

Customs and Traditions in Indonesia

By **R. Soemarno Soerohardjono**

IF TWO PEOPLES come from the same land of origin, they are likely to show common traits in customs and traditions, even though the one may have settled down much later than the other. Investigations in the field of archaeology, anthropology, biology and philology have led to the hypothesis that the present inhabitants of the Indonesian Archipelago are not the original inhabitants. According to a theory of Prof. Kern, they must have originated from areas in Further India, from where they migrated to the Indonesian Archipelago in several batches, with intervals of hundreds of years between one batch and the next. The original inhabitants they encountered, either fled into the inaccessible forests and mountains or were exterminated. What has especially strengthened scientists in their be-

lief that the peoples of Indonesia must have come from a common land of origin, is similarities in the languages of these people and in their domestic tools.

It is natural that geographic conditions greatly influence a people's customs and traditions. People living on the seaside wall naturally have different customs from people in the mountains. It is similarly easy to understand that people living in a cold climate must have different customs from people in the tropics. A nomad life of continual going, leaving and traveling, typical for poor and barren areas, will not likely be found in rich and fertile countries. In the light of these considerations, it is hardly surprising that, widespread though the Indonesian people may live, over an extensive archipelago, they nevertheless show similarities in cus-

toms and manners, as a result of the same geographic and climatological conditions.

Contacts with other people with different cultures have a great influence upon the customs and traditions of a people. This is especially apparent when we consider to what extent the western culture has brought about changes in the ways of living of the Indonesians. As a matter of fact, the educated part of the Indonesians have to a very large extent discarded traditional customs and manners, and adopted the Western way of life.

As a general rule, people with a higher degree of civilization will influence people with a lower standard of culture.

The closer the contact, the more intensive the influences will be. A glance on the map will make it quite clear that the various parts of the extensive Indonesian Archipelago are not equally favorably situated for contacts with foreigners.

The coastal areas of West Sumatra, situated on the important navigation route between China and India in the old days, were most favorably situated. On the other hand, large parts of the interior of Borneo are entirely inaccessible for foreigners.

This explains the great differences in civilization between, for instance, the inhabitants of Java and Sumatra and those of Central Borneo and Irian.

Considering the three most important factors that determine the nature of customs and traditions in certain areas—country of origin, geographical conditions, foreign contacts—we arrive at the conclusion that customs and traditions in Indonesia are bound to show not only great diversity, but also traits of conformity. There is great diversity due to the nature and the extent of influences from outside, but at the same time there is unity on account of the common land of origin and equal geographic and climatological conditions.

There is a close connection between religion and customs.

The most important religion in Indonesia is the Mohammedan religion. Of late years, Christianity has made many adherents among the Indonesians, especially in the Minahassa (in Northern Celebes), and in Ambon. There is, however, the remarkable fact in Indonesia that not every person who calls himself a Mohammedan is indeed one.

This is, for instance, the case in Central Java, where part of the population is poor and uneducated. Though these people call themselves Mohammedans, they often know very little of the Mohammedan doctrines. Most of them still have a strong belief in evil spirits which must be propitiated in order to ward off bad luck and disasters. A great many still believe in magicians and mira-

cle workers, witches and wizards, and are very often an easy victim for unscrupulous impostors who call themselves magicians.

This explains why, in a Mohammedan country like Java, customs and traditions very often show fundamental features of primitive animistic beliefs.

The principal events in a man's life being birth, marriage and death, it is understandable that the most remarkable customs and traditions of a people center around these three milestones.

Birth Ceremonials

WHEN A WOMAN is expecting a child she has to observe all kinds of rules and prohibitions:

1. She has to keep herself clean, wash her hair, cut her nails, etc. The basic idea underlying this custom is that a woman in this position is regarded as physically unclean. Since the rate of death caused by childbirth is naturally very high among uneducated people, the fear of death is very strong in the minds of mothers expecting a baby. In the event of death by childbirth the mother should therefore return to her Creator in a condition of physical cleanliness.

An expectant mother is, however, not allowed to wear ornaments, jewels or flowers, since this is believed to cause miscarriage or, at least, a difficult childbirth.

2. The expectant mother must keep a strict diet.

3. Offers should be brought to ward off evil influences and special formulas and prayers said at fixed times.

At the seventh month a special ceremony, called "tingkeban", should be held, consisting in the bathing of the expecting mother by a "dukun". The water used for this purpose is kept in a bowl and strewn with flowers. Special formulas are said. After the bathing, the expecting mother puts on, and immediately takes off, again seven sets of clothes in quick succession. Each time an older person, preferably one of the parents of the women, says: "No, this doesn't suit you. Put on another dress".

This procedure of putting on and taking off clothes in quick succession is to induce an easy and quick birth. The nearest relatives and friends, are invited to attend the ceremony. The foods served on this occasion are of a definite kind, each having a special significance, mostly bearing on easy childbirth. In the evening, a *wayang* performance is usually given, the story preferably dealing with the birth of the hero Gatotkacha, a popular figure in the Hindu epic Mahabharata.

After the child is born, the placenta is cut with a sharpened piece of a special kind of bamboo. This scalpel is carefully preserved, to be used again later when a

brother or sister is born. The placenta is regarded as a younger brother of the baby, who will, from the spiritual world, watch further over the well-being of the older brother or sister. Accordingly, special care should be taken of it. It should be put in a new earthen pot, which should then be provided with special articles, e.g. a coin, a pencil, a sheet of paper with Arabic characters, a needle, salt, some grains of red rice, flowers and perfume. Each of these articles has a special significance. The paper with the Arabic characters, for instance, is believed to have a favorable influence afterwards on the ability of the child in learning to write and to read, particularly the Qur'an. The pot with the placenta should be buried with special ceremonial by the father of the baby. For this special purpose the father should be formally dressed. He carries the pot in a "slendang" (a sling or scarf) while holding an umbrella over his head.

Immediately after the birth the baby should be washed. This again should be done according to fixed rules. "Golden water" should be used. The name is derived from the yellow color, obtained by mixing the water with the yellow juice of a kind of root with medicinal merits. A brightly polished coin should be immersed in the water. After being rubbed in with a wet and sticky mixture, prepared from many kinds of spices

and other ingredients, the baby is then very tightly wrapped up in strips of cloth, so tightly that it cannot even move its arms or legs. Before putting the baby in bed, a special charm should be read. Curiously enough, this charm is in Arabic and characteristically Mohammedan in words and spirit. Immediately after the child has been laid in bed, three crashing blows are dealt on the bed. This is to prevent the baby from growing into a jumpy and easily startled child.

The first few days after the baby has been born are the most dangerous. Special precautions should, therefore, be taken for the safety of the baby. An oil lamp should be kept burning day and night. Under the baby's bed there should be provided rice, moulded into the shape of a mountain, with a red "lombok" (Spanish pepper) on top. The rice should be kept in a semi-global coconutshell. An egg is mostly added to the rice. This offering is intended for wandering spirits so as to put them in a friendly mood.

The most dangerous time, however, is the day on which the last remnant of the navelstring falls off. On that day thousands of spirits, each with evil intent, are believed to be swarming around the baby. In order to guard it against these evil spirits, it should be borne on the mother's, or a relative's, lap for a period of 24 hours. In the course of this

period, the baby must under no condition be laid down on the bed. In order to mislead the evil spirits from their real objective, a cylindrical stone, roughly painted with lime so as to give it a face, eyes, a mouth, in order that it shall more or less resemble a human being, is laid in the immediate neighborhood of the baby. The spirits will then take the stone for the baby and direct their attacks on it. Finding an unusually hard substance, they will soon give up and retreat. The cylindrical stone used for this purpose is an instrument for crushing medicinal herbs, roots and spices, and on that account it is believed to have magical powers to resist evil spirits.

Marriage

ALSO IN THIS respect much has changed owing to modern influences. Ceremonies attending an Indonesian marriage nowadays do not differ substantially from those in other countries.

In former days, the choice of a wife or a husband was not made by the young people themselves, but by their parents. When a boy has reached the age of eighteen, the parents begin to look seriously out for a suitable partner for him. As soon as they have found one they send a trusted person to the parents of the girl. In veiled terms the person of confidence tries to find out whether the parents of the girl are willing to consider a

marriage between their daughter and the boy in question. If so, an agreement is made on what day the parents of the young man can come and see them in order to have a look at the girl.

On the fixed day the young man's parents, accompanied by their son and a few older relatives pay a formal call on the young girl's parents. An Indonesian house being in fact a double house, composed of a front one which serves for a reception hall, and a back one where the people actually live, the male guests are received in the front house and the female guests in the back one. Care should be taken that not a word should be mentioned about the real purpose of the visit. Both sides should make it appear as if the visit is just a casual friendly call. The guests should not be offered anything but tea or coffee and cigarettes or *sirih*. After talking for a while about unimportant things, the host invites his male guests to join the women in the back house. This is the important moment, for very soon the future bride is expected to come and serve *sirih* for the women. She is not allowed to look at anyone, but should keep her eyes fixed downwards and say nothing. Feeling all eyes fixed on her she, is, of course, very nervous. And indeed everyone watches her attentively, especially the young man. It is therefore that this visit is called "nontoni", i.e.

taking a look. After serving the *sirih*, the young girl immediately withdraws again, without even for a moment having looked at the man who will perhaps be her husband.

Shortly afterwards, the guests go home where they discuss the merits or imperfections of the future bride. The young man is not allowed to take part in these discussions. Sometimes his opinion is asked on this matter, but this is by no means necessary. If the parents should decide in favor of the young girl, they send a formal letter to her parents asking for her hand. Then it will be entirely up to the parents of the girl whether the suit is accepted or not.

In case the suit is accepted, the wedding day is fixed forthwith. This is done according to a rather complicated calculation of favorable and unfavorable days. Mohammedans, for instance, prefer to contract marriages during the month when the religious pilgrimage is made to Mecca.

Some time, however, may elapse between the formal letter of acceptance and the wedding day. This is especially true in the case when the young girl has one or more elder unmarried sisters. The usual custom is for her wedding to be deferred while the family members take all possible steps to marry off the older sisters.

In such a case, the young man's parents usually send presents to

the parents of the girl as a concrete confirmation of the agreement reached by both parties. These presents vary in quantity and quality according to the financial standing of the givers, but they must include three important articles that really form the nucleus of the gift: a special kind of ring made of two diamonds set in a band of gold, a batik *kain* and a batik breastcloth. Rich families often give other valuable ornaments in addition to the ring and also more *kains* and more breastcloths, but these are kept apart from the three articles mentioned before. Foodstuffs and fruit are also included in the gift. If for some important reason or other, the girl's parents should change their minds and decide to cancel the marriage, custom requires them to send double the amount and the value of the gifts to the young man's family. It is therefore easily understood that the parents of the young man are usually lavish in their gifts, since the more valuable the gift, the surer are they that their son will get the desired bride.

A few days before the wedding takes place more presents arrive in the home of the bride from the future parents-in-law. Meanwhile, the bride's house is being busily prepared for the coming festivity. A provisional open building of very light material, mostly bamboo, with wooden planks and a thatched roof, is erected in the

yard surrounding the house. A profusion of pale green coconut leaves gives the house a festive aspect. In most cases, an arch, decorated with palm leaves, is erected in front of the house to enhance the festive aspect of the whole.

When the "day" arrives, early in the morning, the bride is woken up. Immediately after her usual morning bath, she is dressed in her marriage splendour. The dressing, which is quite a long and complicated affair, is usually supervised by a middle-aged woman who is an expert in such matters, assisted by some other married women, mostly relatives and close friends.

The bride in Sumatra wears a two-piece ensemble, consisting of the bodice and the lower part or skirt. The bodice is a kind of blouse of a red color which reaches down to the knees, embroidered with gold threads. The lower garment is called the "kain". Over this ensemble is draped a sort of veil, called the "slendang". Both "kain" and "slendang" are, like the bodice, of a red color richly embroidered with gold threads.

The bride's hair is knotted in a certain special fashion. The whole head is then decorated with golden hairpins. Rings, necklaces and bracelets adorn the bride's fingers, wrists and breast.

The Javanese bride wears a black velvet "kabaya", an upper garment which reaches to the hips

and which is also edged with gold threads. Her lower garment is a richly embroidered "kain", the background of which is of a red-brown color and falls in a train in front.

Round her neck, the Javanese bride wears three necklaces of different lengths. A golden belt encircles her waist with a large clasp in front richly set with jewels. Above her forehead she wears a comb, also jewel-set. Her long hair is rolled into a knot which is covered with melati flowers. Golden hairpins and a garland of melati flowers which is pinned to the hairknot and falls to the shoulders, complete the headdress. After the ceremonials, these melati flowers, as in the case of the bride's bouquet in a European wedding, are given to the bridesmaids in order that they may soon follow suit.

When the bride is fully dressed, she is conducted by her bridesmaids—two, four or at most six—who are all dressed in black costumes with special headgears, to the bride's room where she has to sit on a richly decorated sofa. There she waits for the most exciting moment in the day for her, the moment when she will behold the man who has been chosen to be her husband.

Meanwhile, the bridegroom is fetched by some middle-aged women of the bride's family. On his arrival, he is welcomed by other women who throw rice-grains at

him and wash his feet.

In Java, the bridegroom is welcomed by the bride herself who, accompanied by the bridesmaids, goes out the house to meet him. At a distance of two meters from each other, they throw flowers or sirih leaves at each other. If the bridegroom gets the first throw, it means he will be his wife's protector in their life together; if the bride throws first, it is an unpleasant token that he will be a henpecked husband. The funny thing about this is that the bridesmaids all do their best to make the bride get the first throw.

In Java, the feet-washing is also done by the bride. On the floor a basin of water is put ready, and beside it, a plate with an egg and sirih leaves on it. The bridegroom stands before the basin, the bride bends down on her knees and makes the "sembah" for him, subsequently washing his feet and breaking the egg. She then rises to her feet and conducts him to her house.

The official, religious marriage ceremony is performed by a Mohammedan priest prior to the actual meeting of the bride and bridegroom, and is usually attended by a small circle of male relatives and friends. At this ceremony only the bridegroom is present, the bride being represented by a male relative, usually her father.



Death Ceremonials

SINCE THE majority of the Indonesians are followers of Islam, the rites performed in case of death are Islamic, mixed with some traditional ceremonies which are the remains of Hinduism. On-

ly in areas like Bali and Lombok where the people still cling to the belief in Hinduism, cremation of dead bodies still takes place according to the requirements of Hinduism. Then there is a minority group of Christians, chiefly in the Minahasa, Ambon and the Moluccas, who of course follow the dictates of Christianity in performing their funeral ceremony.

When a member of an Islamic family dies, he is at once placed in such a way that he lies with his head in a North-Westerly direction, and his hands crossed over his waist. The direction is prescribed by Islam in connection with the Holy town of Mecca lying to the north-west of Indonesia. Incense is then burnt on a charcoal fire and is kept burning near the bed on which the dead person lies. This habit is a relic of Hinduism.

As soon as possible the nearest relatives and friends are informed of the sad news and the time is set for the funeral. In the villages this is done simply by beating the "bedug" or sounding the "tong-tong". On hearing these sounds the people will assemble on their own accord, eager for the news.

In areas where the people are strict observers of Islamic customs, they usually dress in black when visiting a house of death. They usually bring some contributions to the bereaved family in the form of rice or money or white cotton, according to the custom in the

different localities and of an amount in proportion to the circumstances of the givers. Everybody lends a helping hand in the preparations of the funeral.

When relatives and friends have arrived, the body is washed. No matter how many people participate in this washing, their number must be odd. If the dead person is a man, the washing is done by the sons or, in their absence, by male relatives; if a woman, by the daughters or female relatives. A deceased possessing neither sons nor daughters is laid out on banana trunk, pulled out in thin layers, while the washing is going on.

After being washed, the body is wrapped in a shroud of white cotton and laid on a bier, while prayers are offered according to Islamic rites. The male relatives then carry the bier out of the house. On arriving at the front door, the bearers stop awhile to allow relatives of the deceased who are still under-age to walk three times the bier. This again is not an Islamic custom.

On the way to the graveyard, prayers are said and coins are scattered at the cross-roads. The bier is carried shoulder-high, while an umbrella is held by a relative or friend to shade the head of the deceased. Some one in the procession carries a sirih box, a spittoon and a mat wrapped up in white cotton.

Mohammedans do not bury

their dead in coffins but directly in the earth. On arrival at the grave, the body is taken from the coffin and lowered into the earth, whenever possible, in such a way that the earth does not fall on the body when the grave is filled up. This is usually contrived by digging a side passage at the bottom of the grave, making a sort of shelf for the body to rest on. The dead is then laid down on its right side, with the head in a north-western direction to face Mecca.

Islamic people believe that the dead undergo an examination whilst in the grave as to his/her beliefs and behavior during his/her life on earth. To equip their deceased for this examination, a set of questions and answers is chanted before the grave is filled in. After the grave has been filled again with earth, wooden slabs are placed at both the foot and head of the grave.

At fixed times after the funeral, namely the third, seventh, fortieth, hundredth and thousandth day, offerings or "sedekahs" are offered and friends and relatives are invited to join in the prayers for the repose of the soul of the deceased. This last custom is not prescribed by Islam.

The Hindu rites, as mentioned before, are still practised in Bali and Lombok. According to these rites, the dead must be burnt in order that his soul may be cleared from impurity and thus may be

reincarnated. This is a rather expensive ritual and not every Balinese can afford it. In consequence, a modification has come about. The dead body is first buried, the bones being ritually burnt if and when circumstances permit. The cremation will then take place in the form of a burning in effigy.

In case of a cremation, the body or bones are carried to the cremation site in a high tower, "wadah", constructed from bamboo and draped with stuff, paper and tinsel. The funeral procession zig-zags across the road again and again, jolting the bones or body, going in circles at cross-roads, all with a view to confusing the spirit of the departed that he will not be able to find his old home but proceed right away to his future domain.

Upon arrival at the place of cremation, the bones are taken down from the tower and placed in a coffin made in the form of some animal. The Brahmans make their coffins in the shape of a cow, the Katryas in that of a lion, the Waishyas in a figure from a fable, and the Sudras in that of a fish. Prayers are then said and both coffin and remains vanish together in the flames.

This brief sketch is merely intended to give a very general idea of traditional customs in Indonesia and, particularly, in Java. Details may vary in other islands, but the underlying general philosophy is greatly alike. — *Indonesian Review*.