rubber trees. Patrick's family sent him away to achieve the kind of status that these other relatives have achieved. From all of mama's seven children only Patrick continued to higher education. But he failed to meet the family's expectations.

Patrick is now 37 years old, 'unemployed' and living back in the village. Patrick lives with his mother in a one-room house, an ex-rubber storage structure belonging to the village and given to them by permission of the head of village. He spent some years working in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. He said "*When I went to Jogja for college, my dad sent me two hundred thousand rupiah each month. It's wasn't enough but I had to manage; my Jakarta experience was even worse*". In Jakarta, he knew no one and said he struggled to survive. Patrick said that he is grateful that he was able to move back to the village and live here rather in Jakarta.

He made it back to Papua with the help of his friend. Because of the harsh living situation in Jakarta, Patrick said that he developed a nerve condition that made him feel depressed. The big expectations of his family and the hard conditions made him do some things that he said would have been unimaginable before. In Jakarta he worked for a big environmental NGO, and would sometimes help his friend to grow vegetables, getting paid when the harvest time came. But the money was not enough.

After Patrick went back to the village he started working at a palm oil plantation for several months but resigned because of the ongoing conflict between the palm oil company and his people — he didn't want to be on the palm oil company's side.

Patrick lives with his mother and one adopted son, Tan. Tan is now 11 years old but is currently refusing to go to school out of embarrassment and frustration. The school lost his previous report card but his teachers won't accept that Tan doesn't have it. Patrick said that he doesn't force Tan to go to school because it's his own choice; he can't do anything about it. He feels sorry for the new generation that has easier access to education but is not taking advantage of the opportunity. He remembers how hard his condition was before he was able to go to school but he was willing to go through it because he wanted to become a successful person.

Patrick's late father was a headmaster at a grammar school. Mama said that she needed to move from one place to another because her husband would sometimes be transferred to different schools, which is why they don't have any permanent house. All of the houses that they were living in before were official houses near a grammar school. Patrick's father died in 2011 because of 'depression'. After his father died Patrick moved back to the village to live with his mom.

The village is a lowland area of Papua, surrounded by swamp, river and forest. Now after the palm oil company came to the village most of the young people work there in the plantation. Five of Patrick's siblings work as labourers in the plantation.

The household sustains their everyday life from the father's pension, which has to be collected in Merauke. Because of the distance Patrick's mother goes to Merauke once every three months.

She's not just collecting the pension though — she also sells the forest products that they've collected over those three months. She stays at a relative's house in Merauke while Patrick and Tan stay at home. Patrick said that even though it's not Jakarta, he still dislikes going to the 'city' of Merauke to accompany his mom.

For everyday life, Patrick is not really the head of the family — that would most likely be Mama as she's the one that goes fishing, sells fish, and earns money while Patrick helps her to clean the house or search for forest products that can be sold. While Patrick hasn't been successful, he is trying to be a devoted son. For example, although Mama's addiction to betel nut has left her without any teeth, while she's out fishing Patrick will chew betel nut and save it for her to suck on later. he does this for her despite the fact that Patrick doesn't really like the betel nut himself. Patrick feels happy to be there though. For him, he belongs to the village.

- Iqbal -

## Faith Keeps Her Going

Initially, I was very careful when I knocked on the door of this house. As Chairman of the Women's Committee for this particular religion, this woman appears to be full of authority and dignity although in reality her family still lives in poverty.

Mama became a widow ten years ago and now raises her 5 children by herself. Her daily work is selling snacks that she makes, such as donuts, fried bananas and the like. She cooks these in the morning to sell in front of her house. Buyers include villagers and students who walk by the house, along with people who visit specifically to buy the snacks.

Our different faiths did not create any distance between us. According to Mama, *"When a child enters Mama's house, (she considers me as a 'child' too), it becomes Mama's duty to free you in the name of Jesus Christ."* She trusted me even more on the second day, as we talked about a variety of things — about herself, her ancestors, her role as religious leader, and the good and bad things about being a widow. Even more, she promised that the next day she would reveal a big story about her faith and also about the poverty of her family and its generations.

Mama is the granddaughter of a war general that in his era had won wars against other tribes. But his wife, Mama's grandmother, chose to end her life because her rice paddies which she worked so hard in were destroyed by other villagers. According to Mama, these people were from some of the tribes that were defeated by Grandpa.

On the third day, on a bright morning, Mama started the conversation about this big secret. *“This is a part of Jesus’s plan for Mama and child, the secret of my people is with Mama. Poverty, conflict, and underdevelopment will always happen to our people because of our ancestors’ sins. We have to accept this for the glory of our nation, it is our sacrifice to carry the sins of our ancestors.”*

Her faith is not yet a collective belief in this community. On one of our days together, I was invited to walk around with Mama to spread her beliefs to others – we visited three houses. According to Mama, poverty has been the difficulty she’s faced in paying for her kids’ education, a lack of sufficient food at times, and difficulties obtaining medication for her sick husband before he passed away. Yet with full belief in her faith, Mama accepts all of the difficulties in her life, her fate in carrying the burden of poverty.

- Rida -

# *Living Simply*



This is the phrase many of those we have stayed with during studies this year have preferred to use. They don't like the stigma associated with being poor and don't consider themselves poor. Some enthusiastically share their contentment with living modestly often surrounded by family and nature.

## Dreams And Vision

Papa and mama Abraham are a couple with two young sons, Samuel (6 years) and Petrus (3 years.). A young family of four, their house seems to match the youthful spirit of their family with its walls painted in my favourite colour (I won't mention the colour here so that it would not be too easy to identify). Papa and mama are friendly and really open with people even when they have only just met. It was mama, out of all the villagers present, who was the first to readily offer for me to stay in their house, without having to wait for papa's approval as he was not in the village when I first met mama.

Samuel and Petrus are two lively, bright young boys who make me feel envious towards how they so much enjoy running around in the wide open space surrounding their house. They can always find interesting objects to play with despite not always being able to have factory-made toys. Samuel told me once how he has a bike which he so loves but is always kept hidden by papa. The bike is only 'let out' whenever Samuel wants to go to school, and he can ride on it to school a 5-minute walk from home, as long as Petrus does not see it. Otherwise, Petrus would also want to ride on it since he does not have a bike of his own. And, it seems, he *'can easily break things'*

On my first night staying with them, mama cooked dinner with my help. Stir-fried cassava leaves with fried fish – papa's catch of the day from the river. My two young brothers ate ravenously and eating a lots of white rice. Unfortunately within days, the food supply at home diminished. There were no more dishes to serve other than the cassava leaves gathered from the forest.

On the third day, Samuel who actually loved white rice complained to mama for serving him only boiled white rice without any main dish.. He wanted it fried with a bit of oil, shallot, garlic, salt and MSG. He said it was much tastier. But mama had run out of oil, sugar, tea and coffee supplies, while the white rice was only just enough for the two boys. Mama also told me that, *“not even a thousand rupiah is with me at present.”*

Papa didn't seem to have a cash-earning activity the family could rely on on a daily basis during my stay with them. He spent much of his time making a bamboo front-wall for their diesel engine storage area at the side of the house. He also often went out of the village with his bike, but there was no change in the dwindling food supply at home resulted from these trips. Samuel told me that papa usually got up late, but in the past Samuel had been so proud of papa. He remembered there were times papa worked as a tractor operator or carried a big “awesome” timber sawmill machine up to the forest.

Samuel is a young boy with high aspirations. He wants to be a racing driver despite knowing that papa wants him to be a soldier. He also has plenty of self-confidence, being quite aware that he is a smart student, even the smartest in his class. He shares with me how the class teacher often lets him be the first to get out of the class, because he can answer the teacher's questions. We were drawing and colouring together when I realised that he needed to pull the paper with my drawing very close to his face, until it touched the tip of his nose, to be able to see what I had just drawn. So after all this time, he's had poor vision! Papa and mama have known about this, *“since he was just two,”* they told me. And before he enrolled in school, a health officer visiting the village diagnosed that Samuel would need to wear glasses. But, papa said they could not and would not afford to buy them. So, there it was, Samuel a boy with high curiosity has become accustomed to fulfilling his curiosity by pulling an object of scrutiny so near his face, until it touches the tiny tip of his nose, to find out what it actually is.

- Revy -



## Happiness; 'We Are All Mamas Here'

*'My biggest problem is my teeth - I suffer from terrible toothache'*, and even the local belief that chewing betel nut cleans the mouth and helps to reduce the chance of tooth decay seems to have let Mama, a habitual user, down. She continues, *'I take painkillers but want to have these teeth taken out. But my daughters say that it will kill the nerves and then I might get malaria'*. This is a particular worry as her husband died when she was only twenty eight years old almost certainly from malaria. But asking mama about other problems leads nowhere. In her mid forties now, she insists she has no problems. She is completely happy and content with family and neighbours all around. She has five children with just the youngest, a boy, whom she describes as *'a school drop out,'* still living at home. But the others all visit often and even another son who is living with his uncle far away in order to attend college, visits whenever he can. One daughter and her two small children stay with Mama most of the time, partly it seems to get away from the gossip she endures in her husband's home on the outskirts of the city. Her two children look very different and their paternity is often questioned. But also because Mama helps her with the child care.

Mama lives in the three-room sago wood house her parents used to live in. It is badly in need of repair now, with a leaking tin roof and broken floorboards. Neighbours constantly ask us if we are ok staying here and mama is delighted when we confirm that we are. She has some farm land about twenty minutes walk from the house which she goes to *'only when I feel like it... not every day'*. One morning we go there together; it is up a steep slope. In the muddle of vegetation that is her farm, we find tomatoes and beans and we cut some cane from her sister's plot on the way back down.

*'We are not allowed to grow vegetables near the house because pigs eat them and this leads to big arguments'*. She explains that she might reclaim some more land from the virgin forest soon and it seems this is simple enough as she just clears what she needs further up the hill.

At the back of the house is a lean-to mud floor kitchen with a rusty and leaky iron roof. There is a wood fire, some cooking pots and a stock of sago. A single sago tree, once harvested and dried will, mama tells me, feed the family for months. When it runs out, Mama explains, *'you just go and cut some more down'* from the communal land.

At night mama takes her sarong and wraps it tightly around her, uses a pink fluffy teddy bear as a pillow and sleeps on an old election campaign banner laid out on the floor. It is really damp at night. They have electricity which is metered and supports about four light bulbs costing about IDR 30,000 per month. The supply is not bad but they have regular outages for about two hours each evening. In the wet season they collect water easily from the roof in a plastic tank which was supplied free to every household in the village but, in the dry season, she has to collect water from the river a short walk away. This is also where mama washes herself, her grandchildren and their clothes every day. It is a beautiful spot and this is a treasured part of her day.

Recently, Mama asked a neighbour who had been to a basket weaving course to teach her too and she now makes plate holders and vases which she sells to a buyer who comes to the village. She collects the raw materials from the forest and cleans and sorts it for weaving so her only costs are for the varnish to finish the items she makes. Mama says that there is much more need for cash these days than before and this is what motivated her to do this. She needs cash to pay for electricity, phone credit, rice (an occasional treat) and snacks (especially when her children and grandchildren visit) and notes that her daughters need cash for packaged baby food, disposable nappies, toys, sweet treats for the children, and school costs.

Each evening, Mama spends the time weaving and chatting with family and neighbours on her veranda. The afternoons are usually spent sleeping and, sometimes, in chit chat. Mama's daughters, in their early twenties, see their futures much the same. They like what they see is an easy life. The younger one who stays with Mama most of the time says she loves this and wants to stay in the village all her life. Her only hope is that her children stay healthy. When pushed to say more about the future she shares, '*I hope my children look after me when I am old*'. Neighbours share bananas and coconuts, call by to pass the time of day. Mama says, '*even when my husband died it was not that bad as I had all my family and neighbours to look after us*'.

They no longer bother to go to Church, but enjoy Christmas (a six day celebration when everyone '*comes home*' ) and Easter which involves the community eating together the spoils of the village hunt (kangaroo and pig mostly). They also like the tribal celebrations though these have declined in the last couple of decades especially as marriage is rare now because of the costs. There are five different tribes in this village with much inter-tribal mixing which has diluted the influence of any one tribe. Although a trained volunteer health worker (kader), Mama doesn't do much of this now and never goes to village meetings. She prefers to spend time at home with her family. We note that neighbours and aunties are all referred to as mama '*everyone looks after everyone here so we are all mamas*.'

- Dee -

## Here, We Eat (Pine) Sap

*"Kita disini makan getah"* (*Here, we eat (pine) sap*), said the father of the house where I stayed during my RCA fieldwork in East Java.

One of the main livelihoods in the village is harvesting sap from pine trees. In the morning, father goes to his plot of pine trees and starts 'sapping', which involves hammering the bark of pine trees to stimulate the sap to ooze from the tree. Every Wednesday, villagers gather at the collection point near the mosque to weigh and sell their harvest to a middleman from a private forestry company. Father tells me that they can get around IDR 100,000 - 150,000 each week from the sap. All the cash goes to purchase food, which is why he quipped that, *'here we eat sap'*.

The family does not own the pine trees. The forestry company allocates a plot with about 500-600 trees to each household for them to look after. One day, I counted how long father spends on a tree; 10 seconds when he taps the lower part of the tree and more if he needs a ladder to climb up. I asked him if I could have a go at sapping. I was useless. He said that it looks easy, but one needs a lot of practice. I asked if he wants his two sons to also sap pine trees, and he replied with a firm 'no'. He works hard to finance his sons' educations, *"so that they can be better than me,"* he explained.

Father has other ways to earn cash for the family but they are less predictable. After returning from sapping he takes lunch and then cuts grass to feed some cows. There are three cows but they are not his. He takes care of them on some sort of income sharing basis for when they are sold. Other days, he tends a small plot of land with corn, chili and peanuts, also provided by the forestry company. He sells the produce on a quarterly basis.

Sometimes he cuts down bamboo from the forest and sells to a buyer who comes to the village. Meanwhile mother cleans the house, cooks, cleans cow dung, and helps with the weekly harvest of pine sap.

*'I think that my family should be categorized as vulnerable but not poor'*, I shared with a colleague on my return. He lit up and shared he had been thinking the same about the family he had stayed with. Both families were able to meet their basic needs such as food and they ate three times a day. They have sufficient clothes and adequate housing. Their children are enrolled in school and my family has a motorcycle. Nevertheless, my family worried about education costs. There is so much to buy: uniforms, shoes, lesson books, transportation and pocket money. Recently they also had to pay IDR 1 million for the junior high graduation certificate for their eldest son. They are vulnerable in that they are ill prepared for crises. Mother told me that they do not have Jamkesmas (health insurance card) and I learned that they do not own their home and fear eviction as the land belongs to the forestry company.

'My family' eats a lot of rice! As much as 1-2 litres of rice for the four of them and much of the cash earned from father's diverse activities are spent here (IDR 10,000 per litre of rice). They eat rice three times a day with simple side dishes: vegetables with tofu, tempe, anchovy and/or dried shrimp. I went with mother to buy the dried shrimp (IDR 2,000) and the flour (IDR 1,000) but the vegetables we collected from the forest ourselves including fresh cassava and papaya leaves. They were the best, freshest vegetables I have ever tasted! But we used very small amounts; just enough to flavour the huge quantities of rice. Everyday, as we ate together, father and mother kept urging me to take more rice *'come on, add more rice!'*

- Stesi -

## Garuda Is In My Heart, Malaysia Is In My Belly

When I found out that I would be travelling to Kalimantan, three things came to mind: black magic, the 1999 conflict and the Dayak tribe. That's all.

I did not realise people still live in traditional 'long houses'. Occupied by 50-60 families with three families to a room it felt more like a large dormitory to me. Staying in a long house feels like staying in a busy village with hundreds of people milling around all the time. I stayed in one of about fifteen small rooms which comprise the long house with Pak Hartono's family and two other families. Pak Hartono and his wife, his children and in-laws and his grandchildren all live in this one room.

Pak Hartono has limited mobility since a recent injury to his leg which never fully mended. He now spends most of his time weaving floor mats and listening to the radio. Pak Hartono is not a chatty person but eventually we engage around his plan to get work in Malaysia. He talked about it not only once, but many times. The village is on the border and people spoke often of Malaysia as a favoured destination for medical treatment, shopping trips and, of course, jobs. Whenever he feels ill, Pak Hartono tells me he contacts one of her daughters in Malaysia to take him there. *'It's just cheaper and the treatment is faster,'* he said.

Ibu Hartanto, his wife, is outgoing and hardworking. She wakes up early every morning around 5 am and disappears. Later, I found out that she spends most of her time on the farm, tending her coffee and rubber trees. Their eldest daughter now works in a café in Malaysia and sends the family cash and groceries (anything from milk to LPG)– all from Malaysia.

Their elder son, Agus, left school in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of senior high school against his father's wishes. He is married and has a young baby and plans to follow his sister to Malaysia. When I was there, Agus was on a waiting-list for work in Malaysia. While waiting, he stayed at home and took turns with his wife to care for their baby. His sister sends baby formula and other needs for his family at the moment. The younger son; Doni is 18 years old but still in the 2nd grade of junior high school. He loves to play guitar and only occasionally goes to the farm to help his mother. Pak Hartono often makes a joke about him "*He sleeps with his guitar...*"

As time goes on I learn that this family take turns going to Malaysia. If one member leaves, the rest of the family stays to take care of their aging parents or work on the farm. Malaysia has been a major source of income for all the families in this village. '*There are lots of jobs in Malaysia. We can earn a lot of money, unlike here....*', people tell me. Someone else said, '*the easiest way to starve people in Kalimantan is to prohibit them from going to Malaysia.*'

Their situation is summed up in this single quote, '*Garuda is in my heart, Malaysia is in my belly*'

- Alifah -

## With Access Comes Opportunity

There's plenty to eat in this 'poor' village; the land is productive with plentiful vegetables, fruits, cassava and sago. The soil is fertile and they happily have no need for pesticides or irrigation. Sea fish are also available from local fishermen. With engines provided by the Government, fishermen can now fish further out, catching fish such as large tuna. Our family of five ate well every day - sago or cassava with papaya leaves, other fresh vegetables, fresh fish and *sambal*. The children seemed to eat throughout the day and there was always rice ready in the kitchen to help themselves to whenever they wanted.

There's cash earning possibilities too - the father works in a team constructing a sea defence wall and if there is no work there, he tends his cacao trees. He can easily sell cocoa beans to a middleman from the city who comes to buy them directly. He tells us that, '*farming is being at one with nature - nobody bosses me around.*' The mother also supplements the household income by growing chillies and making cookies which she sells locally. Both say there is no reason to be poor, '*only lazy people are poor.*'

New roads, a bridge and electricity connections arrived just last year and a new sea port is promised. The family hopes to sell their abundant durian, rambutan and mango when the port is opened. '*Things have really changed since the bridge was built and now we have electricity too.*' Why has this investment in infrastructure happened now? '*Politics! We were told if we give 75% votes then they would build the bridge and that's what happened.*'



Everyone is optimistic that these developments will bring economic prosperity. Mother and father are hard-working and ambitious; they plan to build an extension to their house and hope to be able to afford to send their three children to university.

But this optimism was not always so strong for this family. Father spent his early days traveling, especially on boat adventures. He regrets taking so long to settle down and earn a proper wage. Both mother and father have been married before. Father was left by his first wife who took their son with her many years ago. While working abroad in the Philippines he lived with another woman and fathered a daughter whom he sometimes still hears from. It was in the Philippines where he learned the construction skills which now enable him to get good jobs in construction in the area. Mother, who is still only in her late twenties, was first married very young and separated from her husband just three years later with a small baby boy to take care of. She soon met father and moved to his village with her young son about ten years ago. When she arrived she felt isolated and a stranger in this community, and even now does not feel fully integrated. There were no roads or electricity then and life was difficult especially as she had left a more developed community.

She has not told her eldest boy that the man he calls father is not actually his father. There are administrative problems with this too as his name is inconsistent on records. As a result he does not get the school cash benefit he is entitled to, but his mother says, *'This does not matter, I am only concerned he gets a good education, not about the payments'*. But the school is falling short of her expectations. She recently complained at a school meeting because the teachers were blaming parents for their children's poor performance and told them that the children must learn at home, *'But we are paying for this and you are the teachers, you are trained'*. She shared with us that the teachers are absent a lot, sometimes with only one teacher present for the entire school. The neighbour said *'all the teachers do all day is smoke and drink coffee'* and the children end up playing unsupervised or just being bored.

## She Who Survived

Mother came to this village around 8 years ago, alone. She left her family, her husband and her children, and chose to start a new life in this village. This is not the first time, though. Back in the late 90s, her family had to leave everything they had - house, job, livelihood - due to religious conflict in the city they were living in. Her son shared how his father used to drink and was very violent, and assumed this was the reason why Mother ran away.

First she stayed with her nephew, who had already lived for some time in the village and has a kiosk. A local villager gave her some land and other villagers helped her build a small hut. Then, her nephew introduced her to the retailer in the city, where they purchase goods for the kiosk. With no guarantee and no collateral, just trust from the retailer, she took IDR 25 million in goods and opened her own kiosk in front of her nephew's kiosk. It took her some time to be able to pay for the goods, which she did in instalments, but she eventually paid all her debt and continues to run the kiosk.

Then one by one, her children came to this village to live with her. She has also added more rooms and a kitchen to the small hut. Although relatively small and simple compared to her neighbour's brick house, she seems happy and proud of her house.

The kiosk has played an important role in her new life. She even believed that from an income perspective, owning a kiosk can earn more money than becoming a teacher or nurse, something that is being pursued by her daughter. But, having no other choice, she had to close her kiosk and sold all the goods to pay for the daughter's nursing academy admission fee in Java.

As a newcomer to the community, she has no land and so could not plant anything for an additional source of income. If she needs some quick cash though, she can harvest some nutmeg from the community forest, an area of government land where they have planted nutmeg, and everyone in the village is allowed to harvest it. However, some local villagers disagree with her having access to the forest as 'a newcomer', so she has to do it discreetly.

The tension between newcomers and locals in this village, although very subtle, simply cannot be ignored. There are numerous times where Mother complains about the attitude or treatment from some villagers: for instance by ignoring the privacy of her house (talking loudly in front of her house until late at night), storing boat engines on the chairs in front of her house, and several instances of direct rejection of her and other newcomers in the village. Although there are locals who protect and support them, she says she is always ready to leave her house if she has to, in case something bad happens. "*There is nothing I can do, I'm only a guest here, I own nothing.*"

Now she relies on catching fish and shrimp with nets that she purchased in the city, along with working for government projects, which mostly involves gathering sands or rocks. She hopes to someday reopen her kiosk.

While Mother's story is one of struggle and setbacks, it's also one of small successes and determination.

- Denny -

## Independent Women

I met three women-headed households and wondered if they fitted the stereotype of disadvantaged so readily shared. The first is Nenek S who lives in her “Studio Apartment” where she sleeps and cooks all in one room, but with an ocean view from her window. It’s not a proper window actually, it is just a square hole with no curtain. During the night time the wind blows through that hole and it made the room quite cold. The ocean is only 5 minutes walking distance. Nenek is a widow in her 60s and lives on her own. She does not use Bahasa Indonesia much but can generally understand it. She has 4 grandchildren and one of them lives with her. She has 4 children of her own who live nearby the house, but none of them regularly provide assistance to Nenek. Rather, the grandchildren often ‘pester’ Nenek to give them pocket money. Nenek’s husband died around 15 years ago, and from that time Nenek has managed on her own. She managed to support all her children through junior high school. Her children then decided to start working.

Nenek really is an independent woman, and works periodically for an onion plantation. There she prepares the fields and weeds the grass around the onions. She also sometime sells tamarind or plants paddy in the dried land. Nenek is a really happy person. She is surrounded by her 26 grandchildren and enjoys when her grandchildren tease her to get some pocket money. She was not a lonely or miserable old woman despite her condition. *‘If I can make my own money and am surrounded by my children and grandchildren, how can I not thank God for this?’,* she asked me back. I knew Nenek for only 3 days but I keep thinking of her and her ‘studio apartment.’

*"If you cannot hold your pain anymore, just go. I will make sure your 4 daughters will graduate from University as you have wished"*, Mama Hana told her husband while she was holding her husband's hand before he passed away. She did not get out of bed for 2 months after he died, regretting telling him that he could go.

I came and bought a drink from Mama Hana's shop. One hour later she offered me to stay in her house. I then accompanied her every night to her coffee shop, waiting for her customers to finish their drinks which usually lasted past midnight. It was during these times that Mama Hana told me her story.

Her husband died just one year ago. According to Mama Hana, her husband was a real family man. He cooked breakfast and woke up all the family members and helped them prepare for school. His dream was to send his 4 daughters to university so they could work as civil servants in the city and he worked hard to collect money for these aspirations. He did not want his daughters to spend their entire lives in the village. He built a wooden kitchen with a firewood stove inside. *"If all our children have moved to the city, then we will sleep in this kitchen where we can warm our feet with this stove during the cold season."* But his fate was different. He was sick for 14 days and then passed away.

Mama Hana finally woke up from mourning after her youngest daughter (7 years old) asked her to buy a cake which her father usually brought home for her. Mama Hana then decided to live for the promise she made to her late husband. She then rented a shop located on the main road and opened this coffee shop. She also receives orders for tailoring work. She makes quite good money. There were a lot of *ojek* and truck drivers who drive past and will stop by for drinks and snacks. She worked really hard while I was there.

She received a lot a tailoring orders and would work to finish them as quickly as possible. *“Next month I will open a small restaurant and serve mix rice dishes; it is a good opportunity”* Mama Hana said to me. She told me she can make between IDR 400,000 - 1,000,000 each night.

She told me of a time when she received a phone call from her eldest daughter who is studying to be an architect in Jakarta. The daughter told Mama that she needed IDR 2 million. Mama was sad because she did not have any savings at the time as she spent all of it for her husband’s medication. So she opened her coffee shop for two nights straight, non-stop and earned the IDR 2 million to send to her daughter. *“If there is a will then there must be a way. My will is to keep my promise to my husband,”* Mama Hana told me.

This wonderful woman is not my household mother. She was a neighbour but knows everything about the island that I visited as she has been living there for her entire life.

She has three sons and her husband died when her eldest son was 13 years old. She has devoted her life to send her sons to get good education. Her youngest son has graduated from high school, but her other two sons preferred to be a fisherman. I have met all of her sons, and they all have a good jobs now. *“Do not say I did not send them to school; it is their choice to finish Junior high school,”* she told me. *“What did you do for a living after your husband passed away?”* I asked her. She smiles to me and said there were a lot of opportunities available. This entire island believes that their ancestor is the sea. So that sea will provide for their needs. *“I also learned weaving from my mother so I can weave, go fishing, offer services to my neighbours”* she added later. She also showed me some tamarind trees that she had. *“I am actually rich,”* she said, smiling. *“I own these tamarind trees and when the time comes can sell it for some money. I can also weave cloth to sell to tourists anytime I want; I own my own factory.”* Her ‘factory’ is actually just a simple back strap loom under the tamarind trees.

- Deborah -

## *'I definitely do not want my children to be farmers'*

*'I definitely do not want my children to be farmers... I have invested in their education and always say to them do you want education or marriage?*

*They know to take education seriously', 'my' farmer dad tells me on day on the way to his farm. I ask him why he stayed with farming when everyone else in the village seems to have abandoned it. 'I would have tried trading in Ambon like most of the others from here, but it is too risky. If I did not have twelve children to feed I would go there but I cannot take the risk. At least with farming I can always feed them'. He says he has about one hectare of land and is gradually acquiring more as people abandon their land in favour of working in town. The village head has told him he can take over their land. He grows cassava and maize mostly but also grows beans, spinach, pumpkin, tomatoes and onion. He uses his own seed and never any fertilisers in a bid to 'keep costs down'. He shows me the stone wall he constructed by himself ('there is nobody ready to help these days') around the entire cultivated land 'to keep pigs and monkeys away'. He works to feed his large family entirely by himself as he does not want the children to spend time in the farm.*

I wonder why twelve children and he explains that when he was single he was a street trader in Ambon and met a family with four children. *'I thought this was so nice I decided then and there I would like to have many children'. His wife says that 'I took the Pill and tried injection but these are no good for me and I got skinny'. But they are very, very happy with their large family. When I first arrived, just like any mum, she asked me if I was sure it would be alright for me to stay with them, 'I have not cleaned up and with twelve children it is always really noisy here'.*

Will they have a thirteenth?, I ask. *‘ We hope not... if it was going to happen it should have happened by now so I am hoping I am too old... anyway it is time to stop now that I have grandchildren’*, she laughed.

One morning we start talking about finances and together review all their outgoings; school costs especially the mandatory four school uniforms, the continuous demands from their teenage children for money for photocopying and the snacks each child wants to buy when they go to school. The snacks alone cost IDR 1000 per child each day. Father suddenly becomes very quiet. Mother adds the cost of new clothes at Eid, the transport costs, fish and rice, cooking oil, the costs of medicines. She laughs again, *‘ You know the more we realise how much we actually spend the more we will need to spend on medicines for the headaches’*. But father does not laugh.

Obviously the farming is only enough to feed the large family and the cash needed for all the outgoings has to come from somewhere else. I have been intrigued that mother gets up at around 5 am each morning and starts cooking, so one morning I join her in the kitchen. She is making *onde onde* ( flour sugar cakes) and, of course I assume this is for breakfast. Again she laughs, no she makes this so the two middle girls can go house to house to sell them and raise some cash so that the children can have some snack money. *‘ I have to do this as I don't want them to feel they are poor. They have to buy snacks like the other children’*.

Later conversations reveal that they often go as a family to help bag up sand from the river, collect rock for construction from the hillside, make bamboo baskets to raise cash needed to cover these expenses as the farm has no surplus.



They received one tranche of social assistance money amounting to IDR 300,000 but it involved two trips to town to get as there were discrepancies in their supporting documents. About the IDR 215,000 they actually got, mother says, *' we were pleased to get it but is only covers some of the onde onde ingredients'*.

All the children are happy, well fed and obviously adore their parents. The house is indeed noisy, as mother had said on the first evening. Full of laughter and occasional squabbles. At night we all bed down in front of the TV- the adults are often asleep before the children. We have eaten well as required by 'our' mother, *'You have to eat a lot at night because otherwise your spirit will go off dancing in the night'*.

- Dee -



# *Public Poverty*

We were struck by the many families who dismissed the idea of being poor. Their ancestors might have been poor but these people said that the only aspect of their lives which they considered poor were the provision of services; poor roads, poor phone signals, poor water supplies. Other than this they had food and sufficient cash incomes to meet their needs and enjoyed fulfilled lives.

## Poverty's Stigma

Lis is calm and usually quiet. To an outsider, she seems hesitant and perhaps shy but living with her for few days, we realised that Lis likes to take her time during conversations. We always felt that she would say something profound. But she seemed to have an inner struggle.

Lis lives with her husband and her seven year old daughter. Her older daughter, 19, lives with her grandmother so that she can attend school in town. She moved there after primary school and has just finished high school. Lis says that it is common in their village for girls as young as 16 years old to leave school and get married. But her daughter is an exception. While most of her friends are married and have children, her daughter plans to continue her higher education. She even threatened her parents that, if they forced her to marry and leave school, she would commit suicide. Lis is scared that she might stick to her words and they have decided to support her university education even though it would strain them financially.

The family depends on agriculture. They sell rice, potatoes, cinnamon, chillies, onions and red beans. Occasionally, they sell buffaloes and chickens. During our stay, people came to borrow rice from her more than four times. They would later pay her back with the same amount of rice. She gave the potatoes that she grows in her land up in the hill away for free.

The national census in 2011 listed Lis and her family as a poor household which entitled her to a KPS (social security) card. Lenti, a neighbour, says Lis's family is financially better off than hers. And Lis agreed that they were indeed better off than some of the families in the village.

We had many conversations around why some families were considered poor and some weren't and it all seemed to revolve around land holdings. Households with smaller land holdings or no land at all were considered to be poor. Lis did not like talking about this when other people were around. She always said, *'let's talk when we are alone'*.

One morning, while making lunch, Lis told us that she thinks the only reason the government put them on the poor list was because of her house's structure. Lis says that back then her house was incomplete and had only one room. They had yet to expand the house, and were planning to build an additional space which would be used for their kitchen.

Lis believes that she could still afford her older daughter's education and support the family without the social assistance. She seemed troubled with having the KPS card. While she recognised the support, it also labelled her family as a poor household. And this was a bigger problem for Lis than any assistance the card provided.

- Arya -

# Community Poverty

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Families were quite well off before logging was made illegal in this part of Western Kalimantan. They moved away from the jungle at that time in order to cultivate paddy. Living in a longhouse with seventeen other family units, Umar, his wife and two children enjoy traditional Dayak kin support. The different tribal families still meet each evening on the long veranda that joins all the sections of the house to chat and solve problems together. This support is more valuable than any social assistance provided by the Government, they say.

Most people work as unskilled labourers across the border in Malaysia and such is the strong connection and identity to Malaysia that the whole village uses Malaysian time. Umar is a fisherman, farmer and tour guide for NGO workers as well as a migrant worker and his wife, Anastasia, makes traditional cloth to sell at the annual harvest festival known as Gawai. Despite these diverse income earning sources they are concerned that their income is uncertain and it is difficult to manage their monthly cash flow. The family sees poverty as income insecurity - they worry that any one of the income sources might dry up. Nevertheless, Umar is clear that the best sort of Government assistance is that which is provided to the community as a whole rather than to individuals, such as better roads and bridges and acknowledges with gratitude the hydro-electric generator installed by an INGO which meant free electricity for their home. They note that with no health facilities nearby there is little point in having a health insurance card. Grandma suffered appendicitis recently and to hire a car to the nearest hospital cost half a million rupiah. Day to day illnesses are treated by visiting midwives and medicines can be purchased at local kiosks but the family worries about more serious illnesses. The transport cost is prohibitive and they feel there is no support for this, and no back-up if something goes wrong.

## Just Another Eviction

*“When they (the civil service police and the toll road management) are coming we just need to take down the plywood and let them take the pictures. It takes less than an hour and after they’re gone we can rebuild our house”*

Ibu Yanti is the breadwinner of the family, she works as a domestic worker at a nearby housing complex from 7 am to 3 pm every day. She earns IDR 500,000 each month but sometimes her boss gives her IDR15,000 to 20,000 per day for transport money, which she rarely uses as she prefers to walk to the house. *“I choose to walk as it’s not that far, and I can use the money for my son’s pocket money.”* Her husband used to be a fisherman, but he stopped going out to sea after one accident that has caused him back pain for years. He changed jobs several times, but is now jobless after his boss closed the business. He was working as a scavenger and used goods seller. He showed me a refrigerator, big TV, DVD player, and fan that he got from people in a housing complex. He said that he prefers to be a scavenger and used goods seller rather than a fisherman: *“other than my back pain, the money is better being a scavenger; being a fisherman is hard work and now Jakarta’s water is heavily polluted and I need to go far from the land.”*

Ibu Yanti’s family has lived in slum area under the toll road structure for three years now. She said they have previously lived on the river banks, empty land, a rented house, and now here. She has experienced living in more than five locations in the last 20 years, none of which were her own land. She said her hometown is Tangerang, but that it doesn’t feel like her hometown. Her sister is living there in their parent’s house, but it’s her parents’ land not hers.

She has experienced a lot of eviction in Jakarta, and has got used to it. She said that now the eviction from the government is not a big deal anymore as she's gone through everything: *"every time there is an eviction, we don't panic anymore, it's a usual thing now"*.

The government has now offered them flats (*Rumah Susun*), but they said that people that they know living there now are actually going back to the slum area because the flats are quite far from the places where they work. And one of Ibu Yanti's neighbour said, *"where should I put my car if I lived in those flats?."*

They feel the eviction experience now is better than before. Eviction used to be a very hard thing to handle because they didn't have any place to stay. They used to camp outside using plastic sheeting and would get wet when it rained, but Ibu Yanti said the experience also made the slum community get closer: they opened a public kitchen, demonstrated against the eviction and got a lot of support from students and aid organizations. Now times have changed and every time there is eviction, everyone handles the situation by themselves.

Ibu Yanti said that before she lived under the toll road, she stayed on empty land. After the eviction there she couldn't find her old neighbour. Everyone left separately, some renting a room, some looking for other empty land, some going back to their hometowns. Ibu Yanti feels that living under the toll road now is better because the officials don't really force them to move out. They still can live there as long as the house is not visible from the top of the road. Some of her neighbours said that they will move out if they're forced to, but Ibu Yanti still had no clue when the question came out. *"I don't know where I would go. Maybe going back to my parent's hometown for a while and then come back here if my husband finds another place. That's what we always do."*

## The Generation Left Behind

*'Have you called your mum?'* *'I texted her'*, I reply. In both East Java and West Borneo, I lived with elderly couples. 2000 km of land and sea separate them but their lives have remarkable similarities. Both couples live in simple houses, could recall stories from the 1965 conflict, and both gran-nies liked to chew betel nut and looked after me warmly. Both men are in their seventies, still make a living from tapping rubber and I accompanied both of them in the early mornings. Both are still working, struggle with little money and get no social assistance.

Kakek and Nenek Gun are Javanese Muslims, living in a mountainous and rural part of East Java. They live alongside their daughter, son in law and grandson. Their houses are adjacent and they share a kitchen and outside toilet. Kakek and Nenek's side of the house is wood with a thatch roof and mud floor, while their daughter's side is brick with a tiled roof and ceramic floor. Kakek comes to this side to watch TV and Nenek comes for ice cubes from the refrigerator. But otherwise the elderly couple basically have to look after themselves.

Kakek and Nenek Ja are Dayak Protestants and live on their own in West Borneo; all three of their children are married and have moved away. They live in a two-storey brick and wood house which Kakek built himself with a tin roof and mud floor. Two of their children live in the main town, some 15 minutes away by motorbike, and often came by during my stay to say 'hi'. *'They also come to ask for money from us. What lazy children!'* shared Nenek Ja grumpily.



Nenek Ja, also in her seventies, still farms for their own needs. She spends six hours at the farm every day that I am staying with them, painstakingly harvesting paddy rice with a small knife, collecting just half a sack of paddy each day. '*Setengah mati!*' (halfway to death) she comments, sweating, as she walks back from the field.

Nenek Gun, meanwhile, can't go to the field anymore. '*Setengah mati*' became a literal limitation for her after she contracted pneumonia some time ago. Now weak, she stays at home. The Gun family does not qualify for social assistance. The daughter says, '*It's so unfair, it's just because we have a brick house*'. But what is unfair is that Nenek and Kakek don't qualify.

Nenek Ja is pleased they are independent of their children but worries for the future. Kakek Ja was a migrant worker in Malaysia during the 90s and tells me how the social assistance in Malaysia was better there. All widows, people with disabilities and elderly automatically got social assistance: regular cash and foodstuff. He cannot explain why he and nenek do not get any assistance here while better off younger people do. He speculates that the village administrator is corrupt and provides assistance for his relatives only. He thinks that giving cash to young people who still can work can make them lazy. Without any prospect of government help, they hope their eldest granddaughter will take care of them. '*She is the nicest girl and often comes and gives us IDR 200,000. We protest but she insists saying, 'keep it for your pocket money, Nek'. She is so lovely.*'

Kakek Gun can't use the mobile phone his children gave him to keep in touch. '*The letters are too small*', he says handing me the phone so I could save my number on it. '*Don't forget to contact me when you are back in Jakarta. Anyway, have you called your mum? I haven't seen you call anyone while you've been here.*' '*Yes Kakek, I texted her.*' I gave him the mobile back. '*Not texted! Call her!*'



# *Unforeseen*

These are stories of difficult times and unfulfilled dreams. They touch us because the circumstances of the disappointments are nearly always outside their control.

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Call M

Fatima is a skinny 67-year old woman, living on her own in a village on the large K-shaped island of Halmahera, North Maluku. She, like most people in the village, farms for her own consumption. She also sells coconuts at the local market. This is her only source of cash and it is seasonal. Few keep livestock these days; perhaps just a few chickens, ducks, pigs and cows - and she doesn't have any. Fatima eats vegetables and fruits from her garden together with rice and *sambal*. Sometimes she can afford to add *ikan ngafi* (tiny anchovies), which she really likes. The water for drinking, showering and cooking is taken from a well in her small backyard. Fatima bathes by pouring water from a bucket over herself while fully clothed in her backyard. Her house is relatively large with three bedrooms. Yet, this is basically all she owns. She does not own a cell phone, motorbike, radio, or TV, as many others do in the village nowadays. She has just recently arranged to take electricity from her neighbour's house for a small monthly contribution. This means she can now light her kitchen and the *ruang tamu* (front room). She has only a small table and some plastic chairs. She is usually quite lonely so loves to receive visitors. When people do come, seldom does she stop talking. These visitors include her younger son, Rusli, who has settled in a nearby town with his wife and son, and visits Ibu Fatima almost every week. Rusli never liked school very much and decided to start working as an *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) driver after high school. With this work he barely makes ends meet, and so says he cannot help his mother with any additional money.

Fatima tells me one evening of the night fifteen years ago when her husband and elder son were brutally killed in the inter-communal conflict that spread throughout the area. Her house was burned down. She tells of the betrayal by the village leader who said the Muslims would be kept safe in this predominantly Christian village. She tells me that nobody was ever brought to justice but that it is taboo to talk about this period now. It was clear that she felt some relief in being able to talk to me, an outsider about this.

## Below The Highway

*"Who are they, sister?"*

*"Shh.. satpol PP<sup>1</sup>. They have come to evict us !"*

*"The slum beside the river was evicted last week. I don't know where they are living now,"* worries Ibu Ida, a kiosk owner, who has lived here for eight years. Others have been living there for 15 years. Many living here are trash collectors.

They are living under the highway in Jakarta but you would never know they were there when you drive over the flyover. I stayed there for four days with a small family. The father is a driver for a construction business, mother works as a helper in what she describes as a 'high class' kindergarten. She tell me that the children who go to the kindergarten *'celebrate birthdays in fast food restaurants and go to 'the farming village' for school outings.....those rich children went to the farm to see goats and to plant paddy! What a dirty activity for rich kids. Here, our children play with mud everyday,'* she laughs.

Jamie is the youngest son in the house. He is 5 years old and likes to play hide and seek with his many friends. Ibu Ida's daughter, son in law and their 8 month old baby, Jonas, also live here. The baby has breathing problems, and is coughing day and night. *'I took him to the doctor but the cough stays'*, the daughter explains. Her husband works the night shift in a plastics factory and usually sleeps inside the house during the day.

Standing inside the house, our heads touch the underside of the highway above. The house shakes every time cars or trucks pass by above us.

Ibu Ida teases that the house is *'fancy'* because *'we have many cars as our roof!'* There are many houses under the highway arches, built side by side using plywood and with cement floors. Some are tiled with ceramic tiles that they have pilfered from work. Each house is small, about 20 square meters. *'My family'* has a 32" flat screen TV with boom box audio, a fan, a small refrigerator and a gas stove. Some other families here have running tap-water inside their houses; water which appears crystal clear.

*'How do you get the electricity?'* I ask pointing to the electrical appliances. *'Oh do not worry: it's legal. We do not steal it from the highway,'* I was assured, *'It is fixed through Pak Kumis - he installs it for you. Then, every month, we pay him IDR 40,000 per house. We pay, so we are legal,'* confirmed Ibu Ida, halting any further discussion on this topic.

While I was helping to build a small extension to one of these houses one day, ten men in black uniforms arrived and threatened eviction, *'This house can be seen from the road above. You must take it down or move it under the arch,'* they shout. They point to another house which could also be seen from above. *'Tell the owner to move it inside'.* *'Yes, Pak'* they nod and, after they leave, say, *"They asked us to move all the houses which can be seen from above. We know that the land is not ours, it belongs to the state. So we do whatever they want. If they say move it, then we move it. If they say demolish it, what can we say?"*

A small crowd gathers outside Ibu Ida's kiosk. Someone says, *'I've been living here since the 80s. Every time an eviction happened, I would move for a day, let them take a photo for their report and come back later to rebuild the house'.* *'They say we will be moved to rusun (apartment block). An officer came and took down our details. But it might only be for old inhabitants or for the ones who have a Jakarta ID,'* another man shares. *'Do you have an ID?'* I whisper to a young man. He replies, *'How can we? We have no residential address.'* *'But how come some people here have ID?'*

I had observed that some people lend their ID cards to others so that they can get their wages paid. *'They organise it in other areas nearby, but it's so complicated. Could you imagine if gembel<sup>2</sup> like us go to a government office?'* *"Gembel like us can't live in a rusun either. They will not allow us to bring our trash carts to park them by the rusun. We will be expected to pay rent monthly including 'uang kebersihan' (money for cleaning). How silly that trash pickers might have to pay 'uang kebersihan'?"* they laugh.

The whole day, people did not stop talking about the threatened eviction. *'Why can't they leave us alone?'* a young man asks, *'if the government wants to help us, just let us live here'* *'Anyway, we pay every month to Pak Kumis. Nearly 100 households pay him IDR 40,000, that's 4 million rupiah a month. He will protect us'*, another man adds.

Every one is clearly agitated and then Ibu Ida says, *'Why don't we all shalat berjamaah (pray together) and pray to God to make us invisible!'* *'Yes, yes!'* other women like this idea. *'So when they come again tomorrow, they won't see our houses. God will make them see only open land without any houses, God will make us invisible!'*

Later in the evening, I see the orange sky of Jakarta from below framed by two highways. I can hear cars and trucks rushing along the highway, headlights flashing, advertisement boards brightly lit.

As I gaze up, a young man pokes me and says he is looking for his mum. Everyone knows that his mum, now in her fifties, likes to sleep with many men in the slum. He, a young man, has nine siblings from different fathers. Another young man tells me about when he and his friend were addicted to drugs they made from cough tablets, mosquito repellent, soda and *jamu* (traditional herb). He says he has spent time in jail for stealing a phone, but has evaded capture for stabbing a man. He shows me the playlist of heavy metal songs on his phone.

Yet another, whom I had helped build the extension earlier, comes by looking for his children who now live with his ex-wife's mother. Another mum tries to hide her disabled boy from me. The daughter of 'my family' tells me she was pregnant before she got married. Everybody here, it seems has a story. But there was never any gossip, just acceptance.

*'Riz, come inside,'* my 'sister' calls me for dinner; the contents of a few fast food boxes left over from a birthday party at the posh kindergarten where her mum works. I ask her, *'Why do you live here, sister?'* *'My husband asked me to move to his community, but I do not want to,'* she said, *'People there judge you. They seem repulsed by me. It is better here.'* Just below the highway is a complex, supportive and joyful community of misfits.

- Rizqan -

## The Choice

It was a terrible choice that no parent should have to make—choosing between your children. Mama Nainggolan had just moved in to her mother-in-law's home with her husband and three children: 5 year old twins and her 13 year old son, Augustus, who is from a previous marriage (his father died while she was pregnant). They had been living in Jakarta but life was hard there. Mama peddled small items from her bicycle while her husband minded a small kiosk. They struggled to make ends meet. Her husband eventually got tired of it and decided to move back to North Sumatra to live with his mother where life would be easier. Mama said he was just lazy.

Upon arriving in North Sumatra, the mother-in-law rejected Augustus. In Batak culture he could not take on his stepfather's name and she insisted he had to leave. Her son, Mama's husband, took her side. Mama Nainggolan hated the thought of leaving her younger twins behind, but she couldn't throw Augustus out to live on his own. So she contacted one of her brothers in another part of North Sumatra for help. He's the youngest of Mama's eight brothers and sisters and also the most successful—he runs a recycling business near a landfill. He offered to help her find a place to stay near him, and put her in touch with the owner of a small rented house next to his.

That was two years ago. Now Mama spends her days picking and selling trash from the landfill to support herself and Augustus. From time to time, her brother gives her work in his recycling shop sorting and bagging recyclables. While that gives her a more predictable income - about IDR 60,000 for a day's work - Mama prefers to work at the landfill, where on a good day she can earn more money.



Still, she feels obliged to work at her brother's when he asks. He lets her use his washroom to clean up, and she's rigged an electric wire from his house to light two lightbulbs at hers.

The standard items Mama recycles are plastic bottles, paper, cardboard and glass. But metals like copper wire or the steel cable inside car tires sell better. And she might also *'get lucky and find something more valuable'*. She once found a nice ring, which she kept for herself and now wears. The landfill also provides a lot of other needs: clothes for herself and Augustus, vegetable scraps for meals, and wood for the cooking fire. She also has a plan to buy some pigs for fattening and in preparation is collecting feed for them from the landfill.

While the landfill seems to provide her with enough income to meet her basic needs, Mama Nainggolan has almost nothing. Her rented one-room house is bamboo, and she's proud to say she and Augustus themselves put up a dividing wall for a bedroom, and laid a concrete floor (before it was just dirt). There's no toilet and she collects rainwater off the roof for drinking and bathing. She has no TV or radio, but Augustus has a second-hand mobile phone. Last year she bought a motorbike with a loan from her brother for a IDR 850,000 down payment. Augustus helped his mom to research the best deal and manage the purchase, since the calculation was difficult for her.

Mama smokes quite a lot - more than a pack a day - and until recently used to drink a lot of coffee (10 cups a day!) until the doctor said she had to stop because she has a high heart rate. She didn't eat breakfast or lunch while we were there and works non-stop, so the cigarettes and coffee probably helped to keep her going throughout the day.

Augustus is a very smart kid — he has ranked at the top of his class for the past two years and is mature beyond his years. That probably comes in part from his circumstances. When he's not in school he helps his mom with picking trash and other chores.

In the morning, Mama and Augustus sort through the trash left in front of their house, since there are lots of bits and pieces left over from recyclers who drop off their rubbish. Then Augustus drops Mama at the landfill down the road on their motorbike and heads off to school by public minivan—IDR 2,000 each way to school and back. After school, he does his homework and then helps some more with the trash picking.

Augustus has received a school grant for the past two years, possibly because he is a diligent student but also perhaps because the principal wanted to help him out. It wasn't because he's on the national poverty database, since the poverty survey was conducted before he and Mama Nainggolan moved here. He and his mom collected the IDR 750,000 grant from the bank and used it to buy a uniform, school bag and books. He's quite religious and regularly goes to the Pentecostal church (Mama doesn't) and has plans to become a preacher.

Although the government plans to update the poverty survey this year, that won't help Mama Nainggolan and Augustus. They're illegally renting on government land—formerly a state-owned plantation that stopped operating a decade ago—and it's the only place they can afford at IDR 600,000 a year. This may not be for long, however, since signboards have recently appeared ominously announcing the local government's intent to remove everyone from the area. Living here also means she doesn't have access to a neighbourhood administrator (RT or *rukun tetangga*) who must issue the recommendation letter needed to receive an official identity card (KTP). But there's always a way around the system—Mama paid IDR 350,000 to another RT for a letter that states she lives in his village. That allowed her to at least enrol Augustus in school.

Working day in and day out picking trash and surrounded by rubbish is a not a job anyone would choose if they had a choice, and it would seem that Mama Nainggolan could not be worse off. But although she can't think of anyone poorer than herself and Augustus in this community, she does draw the line—*I would never sell my body*, she says.

When we get ready for bed it is hard to fall asleep due to the loud dangdut music coming from the nightclub across the road. Mama says they play music like that all night, every night, and there are singers that clients can pay to sing for them, or provide other services. In total there are ten nightclubs in the area—all illegally set up. Many of them are run by a local organisation that has been trying to intimidate people off their land, acting as a front for private business interests with Mafioso-type links. In the past they have hired thugs to cut down crops, burn down houses and even kill people. Mama's brother was a leader in a local Batak farmers' organisation that tried to stand up to this group, and had to go on the run for two years after his life was threatened. More recently the organisation has resorted to the courts and advocacy work to further its aims, and possibly it has found managing nightclubs to be more lucrative. It recently set up accommodation for the nightclub workers, with separate units for women and male sex workers.

Mama works hard, getting up before dawn to prepare Augustus's breakfast, and returns home after dark when she makes dinner for the two of them. Before going to sleep she treats herself to a cup of "tuak" (palm wine). She insists it is non-alcoholic, but it helps her relax—without it she says she couldn't sleep because she misses her other two children so much. Last Christmas she tried to visit them with Augustus, and brought presents with money borrowed from her brother, but her mother-in-law wouldn't allow her in so she left the presents outside the door. She doesn't know if she'll ever be able to get her twins back, but doesn't know what else to do. '*Pray that I can get my family back together,*' she asks as we leave.

- Bernie -

## Scars

It was during the second day staying with the family in Maluku that Mama Siti told us about her visit to Paris. According to her, her employers were so pleased with her service that when the family went for a holiday - they took her too. When pressed about the sights she had seen, she was a bit vague, but insisted that it had been beautiful and that she had had fun. We listened and asked her how she had come to work with such a generous couple. At first she didn't reply, was silent for a while, and then just changed the topic.

Over the next couple of days, we slowly pieced together that she had had gone abroad to work two times. The first time she was unmarried and it was just after finishing school. She and a friend had ran away to Saudi Arabia. She managed to get work in a manufacturing factory, but, she didn't like it so she left after two years. The second time she went to work as a domestic helper with a family in Malaysia. According to her, she was already married and had to leave her young daughter with her husband back in the village.

What is striking about these two journeys, is that when Mama Siti talks about her first time working abroad, her stories are detailed about the people she met and the different types of food that she ate. But, she hardly reveals any details about her time working for the couple. Except to add stories of other visits to New York and that when she left their service, she spent a week in Jakarta shopping and sightseeing. According to her, she spent all her earned money there, which is why she didn't bring much back home. It shows.

Her home is modest and consists of three rooms. The walls are made out of wooden planks, with a corrugated iron roof and a pebble floor. There is no electricity, even though the other houses in the village all have connections and some even have satellite dishes in their yards. Compared to the other houses in the village, Mama Siti's house looks the poorest, but it is clean. Once, when she took us to her father's house, we notice that it had concrete floors and brick walls. They were watching TV then, which Mama Siti pointed out was sent by a sister who was working abroad.

During our stay, her neighbours were always asking why we were staying there and whether we were happy. Later, we learned that word had got back to Mama that we were happy there, and she told us that hearing that had made her happy.

From the neighbours, we also came to learn that the burn scars visible on her body were due to a suicide attempt after she came home the second time. She had told us early on it was because of a cooking accident, but, according to others she had set herself on fire. It was her husband who had found her in time and had saved her.

We never questioned Mama about those scars nor raised doubts about the veracity of her journeys. Her husband was very supportive of Mama Siti and seemed proud that she had travelled to all these places, but was adamant that she should not go again. He himself had not travelled far and seemed satisfied earning a living from his land in the forest and occasional fishing.

Mama Siti told us she did not want to go anywhere now. During the last time that she was away, their daughter had fallen very ill and had passed away. She told us that no one was able to take care of her then. Now that she has another son, all she wants is to take care of him.

- Ansu -

## Poverty Is Not Just Numbers

Counting days, hard work and income: 20 years multiplied by 12 months multiplied by 2,000 ringgits. This is what Ibu Ning had done, since her only boy was 7 years old until he was 27 years old. Triggered by the struggles faced by her family, it seems that she hoped to find ways to make ends meeting the village, but this hope vanished for Ibu Ning and her husband. So, she decided to work in Malaysia. Her husband then left their son to find work in Aceh. The son was 'left and entrusted' in the care of his aunt, who was not affluent herself. Just 7 years old at the time, the boy had to live in a paddy field hut, taking care of his aunt's paddy field which was not productive anyway due to drought.

One day the boy was sick with a fever and fell from the hut. Both legs were swollen, and within three months he could not walk. It turns out that this accident had caused a permanent condition. The boy had difficulties in walking, and now he has to use a walking stick. Only later it was discovered, when he was circumcised, that the boy had haemophilia, a blood clotting disease.

Ibu Ning continued to work hard in Malaysia, transferring each month's salary to her in-law's account. Her maths was simple: 20 (years) x 12 (months) x 2000 ringgits = 480,000 ringgit or around IDR1.6 billion. *'More than one billion rupiah'*; she would dream about that plot of land and the beautiful house that she would own. She also imagined that her son had already graduated from high school or even university. Her maths convinced her that when she returned to her village, it would not be as the poor person who left twenty years before.

When she returned home however, those dreams vanished. A huge feud occurred between Ibu Ning and her brother-in-law and his extended family, because all of the money from her work in Malaysia had been spent by the big family instead of for her own son. Ibu Ning demanded the money be returned, in instalments, but this could not be fulfilled because her family also had a hard life.

Ning continued to make her demands to the family. Village officials tried to mediate, but to no avail, and Ibu Ning even experienced some hostility and resentment. She does not even have a house, just a small tarp attached to the back of her aunt's house. A small shack with a dirt floor, a tarp-roof and cardboard mixed with plywood for the walls is her only shelter after coming home from Malaysia. She lives with her disabled son, now 33 years old. Both work as red onion peelers, getting a payment of IDR 1,000 per kg. Both of them can peel 3-6 kg per day. Once in a while, she works in the onion warehouse, cleaning red onions from gardens to be sold in the market. Her income from the warehouse is not more than IDR 50,000 per day.

Her status as a migrant worker, her neighbours said, prevented her from accessing social assistance as Ibu Ning and her son were never registered in the village. Her only hope was for her son to have a better future, have enough food, have medication every time his haemophilia relapses, and have a small poultry business. Her son now has five chickens, a gift from a neighbour. These chickens have begun to lay eggs and the son is very diligent in feeding his chickens in their shack. Once in a while, he sells eggs for IDR 2,000 .

Ibu Ning and her son face their days together. A week after I had left the village, I received news that the son had passed away. Now Ibu Ning lives alone, burying hopes of her son's future.

Calculating salaries, savings, and expenditures couldn't predict all of those things beyond Ibu Ning's control. Where are Ning's dreams now?



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