

## POOR PEOPLE

Children in Bayu, a village in the far east of Java, go barefoot to school. Though they possess sandals, as required, they carry them to school and carry them home. New shoes, sometimes more than one pair per child, are passed on intact to the next sibling. Things last. It's a practical and face-saving solution to scarcity, showing that you can get by with little. The Javanese word for this respectable, make-do Micawberism is *cukupan*, 'having just enough'. It sounds a bit grim, but the orderly jollity of the daily procession is a thing of wonder. Our children used to join the happy march, shoeless like the rest.

The same balance of frugality and display governs public events. Most villagers live modestly, with just enough for the necessities. Naturally, behind the shady porches and mango-fringed yards, differences can be found. In a village of some 2000 souls, half a dozen rice farmers own more land than the bottom hundred. But an ethic of mutuality and a fear of 'standing out' obliges the better off to avoid lavish spending, living much like their poorer neighbours and buying provisions at the same village stores. (Profits are reinvested in land.) In turn, sharecroppers and artisans are expected to make exactly the same donations as landowners at weddings and circumcision feasts, which are always big affairs. The men give money – a fixed sum, equivalent to half a day's wages, and sit politely awaiting their clove cigarette, doughnut and goat stew (in that order); the women arrive in the elegant uniform of sarong and sash, with identical headloads of rice. Guests great and small are equalised, deserving equal honour. Being poor is no disgrace.

The week of feasting and visiting that follows the end of Ramadan is another controlled splurge, good cheer laced with anxiety. Again, there are traditional means of appearing well while having little. Among old-fashioned villagers, new clothes, bought for Eid, are worn once (with the label or price tag showing), then displayed on poles alongside last year's sarongs and even the odd bicycle: treasures that dangle hazardously above visitors' heads. Sadly, every year or two a suicide shows that not everyone has enough to participate.

As welfare theorists have shown, the stigma of poverty comes from relative deprivation, exclusion from socially valued activities rather than simply from a lack of wherewithal. Stigma also comes with a label. Few Javanese would call themselves *mlarat*, 'poor', 'wretched'; most settle on something like 'hard-up' or 'have-not'. 'Poor' is a moral category, implying charity, pity and blame; it's a label that shapes behaviour and self-image and for that reason is taboo among some policy makers. Yet technical terms and euphemisms like 'low-income' or 'deprived' don't begin to fathom the existential predicament.

Whatever the designation, however politically correct, there's an effect of distance, a blurring of distinctions. The bottom billion, the underclass, the so-many per cent: were we to see them as individuals, with their own histories and characters, we might hear their diverse voices. But poverty erases differences. The poor do not have ideas except in the mass. (And their desires and opinions are of no particular account since they must refer, in the end, to their poverty.) To be poor is to be a certain kind of person with a definite fate.

Rural Java has its pockets of extreme poverty, but the green revolution – bringing in two or three rice crops a year – has improved things for most people. In Indonesia's Outer Islands that is less often the case. Scarcity takes a very different

form. The economic relation that frames poverty is tenuous, often remote, and the cultural solutions more imaginative. Until recently, there was no rich class to measure oneself against, no aspiration to live on terms other than those given by local tradition.

In 1986, with my wife Mercedes, I began two and a half years' fieldwork on Nias, a large rugged island eighty miles off the coast of Sumatra. Nias is one of the poorest places in Indonesia and our hilltop village, with its ancient stone plaza and crumbling clan houses, was counted among the most 'backward' on the island. That official estimation had not changed when I returned, a few years ago, to write the epilogue for a [narrative ethnography](#), the story of the fieldwork. In the wake of the tsunami and earthquake, Nias was, if anything, even poorer than I remembered. 'Backward', 'remote', 'undeveloped': a vocabulary of deficit defined our village, making of poverty a technical problem, less a matter of historical forces than of roads and mind-set. But official euphemisms hardly touched the reality - bony grey pigs rooting in the damp square, mothers delousing children under the eaves of shaggy roofs, men burdened with firewood, back from the swiddens at dusk. Poverty had a look, a feel, a smell, a sense of permanence that statistics couldn't capture. And it had a meaning, too, that the people who became our companions - hunters, orators, ex-warriors and diviners - were unlikely to share with the distant functionaries they mocked as Our Rulers or cursed as the Devil.

A fledgling anthropologist, my object back in 1986 was not to study the causes of poverty but to learn something of how a tribal, mostly non-literate society worked, how its systems of marriage and kinship, religious beliefs, political alliances and economic exchanges fitted together, or perhaps fell apart. In the time-honoured fashion we made a life among the villagers, learning their language, sharing their world. But before we could do anything else we had to learn what it meant to be poor.

Poverty was not the motive, but it motivated much of what happened during our stay. Its effects were undeniable: shortened lives, withered bodies, broken dreams. But immersion in village life gave a subtler appreciation of what it was to have little or nothing. Once the shock had been absorbed, the anonymous face of poverty receded and the many different solutions to the fact of scarcity stood out. The ambition, defiance and resignation that we saw enacted around us in the starkest possible forms could be seen as stances against want and misfortune. The ordinary human passions seemed enlarged and clarified on the empty stage. We came to see that, for the villagers, poverty was not an affliction, assuming some normal healthy state of well being – such could only be an outsider's view. It was simply how things were, how they had always been. It was the starting point for many journeys, many different kinds of person. Against expectation, against the levelling of want, poverty was what made a difference.

At first glance, it was harder to *see* scarcity in this tropical garden than among the swarming slums of Jakarta. Land was abundant, nobody was idle. There were no shiny goods to covet or rich people to envy. No one was starving, no one had given up. But people in Nias lived on less than city vagrants. It was common for women to die giving birth; half of their children were lost before the age of five. Diseases forgotten in the developed world - historical maladies like yaws and plague - brought an early and painful death; but so too did snakebite and infected wounds, curable ailments made lethal by distance. There was luck in survival, a Malthusian cruelty in the irregular cull.

Perhaps, as the Devil declared, it was all a matter of schools and infrastructure. But wasn't that His excuse for corruption? To be sure, poverty in the hills wasn't the result of obvious class oppression, landlordism or market swings. Such evils, where

they existed, could make things worse, but their removal would not bring prosperity. Nor was it something that *happened* to people. The earthquake that briefly made Nias world news in 2005 turned little into less, but to Niha it wasn't news; tremors were as familiar as the jitters of malaria. No, for people with little knowledge of what linked them to the rest of the world – or separated them from it - poverty was the inexorable condition of life, not a policy oversight or accident of geography. And because the persistence of want was rooted in the order of things, not in the changing circumstances of history, it could only have a moral significance, an explanation that pointed abstractly to God or to your fellow Niha. If your harvest was smaller than your neighbours' in the next swidden, you suspected them of sorcery. If your pigs grew lank and your children ailed, you wondered what you might have done to earn an ancestral curse. If you were a Christian, especially of an Old Testament cast, you reflected on past sins or demanded, Job-like, why you had been singled out. And if you were sceptical of the old beliefs but unable to embrace the new, your questions could find no answer. Am I my brother's keeper? How, in a vicious world, can I be good? What is the point of it all? Lacking the comfortable distractions of consumer society, speculation had practical urgency. The stakes were so much higher.

Without modern healthcare, transport or roads connecting markets, without even the pre-industrial technology of surplus (the plough, draft animals, credit), there was little villagers could do to better their lot. It was as if you couldn't fight human misery, you could only weather it and try to understand. Or strive against the odds, knowing that – in the zero-sum moral economy - your gain was someone else's loss. Adversity, Providence, ambition and human frailty: how could these be squared? 'If the Bible were true, there's not one man alive who would be saved,' said Ama Darius, a God-tormented soul who devoted the early months of our stay to explaining why the

life of a Christian was futile. (Niha are named after their first-born child. Ama Darius = Father of Darius; Ina Ria = Mother of Ria.) Damnation, not development, was his obsession. 'If there *is* a God, as the priest insists, we here, at the end of the earth, are his stepchildren,' he would lament. His nephew, the village malcontent and rival in a dynastic feud, had no such doubts. 'Hell is as close as heaven is far,' said Ama Jonah, widening his eyes in mock horror and flattening his hands against an invisible wall before breaking into laughter. What mattered more than righteousness was truth, or rather plainness - hard in a place where fancy speeches went on day and night. In his time, he had poisoned enemies, stolen the wives of kinsmen, hiding them in the forest, rained on many parades (he knew the spells), and now he was locked in a battle over lineage land. 'I do what I do, and say it loud, even if they hate me for it,' he boasted. With small chance of salvation you had to take whatever chances you could, and to hell with the consequences.

Ina Ria, the chief's sister, had once possessed riches of a kind and she spoke from a different vantage. Led away in marriage, forty years ago, to a gaunt stone village over the hills, on her wedding day 120 pigs died in her name. Her gold necklace and tiara - her brideprice - had melted in the fire that killed her husband and burned down the house. Now she lived on next to nothing. A 'village widow', she had won great titles, hosted potlatches and could outface any man in a contest of wits. In her threadbare, soiled dress she looked like any careworn peasant woman, but she carried all that history inside her. Profit, she once told me, was sinful and brought down the wrath of the ancestors. That, too, was part of her family story, tragedy interwoven with a ledger of festive debts. Many years ago, when her brother was newly appointed chief, the ancestors had visited smallpox on his wife and six children - 'a warning' - forcing him, at their burial, to lower interest and reset the rates of

exchange among gold and pigs. There was a calculus of gifts, sins and illicit gains. ‘A *false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight,*’ Ina Ria liked to quote. The Lord, the ancestors: it was all one. But debts, spiritual or earthly, had to be repaid.

These were the big characters, the over-reachers, men and women whose lives loomed over the landscape like their peaked houses, raised against mortal ruin. But ordinary folk, too, had found ways of managing fate. Our neighbour, Ama Ya'a, took the middling view. A good man, versed in hardship, he had buried five children. Yet he had no complaints.

‘People are poor because they sin, and they sin because they are poor,’ he said, inescapably. ‘Those who have nothing must steal. But being poor makes you spiteful too. That's why the thief who stole the tailor's ducks killed those he couldn't carry off. And that's why a man who stole a pig from the chief took care to shit in his pigsty, just to mock him.’ Theft was wrong, but the chief had it coming: he put the squeeze on people and now he was suffering. He kept getting ill and no one could cure him. God punishes us for our sins.

Ama Ya'a's bleak theology, a touch ironic, stopped short of Ama Jonah's God-defiance or Ama Darius's scepticism; but it gave him something, it raised him an inch or two above his misery; and it was a weapon against the strong, even against the world. After all, the divine thunderbolt was a kind of justice, a mockery of human vanity, if not much of a consolation.

‘Then why do the good suffer?’ I asked.

‘God's anger!’ Ama Ya'a shrank back, twisting his face like God looking down in horror, hurling calamity upon the world. I was shocked. He held the pose too long,

grief frozen in his face; then he shuddered, collecting himself. ‘But why ask *me*? Isn’t it the same everywhere?’

For Ama Darius, suffering disproved God, at least a God worth having; for Ama Ya’a, it *justified* God: misery’s cause and cure. In their opposite ways both were moralists. But there were other stances, less theological, better fitting the newer ways. For poverty in Nias has its modern counterpart: progress. Progress is less an opposite or antidote than another version of the same thing: the half-built road, the medicine that kills, the rotten state with its uniformed predators. And because it comes to the village as a failed promise, or a planned failure, people are mystified by its purposes while being clear about its root cause: the extractive state and its corrupt agents. Even the young schoolteachers, apostles of government policy, are quite cynical about the new ways, coolly giving and accepting bribes, stuffing ballot boxes to ensure the village won’t lose its annual subsidy. Only the farthest-flung pioneers, remote from cynical gossip, pay their tax with an innocent wince. I remember a gnarled hut-dweller, drenched from the forest, calling on the chief to pay his annual tithe. In a little prepared speech, he reflected on the hardships he had endured to finance his great feasts; he looked forward to returning one day to the civilised comforts of the village. But when he fished a banknote from his betel pouch, the smirking tax official held it up and joked to onlookers about the tobacco stains. ‘What’s the money for?’ the old man asked me. I hadn’t the heart to tell him.

Progress defines its object – the poor - as underdeveloped, inferior and dependent; but the villagers saw themselves as none of those things. It was the townies, with their soft hands and pointless lives, who were lesser beings. The chief and the elders always treated officials - creatures of the state, ‘those who eat wages’ - with scant respect. And there was further proof of the modern delusion in the youths



who had boarded in town to attend high school and came home with nothing to offer: too feeble to clear forest, too clean to kill pigs, too dumb to make speeches. Indeed, for most Niha today, progress – which depends on an alien scale of values - is necessarily elsewhere. (In this, as in much else, they differ from the Javanese.) By the time I went back to the village in 2011, most of the young people had migrated to the plantations and plywood factories of Sumatra, shedding their tribal past, forgetting Nias, becoming Indonesian. They had joined the World Poor. A generation earlier, Niha still had their own resources, their own conception of the good life. Wealth was reckoned in networks of kin, credit in potlatch-style feastgiving and swaggering titles: Lord of the Masses, Guest at the Sun's Feast. It was possible to have little but become great. Glory went with penury.

The poet-physician William Carlos Williams used to say that patients came to him with 'the symptoms of life'. The privations and blood feuds of a Niha village are equally the symptoms of life. So too are the fiery speeches and black humour, the profligate feasts that deepen poverty while defying it. And against the ache of want, all this effort, this outpouring of words, helps define something for which Niha lack a term but possess in plenty: character. In facing the void, enduring or defying fate, Niha make themselves. Against that Nought, their individuality flourishes. And it gives the lie to a popular prejudice that sees the poor everywhere and at all times as the same. Dostoevsky (whose first success was *Poor People*) knew this, and made it his compelling theme. Hunger, humiliation, hope, fantasy, revenge: any story, like any life, is about more than bread alone. For anthropology, too, beyond the generalities of class and culture, it's the moral gesture that matters, the self-defining act. Economists and planners can quantify poverty, plot Gini-coefficients and devise remedies; but they cannot tell us what it is, what it feels like, how, in much of the

world, it frames existence. They cannot tell us what, in the scheme of things, it means to have nothing. The struggle for life is also a struggle for meaning.