

GAINING ACCEPTANCE IN THE FIELD:

AN EXAMPLE FROM WEST SUMATRA

<sup>1</sup>  
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A Village Calls...

We'd lived less than 10 minutes by car from Pulai for over *two* years, and I'd driven within a stone's throw of it many times. That day we were out for a joy ride, escaping the public nature of our home in nearby Piruko, seeking privacy---ever elusive there---together astride Dudley's yellow Suzuki trailbike..

It was a beautiful September day, blue sky with white puffy clouds overhead. The road was neither a morass of mud nor a mass of billowing dust. We headed across the Batang Hari River to the forests, escaping. Driving through the cool shelter of the trees was our relaxation, our joy.

The last few months had been difficult. I was the anthropologist on a team of soil scientists; and one of them--a dedicated, hardworking and bright one, at that---had been unjustly accused of doing Christian missionary work in the area. It was becoming clear at that time that Jim and his family might be asked to leave the country---meaning a huge loss to the project and to us personally. They were our friends.

As we rode along, Dudley and I were discussing my need to do some research in a Minang community. I felt I knew a lot about transmigrants <sup>2</sup> from Java, but I wanted a clearer picture of the differences between the transmigrants and the indigenous population of West Sumatra. Our project had only worked with transmigrants (because of governmental interest in them), and I

felt we were neglecting an opportunity to make use of indigenous experience with the local environment. It also seemed quite possible to me that the Minang might have noticed the lack of benefits from our project for their agricultural system. This could have exacerbated the religious problem. I had just become Chief of Party, and I wanted to rectify this inter-ethnic equity problem insofar as possible.

The gist of our conversation prompted my husband to veer toward Pulai at a fork in the road, leading us onto a narrow path exactly wide enough for a car. This turned out to be the axis along which the village was situated, paralleling the nearby river. We were greeted by a profusion of trees---hiding the community ~~fairly~~ thoroughly from casual detection, and the curious but friendly stares of children and a few adults in village yards.

Piruko, where we lived, was a planned transmigration community, every home replicated 4 times on every block, every yard exactly 1/4 ha in size. Although eight years of occupancy had altered the once identical houses, the original square wooden structure was often still visible. Even the placement of trees in the yards attested to the standardization that characterizes such settlements.

Pulai was different. Brightly decorated concrete houses were interspersed with traditional wooden homes built on stilts, with Minang roofs, the outer peaks reaching skyward, in the shape of a water buffalo's horns (or according to legend, a canoe). The homes were generally aligned along the road, but in a haphazard,

natural sort of fashion. They seemed a part of the surrounding forest, which gradually blended into the fruit trees and other greenery surrounding their homes. Yellow flowers sprinkled the yards in abundance, highlighting the brightly painted windows here and there, contrasting with the many shades of green that characterize the whole area. The profusion of trees gave the village a cool, refreshing air. I was enchanted.

We drove on across the river and proceeded into the forest in search of monkeys, boars, peacocks, and other natural phenomena. But I resolved to return to Pulai.

A few days later, Megan (my teenage daughter) and I decided to go for a similar joy ride. She'd been in Kalimantan with me some years earlier, working with Kenyah Dayaks who lived along a river. We wondered if the people of Pulai had the floating platforms that the Dayaks had used for bathing, sociability and all functions requiring water. So we headed for Pulai again.

This time, we stopped at a cluster of buildings which turned out to be a Muslim religious school and its dormitories. The dormitories were made of woven mats, strung together into human size boxes, and set up on stilts. Little did we know at that time that some of these were occupied by whole families.

We were immediately surrounded by interested boys and young men, ranging in age from about ten to 20---a common occurrence in Indonesia. They chattered away in Minang, their native language. We could only understand bits and snatches of their speech. ~~We~~ ~~were~~ ~~surrounded~~. We felt uncomfortable, closed in---though we knew we were perfectly safe. As we resolutely moved toward the

river, the circle broke, granting us freedom to go where we wanted.

Very steep steps had been carved out of the cool, damp banks of the river. Regular use kept the steps firm and grass-free, but on all sides lush vegetation surrounded us. Clambering down the steps behind us was an entourage of the younger boys, grinning mischievously or smiling shyly. Several of them were making fishing nets, working on them as they played.

At the bottom we found only a shallow side channel of the river between the shore and an island. People could draw water, bathe and wash their clothes directly in the river. We returned to our motorcycle, grateful to escape the persistent stares, the alien language, and occasional laughter of the boys.

I realized, as I contemplated working in Pulai, that the chance to work on my own again was a powerful draw. I had worked for two years in a very collaborative mode, with soil scientists and agronomists. The decision to do so had been a conscious one: I wanted to use anthropological information to help determine research priorities on the project. To do that effectively, I had to work closely with the agricultural scientists. It had worked well.

Yet the ethnographic loss was significant. I had chosen--like my <sup>coworkers</sup>---to live in a comparatively comfortable home (with a generator, running water, fans), largely to enhance communication with them---recognizing that this would have a negative impact on my communication with villagers. I had accepted the driver that had been urged on me for the same

reasons. We lived close enough to each other so that a significant amount of my leisure time was spent with co-workers---again reducing my immersion in local life.

Some of our work involved designing and doing experiments collaboratively with farmers. Although this process provided some useful ethnographic information, I was always wondering what the farmers would be doing without our collaboration. That this close association with other team members presented a potential danger ~~to~~<sup>to</sup> my rapport with villagers (should they act, or be perceived to act, inappropriately) was also clear.

My co-workers were remarkably aware and culturally sensitive. But they were not anthropologists. The degree to which this religious controversy, for instance, might affect my work was troubling me. I'd lived and worked under the constraints of teamwork for two years, and I relished the idea of returning to "real fieldwork." I was confident that my rapport with team members was sufficiently good to allow me to go it alone for a while.

#### Getting Permission to Work in Pulai

I returned to Pulai one morning a few days later, driving through town more slowly, hoping someone might invite me in, trying to get a feel for the place, wondering how best to proceed. The people were friendly, but more guardedly so than the transmigrants. No one invited me in, but I noticed a small shed, outfitted on three sides with benches, full of men, apparently just sitting around. One thin man about my age (40)

gave me a particularly friendly smile which cheered me in the difficult first moments when fieldwork actually begins.

I drove on to the river, lined with lush tropical growth, its beauty and size always a source of strength and inspiration to me. Coming back, as I reached the village edge, I saw the thin man again. Again he smiled, giving me courage to stop and ask him where the headman might be. I felt a surge of relief that he understood and spoke Indonesian, as well as Minang. I was self-conscious but grateful when he led me back to a little shop near the shed full of men, and called the headman over to me.

The headman turned out to be a young man in his late twenties. He (and the toothless old shopkeeper) listened to my explanation of what I wanted ---- to learn about their agricultural system, about their way of life, so that our project could begin to do agricultural experiments that would be more appropriate for their system. We also hoped this would help the government develop policies that were more appropriate for Sumatran conditions. He smiled somewhat shyly and nodded with what I took to be reserved approval through all this. I could understand enough of the Minang language to pick up his occasional corroboration of something I had said, addressing himself to the older man who seemed to speak little Indonesian.

Then the headman asked what exactly I would be wanting to do in Pulai. As I spoke of coming every day, spending time in the village and in the fields with families, interviewing people, he began to look progressively more uncomfortable. His youth led

me to suspect that he held the position of village headman because of educational certification requirements of the central or provincial ~~g~~overnment, and that he might be headman in title only (or mainly). I could see that I was putting him in a very difficult position. He looked enormously relieved and grateful when I asked if he'd need to discuss something like this with the village elders. Yes, one person shouldn't make a decision like this, he said. We agreed that I should return in a week's time.

The following week I got my first lesson in Pulai politics (and kinship). I learned that the "elders" he needed to consult were the clan leaders of Pulai's three major matrilineal clans (Tigoninik, Melayu Satu and Melayu Dua) and the religious leader (who was also head of the religious school).

How fortunate that one of the leaders of Melayu Satu was the thin man who'd first smiled at me---Pak Munir. The leader of Melayu Dua was a very distinguished looking man of middle age who was also the head of the village elementary school. The religious leader was a member of the Melayu Satu clan. The leader of the Tigoninik clan, which I later learned was by far the most influential, never came to any of our meetings, though the young headman was also a member of this clan.

Each time I came to the village for a meeting, I lingered, hoping to meet some of the village women. On one such occasion, an old, but still strong, woman beckoned me into a room adjoining Pulai's grandest house. Large and new, this house was beautifully constructed of elaborately carved wood, with the pointed roof and stilts dictated by tradition.

The woman's lips and teeth were stained red and black from years of chewing betelnut. She struck me as forthright, curious, friendly, and very self-confident. I was to learn that this was the clan home and meeting place for the Tigoninik clan, and that she was the mother of the leader of the Tigoninik clan. She could not speak Indonesian and I could not speak Minang. But three women in their 20's and 30's translated for us.

Her message was that I had been talking with men of little import, that I needed to speak with and get permission from Pak Datok before proceeding. Pak Datok was her son. I promptly went to his home, and kept returning until I could explain to him my purpose in being there, and request his permission to proceed.

I suspected that I had been accepted---at least provisionally---one day when these influential men invited me to accompany them the following week to a village rice planting party. Pak Munir very quickly assumed the role of my champion, explaining my agricultural---not religious---motivations to all and sundry.

The process of getting permission to work in Pulai underscored an important Minang (and perhaps pan-Indonesian) value. Interpersonal relations should be cordial; conflict should be avoided.

In all of these formal meetings with the men of Pulai (and with the head of the subdistrict), there was a strong undercurrent of concern. I could feel the distrust, the suspicion. They all asked me many questions, and warned me---in polite, gentle terms---that they did not want any politik (or

political maneuvering) on my part.

They were, of course, referring to Jim's alleged religious activities. Missionary activity was strictly forbidden to our project by Indonesian law and it was greatly feared by the devoutly Muslim Minangkabau of the area.

One of the rumours that seemed most absurd to us---that Jim had been paying a million rupiah (US \$1,000) to anyone who would become a Christian---was consistent with a common warning to children in West Sumatra. Christians were reputed generally to pay people to convert. Pulai's inhabitants believed these rumours, and many feared that I had come to their village with similar intentions.

Despite these genuine suspicions and fears about my motives, no one ever brought up this subject directly. They mentioned politics, they spoke generally against "carrying or bringing people from one group to another," but neither the religious controversy nor Jim was mentioned until I brought it up. I was then able to address their concerns directly, though it took months---and a dramatic event---before I truly won most people's trust.

#### Acceptance Finally Comes...

By January, I was beginning to despair of ever getting beyond this religious problem. There seemed to be no end in sight. Pak Munir initiated almost every interchange, when we were together, with an explanation of my agricultural not religious interests; and he took every opportunity to point out the agricultural nature of my actions and questions---as did I.

Yet the suspicion remained.

The people of Pulai brought up their own religion, Islam, continually. Pak Munir and I went out to Fahmuddin and Miryam's rainfed ricefield in early January. The rainy season was underway in earnest, and we had a hard time getting through the many huge mud holes in the road. The same road we'd traversed so easily in October was now a quagmire, regularly entrapping the log trucks that moved between the highway and the settlements and forests.

There were three married women in their late 20's working together in the field---Miryam, Rukiyah, and Sam (all of the Peliang clan). They lived near each other and regularly traded labour. Sam was married to the influential Pak Datok.

I watched the women weeding, bent double over the sharply sloping hillside, and tried to copy them. The slope was so steep I regularly slid down a foot or two. Pak Munir---true to the local division of labour---sat on a log during the two hours we worked there, fondling a weeding tool, but never touching a weed.

The women asked about Christianity and circumcision. My explanation prompted a lesson in Islam. Pulai boys are circumcised between the ages of 6 and 12, and become real Muslims at that point. Girls are "circumcised" at 6 days after birth, though this only involves a light scraping of the clitoris, not its removal. People consider youth of both sexes under age 15 to be too young to sin, not yet fully responsible.

Women are considered dirty during their menses, and are

forbidden to fast, to pray or even to be touched by their husbands. Post-menopausal women are clean and pure; and, for pre-menopausal women, menstruation has a purifying function.

This discussion led to family planning. The women knew something about and expressed interest in all kinds of contraception. We compared effects of the Pill in our respective countries (the same). They said they were afraid of birth control. Sam told of a woman who'd gotten an IUD, which had worked its way up into her body and was approaching her heart. The woman had been taken to Padang for an operation the previous Tuesday. I was to hear more about IUD's in the near future.

They wondered why my husband had wanted to marry me, since I couldn't have any more children. Minang men, they all agreed, wouldn't want to take care of another man's children (though many, I'd noticed, do). How long was I divorced before I remarried? Islam required them to wait 3-1/2 months before marrying again. Was adultery allowed in America? Prostitution? Pre-marital sex? I explained that, as in Pulai, none of these things was really allowed; but they all happened.

The next day we went to another upland field----this time, accompanied by Pak Munir's wife, Niisah. This was my first chance to talk with her alone. She had originally come from Sawahlunto, the district capital, about 80 km from Pulai. (Some 20 years ago.) But she was taken in by a family and the Melayu Dua clan, after marrying Pak Munir---an exception to the usual matrilocal residence pattern. She rarely did agricultural work, partly because Pak Munir was successful at contract and other

entrepreneurial work. They had no fields under cultivation, though he occasionally claimed partial ownership/interest in his clan's rubber orchards.

We went out the same slippery, muddy road to the area I'd watched the community plant in October. Niisah called to everyone we passed---a common practice---saying we were on our way to Nur's field. Nur was weeding her field with another woman, Yanti (both around 40 years old). Yanti, like Nur's husband, is a Tigoninik, but the women consider themselves to be friends, not relatives. Nur is Melayu Satu. Their homes are quite close; their fields adjacent.

We talked about the "1001" names they knew for kinds of weeds. My sense that only <sup>the</sup> women weed was growing. These women said the men fish and tap rubber and "look for money."

Again family planning emerged as a topic of interest. Niisah had 8 children, 7 of whom survived; Nur has 6 children and one grandchild; and Yanti has 3 children (2 boys, 1 girl). It's important in this matrilineal society to have at least one girl. They told me, worriedly, about a woman who'd become pregnant with an IUD in place, and they wondered what would happen. I promised to look in a book I had.

The next day I went out that wretched road again, with Niisah---this time to a field belonging to the headmaster of the religious school. There were 25-30 women weeding his field (no men, no children), many of whom were students. I learned to sharpen the weeding tools from Nur, who also lent me her head kerchief. The women worried that my "beautiful white skin" would

darken in the blistering sun. Conversation, laughter, singing all serve to lighten what is undeniably a dreary, hot, back-breaking task.

When Niisah and I returned to Pulai that afternoon, we received word that the woman with the IUD was not doing well. When I offered to go see her, Niisah accepted gratefully. The woman, Risani, lived in a small box in a row of similar boxes built on stilts between the regular houses on the road and the river. The whole house was about 2m x 3m, and its walls were woven from forest fibers. The house---like the school's "dormitories"---looked like a rice storage structure. I had thought that <sup>was</sup> what it was!

Risani and her husband and three children had come to Pulai from Solok (about 100 km to the West) in search of their fortune. However, good fortune had not yet been theirs. Risani was 7 months pregnant, writhing on the floor in pain, and hot as a firecracker. She had been passing blood and pus. Her young husband sat by, trying to look impassive, yet with anxiety etched deeply into his face. I too was afraid for her life.

I asked what had been done. Her abdomen had been smeared with charcoal, and the local healer had "read" over her. "To read", in this way, is to whisper magico-religious phrases over someone or something.

My own anxiety level was rising. I was doing fieldwork, and this was an opportunity to find out about how people made decisions regarding health care, what their normal practices were. From an academic standpoint, I shouldn't interfere; it

would be wasting information. Yet it looked to me as though this woman might be dying.

I decided the pursuit of knowledge could wait for a more benign moment. I asked "Has she been to a doctor?" No, not yet. I didn't know if her husband approved of doctors or not. I said I thought she needed to go to the doctor. No response. "Is transportation the problem?" No response. "How about if I come and get her?" No response. Her husband stared unhappily and silently into space about ten cm above her abdomen.

Finally I asked if the problem was money. His face riveted to mine---a strong "Yes." I offered to pay; and they gladly agreed for me to take her.

I went home to get my jeep and driver. After considerable manoeuvring, we managed to get the vehicle through the narrow paths to her hut. Getting her body, awkward with pregnancy and pain, into the jeep was another hurdle. She lay on the floor in the back, still moaning and writhing in pain, with her husband beside her. I sat in the front, twisted around, holding her hand, ~~over the seat.~~

The 20 minute ride over bumpy roads to the health clinic seemed interminable. The tenor of her moaning informed us clearly that the bouncy ride was not welcome. I could monitor the depth of her discomfort by the pressure of her hand on mine. Her husband held her other hand. I saw him rearranging her sarong, but I wasn't sure what he was doing. My mind was on her struggle, her danger, and my own fear for her life.

As we drove into the clinic yard, I was surprised and

dismayed to see a gaggle of foreigners (one of whom I knew) coming toward me with outstretched hands. I hated to leave the woman in my charge, but the clinic personnel were already opening the back door of the jeep to take care of her. Politeness seemed to dictate that I greet these people. I listened as patiently as I could to their reason for being there (they were in fact looking for me), and explained that I was in the midst of an emergency.

After extricating myself temporarily I returned to the cluster of people behind my jeep. I was amazed to discover that Risani had given birth to a baby girl in the car on the way to the clinic! The baby---premature---was the tiniest I'd ever seen, though apparently perfectly formed. Mother and daughter were taken into the clinic, and I was required to turn back to the visitors.

Every effort was made to save the baby, within the capabilities of the small rural clinic. Risani's husband came to my home to fetch me 3 days later to bring her and the new baby home. I could hardly believe the baby was still alive; and I couldn't help noting sadly that her chances in that small crowded hut were rather slim. Indeed a few days later I learned that the baby had died. But Risani was well. The IUD was never found.

This event--to my surprise and relief---brought to an abrupt end people's overt suspicion of my motives in the community. I was never again called on to explain my purposes in being in the community.

The general concern for this woman, actually a stranger in

Pulai, is reflective of a cultural ideal that strongly values human beings and welcomes them into the community wherever they come from. My concern for this unknown woman and willingness to pay for her medical care (\$25) seemed to demonstrate to the people that I shared this value. They were then willing to accept and trust me as they could not before.

#### NOTES

1

Colfer is an anthropologist employed by the Sultan Qaboos University's College of Medicine (Al-Khodh, Oman). The research reported here was supported by USAID's Soil Management Collaborative Research Support Program, the University of Hawaii, and the Centre for Soils Research in Bogor, Indonesia. Heartfelt thanks are offered to the people of Pulai for their ultimate leap of faith in learning to trust me; and to my co team members for their steadfast support throughout this research.

2

Transmigration is a longstanding Indonesian governmental program designed to move people from the densely populated islands of Java and Bali to Indonesia's many sparsely populated "Outer Islands." Piruko is one of many such settlements in the Sitiung area of West Sumatra, where this research occurred.

A more conventional analysis of Pulai can be found in

Colfer, C. J. P., Dan Gill and Fahmuddin Agus (1988). An Indigenous Agricultural Model from West Sumatra: A Source of Scientific Insight. Agricultural Systems 26:191-210.