

Richard Wright

Indonesian Notebook

WHEN I entered the café, I saw D., a young Dutch girl whom I'd known for some time.

"Oh D.!" I called to her. She held out her hand.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm happy," I said.

"Good! What's happened?"

"I'm going to one of your ex-colonies, Indonesia."

Her brown eyes widened in surprise. She reached forward and impulsively seized the fingers of my hands.

"You're going to Indonesia?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes."

"Oh, God! Then maybe you can bring me some spices?"

I hid my shock, remembering that spices were what Christopher Columbus had been looking for in 1492.



FEELING the need to learn more about the country I was to visit, I went to see A. In his twenties, he is a full-blooded Indonesian. Single, restless, a student of political science, he is subsidised by his Government, and he openly says: "I belong to the backward nations of the world, the underdeveloped nations." His manner of saying it shows how deeply the sense of the inferiority of his people weighs upon him. He has a quick smile that hides bitter knowledge; already he is an actor: for the outside world that is white, he laughs; for the non-white world

he drops his smiling mask, and his eyes stare with the unblinking fixity of the fanatic.

His contacts with the West have left scars.

"I remember once at military school something happened. We were together there, Dutch and Indonesians. I was invited to a birthday party by one of my Dutch classmates. But the parents of my classmate did not want me to come to the house. There was a big row in my classmate's home about it. At the last moment the boy's parents said I could come along. I went and pretended that I was having a good time, but I was self-conscious.

"My father is a doctor and holds a high position. But the Dutch who live next door would never call on his services unless they could not get a white doctor.

"My political awakening came one day at school when I coloured the face of Queen Wilhelmina with my pencil. I didn't know what I was doing; I was sitting in class and when I saw her face on the page of my book, I made it dark, dark like mine. When the Dutch teacher saw that, he beat me, but he didn't tell me why. It seemed natural to me for my Queen to have a dark face. My father had to explain to me the meaning of what I had done."



I HAVE since spoken to many other Asians, in an effort to get my bearings before I left. And I have been heavily reminded, once again, that to those who have been penalised because of racial origins, the sense of race

becomes inflated, swollen, fills almost the whole content of consciousness.

The trampling by a powerful West of the traditional and customary Asian cultures, cultures sacred and beyond rational dispute, left vast populations to the mercy of any strong wind of congenial doctrine. Present Asian mass movements are a frantic attempt on the part of the sundered and atomised "coloureds" to reconstitute their lives, to regain that poise and balance that reigned before the coming of the white man.

Still another, and, to the Western mind, somewhat baffling trait emerged from these conversations. There seems to be in the Asian consciousness a kind of instinct (I can't find a better word!) towards hierarchy, towards social collectives of an organic nature. In contrast to the Western feeling that education is an instrument to enable the individual to become free, to stand alone, the Asian feels that education ought to bind men together. Underlying most Asian reactions is a hunger for strong leadership, for authority, for a sacred "head" towards which all eyes can turn for guidance and final sanction. The Asian seems to have a "picture" of life, and wants to find out where he fits into that "picture." He seeks no separate, unique, or individual destiny. This propensity towards the organically collective may be a residue from his past religious conditioning. In any case, it certainly propels him, irrespective of ideology, towards those collectivistic visions emanating from Peking and Moscow.

White Europe's impact upon the coloured East sets in motion two contradictory currents: one is a reflex gesture on the part of the Easterner to recover what he has lost by his contact with the West, his language, his art, his religion, and his traditional ways of seeing and doing; the other is a state of chronic anxiety, bordering on hysteria, to embrace as quickly as possible the new Western techniques of science and industry in order to defend himself.

Rendered psychologically uncertain as to his own motives, the uprooted Easterner does everything self-consciously, watching himself, as it were. Behaviour is spontaneous only

when passionate action lifts him to the plane of self-forgetfulness. Hence, to feel a thing deeply makes that thing the worthwhile thing to do, indeed, makes it the right thing to do.

IT HAD been arranged for me to pick up the plane in Madrid. It is Holy Week here. In Asia and Africa the leaders of the newly-freed nations are trying desperately to find ways and means of modernising their countries, to banish fear and superstition, while in Spain millions are marching in pagan splendour behind jewelled images of Dying Gods and Suffering Virgins. Worlds are being born, and worlds are dying.

SOMEWHERE between Cairo and Baghdad, I got into conversation with a shy young man who had Oriental features. He turned out to be Indonesian, a student returning home from Holland. He had spent four years studying sociology at Leiden.

"You're going to find your newly-gained knowledge useful," I told him.

"Yes," he said. "My country is very backward."

"Is there a wealthy class among the Indonesians?" I asked.

His glance flickered over my face, and then he perceptibly relaxed. I was to get to know that reaction very well. The Asian had many truths to tell. He had one truth for the British, one for the Dutch, one for the white Americans, and still another and special kind of truth for American Negroes who shared a background of racial experience that made them akin to the Asian.

"No. We have no rich class among our people," he said. "We have no bourgeoisie to knock over."

"But in a nation of 80,000,000 people, somebody has real money. The Dutch are gone. Who has the money now?"

He stared at me with a strange, hard smile on his lips.

"For the time being, the Chinese have all the money," he said grimly.

At JAKARTA airfield, I quickly became entangled with the bureaucracy of Indonesian customs and immigration. There was a great deal of smiling goodwill but an appalling amount of inefficiency. The young men seemed at a loss as they fumbled with papers, searched about for rubber stamps.

The heat was like a Turkish bath; the humidity was higher than in the African jungle. I was met by Pen Club officials and Mochtar Lubis, editor of the *Indonesia Raya*, an independent Socialist daily. Lubis took me in tow, loaded my luggage into his car, and we nosed into the wide streets of a chaotic, Oriental city. Jakarta, like Accra in Africa, presents to Western eyes a commercial aspect, naked and immediate, that seems to swallow up the entire population in petty trade—men, women, and children. Everyone is doing business, for one must sell to earn money to buy products shipped from Europe.

I passed those famous canals which the Dutch, for some inexplicable reason, had insisted upon digging here in this hot mudhole of a city. I saw a young man squatting upon the bank of the canal, defecating in broad daylight into the canal's muddy, swirling waters; I saw another, then another. Children used the canal for their water closet; then I saw young women washing clothes only a few yards from them. A young girl was bathing; she had a cloth around her middle, and she was dipping water out of the canal, and, holding the cloth out from her body, she poured the water over her covered breasts. A tiny boy was washing his teeth, dipping his toothbrush into the canal. . . .

Lubis's car nosed forward through throngs of strange contraptions that resembled huge tricycles; they had one big wheel at the back, upon which was perched a native boy who sweated and pumped the pedals; in front were two smaller wheels and a seat large enough for two people.

"What is that thing?" I asked Lubis.

"That's our taxicab," he explained. "There are about 40,000 of them in the city. They are called *betjas*."

"A sort of Indonesian rickshaw, eh?"

"Yes, and we are ashamed of them," he

confessed. "A boy who works on those things gets ill after about two years. But we have no money to import taxis."

As we drove on, he gave me a short summary of the Indonesian situation. "The government is weak," he explained. "Bandits are everywhere. There are daily clashes between government troops and bandits."

"The literacy rate?"

"About 30 per cent."

"Is education compulsory?"

"The government wants to pass a law making education compulsory," he explained. "But what would such a law mean? We don't have enough school buildings, enough teachers, enough school books. . . ."

"How is the housing situation?"

"Desperate," Lubis said. "Before the war, this city had about four hundred thousand people. We now have three million jammed into it. People flock here for jobs, because they are bored in their villages."

"What's holding up the building of houses? I see that many houses here are made of bamboo. Why can't more people build houses like that?"

"It takes about \$50 worth of Western materials to build a house. And we have no dollars, no hard currency. We don't even make nails here."

"What about health?"

"Malaria and yaws and infant mortality are high. We have about 1,400 doctors for 80,000,000 people."

"And education?"

"It's out of control. There is a vast thirst for learning. Universities are springing up everywhere, faster than they can be properly manned. The year the war broke out, we had 240 high-school graduates. There were only ten Indonesians teaching in our high schools. The Dutch left us in the lurch and we had to start from scratch."

I was lodged in the home of an Indonesian engineer. Mr. P. and his young wife were ardent nationalists, their home modern to the nth degree.

"What kind of an engineer are you, Mr. P.? I asked my host.

"I'm an oil man."

"You got your training and experience in Europe?"

"My training I got in Europe," he told me. "But I'm getting my experience now here in my country. You see, before the revolution, they would not hire me to do what I'm now doing."

"You mean the Dutch?"

"Yes. Now I'm the head of my department. It took a revolution to do that. Killing, fighting. . . . I'm a major in the Indonesian Army. By nature, I hate war. But what is one to do? The Dutch attitude was that I was not and could never be intelligent enough to do what I'm doing now."

"Your home is in a beautiful section of the city," I told him.

"This used to be the European quarter," he told me. "The revolution gave me the right to live here."

"How many engineers have you in Indonesia?" I asked him.

"About 160, 40 of whom are in government service. The rest work for themselves, for they make about three times more than the government pays."

After dinner Mr. and Mrs. P. took me for a tour of the city in their car. I noticed that the sidewalks were thronged with children who carried books under their arms. It was past ten o'clock.

"Where are those children going this time of night?" I asked.

"To school," Mrs. P. told me. "We don't have enough school buildings, not enough teachers. So these children are going to the night shift."

The suburbs of Jakarta are studded with lovely newly-built bungalows erected by the *nouveaux riches* from money gained in black-market operations. There is no doubt that a new Indonesian wealthy class is rising and it is focussing attention, most unfavourable, on itself.

I HIRED a *betja*, and, perched upon a rickety seat, spent an afternoon looking the

city over. I noticed that each home in the wealthy section kept huge, vicious dogs on leash: one move on the part of a stranger created a loud snarling and barking. These dogs, I was told, defended the inhabitants against the all-too-frequent visits of bandits who infested nearby mountains and suburbs. Try as I could, I have not been able to decipher the mystery of the Indonesian bandit. One person would tell me that the bandits were just lawless gangs; another would swear that they were Communists; yet another would claim that they were Moslems who objected to Communist participation in the present Government; still others said that they were youths who had fought in the revolution and had never learned how to work, and they were now living in the only manner known to them. I suspected that the bandits are all of this, plus hordes of young men who are, in the daytime, respectable wage-earners and who find it impossible to make ends meet in a nation where the Government printing presses were grinding out a whirlwind of all but worthless paper money. In any case, large areas of Java and Sumatra are overrun with bandits and smugglers, and it is not safe to drive upon the highways after dark.

THIS EVENING I enquired of my host, Mr. P., what there was that one could do or see in Jakarta at night, and he informed me that there were no nightclubs, no bars in the city.

"We are Moslems, and we are not a drinking people. We dance, but not in nightclubs. There are but few Europeans in the city now. They are going home, or being sent home, at the rate of 20,000 a year. There will be but 50,000 Dutch left at the end of this year. Nightclubs are definitely European establishments; so, when the Europeans go, so do the nightclubs."

THIS MORNING I went into the Ministry of Information for a press card, so that I could attend the Bandung Conference, which was to take place in a few days. All the faces

behind the desks were dark, as dark as mine. At one desk, I saw a white American newspaperman leaning forward intently and putting up an argument, and the Indonesian official to whom he was so urgently talking was obviously not listening, and had already made up his mind as to the kind of negative answer that he was going to serve up. But the moment he saw me, his manner changed at once. While the white American waited, I got my press card at once. I was a member of the master race. And I thought of all the times in the American South when I had had to wait until the whites had been served before I could be served. . . .

As HUMID Indonesian days unfold, I make many tiny discoveries. Instead of toilet paper, the Indonesians use water; a small bucket of water is placed in each toilet. Toilet paper is hard to come by, having to be imported from Europe. Families not well-off enough to afford buckets will place several beer bottles of water beside the commode.

Indonesian bathrooms are strange contraptions indeed. There is no bathtub as such. In middle-class Indonesian bathrooms, there is a shower which works when there is enough water, which is rather rare. Mostly you will find a walled-off enclosure about four feet high, in which water is trapped as it drips from a faucet. To make the water flow, a reserve is kept constantly on hand. In order to bathe, you take a tin pan and wash towel, soap yourself thoroughly, and, afterwards, dip out of the walled enclosure enough water to dash over your head and body to rinse off the soapsuds.

The classic bathroom joke in Jakarta concerns an American businessman who got by mistake into one of those walled-off water traps, and actually took his bath, an act which necessitated the foregoing of all bathing for the Indonesian family in whose house he was an honoured guest. The hygienic-minded American had polluted the supply of water for the entire day for the entire family.

THE drive up the mountain slopes to Bandung lasted more than four hours, and at no time were we out of sight of these brown Javanese faces. The island of Java has a population density not to be matched anywhere else on earth; more than 1,000 people to the square mile. In many respects the Javanese countryside reminded me of Africa: there were those stolid peasants squatting on the side of the roads, and staring off into space; there were those same bare-breasted young women with sombre coloured clothes—sarongs—rolled and tucked about their waists; there were those barefooted men carrying burdens on poles slung over their shoulders (instead of on their heads, as in Africa, making mincing little steps, almost like dancing a jig, so that the jogging of the elastic pole up and down would coincide with their footsteps; there was that same murderous sun that heated metal so hot that it would burn the skin; there was that same bright greenness of vegetation. And there was that bustling economic activity filling the visible landscape, that frantic buying and selling of matches and soap and tinned sardines, that fateful hallmark of those who have enjoyed the dubious blessing of having their old, traditional, and customary culture blasted and replaced by the market. There was that same red earth, that same attitude of the sleepwalker in the young men who strode along, that same gliding slow-motion gesturing in the women and children, that fine gracefulness of stance that seems to be the physical trait of people who live in the tropics; only here in Java there was no jungle, no dense wall of dark green vegetation rising fifty or sixty feet into the moist and hot air.

My friend Lubis was behind the wheel of the car, and the temperature dropped as we climbed into the mountains where volcanic craters could be seen crowned by haloes of white, fluffy clouds.

We rolled into Bandung, a city of half a million people, and saw a forest of banners proclaiming the solidarity of the Asian and African peoples, and welcoming delegations to the city. White-helmeted troops lined the

clean streets, holding Sten guns in their hands, and from their white belts hand grenades dangled. The faces of these troops were like blank masks, and they looked at you with black, cold, and unresponsive eyes.

Our car was stopped, and we had to show our credentials, then we were waved on. I saw that the entrance of every hotel was under heavy guard.

"They are taking no chances," I commented.

"A few days ago," Lubis told me, "they rounded up every loose woman in the city, and hustled them out. The city is ringed by crack troops. They don't want any unexpected visits from bandits. No deliveries of packages will be accepted at any hotel in which delegates or newspapermen are staying—"

"Why?"

"Such packages might contain bombs, my friend."

We drove past the conference building and saw the flags of the twenty-nine participating nations of Asia and Africa billowing lazily in a weak wind; already the streets were lined with crowds, and their black, yellow, and brown faces looked eagerly at each passing car, their sleek black hair gleaming in the bright sun, their slanted eyes peering intently to catch sight of some prime minister, a U Nu, or a Chou En-lai, or a Nehru. . . . Then the air was pierced by a screaming siren, heralding the approach of some august representative of some Asian or African country. Day in and day out these crowds would stand in this tropic sun, staring, listening, applauding. They were getting a new sense of themselves, getting used to new roles and new identities.

Lubis and I got out at my hotel, and swarms of children rushed forward with notebooks, calling out:

"Please sign! Autograph, please . . . !"

I didn't relish standing in that homicidal sun, and I said quickly:

"No, I no write." I pointed to Lubis. "He important man. Make him sign. Me, I no write."

I dashed for the shade of the hotel corridor,

and the children surrounded Lubis, held him captive for half an hour; he sweated and signed his name, cursing me.

AT LAST, Sukarno, President of the Republic of Indonesia, mounted the rostrum to deliver the opening address. He was a small man, tan of face, and with a part of dark, deep-set eyes; he moved slowly, deliberately. He spoke in English with a slight accent. Before he had uttered more than a hundred syllables, he declared: "This is the first international conference of coloured people in the history of mankind!" Throughout his speech, Sukarno was appealing to race and religion ("our countries were the birthplaces of religions"): they were the only realities in the lives of the men before him that he could appeal to. Rather, he was evoking these twin demons; he was trying to organise them. The reality of race and religion was there, swollen, tender, turbulent.

The speeches went on and on. It was clear that they had not been prearranged, and that no one knew what the others had planned to say. Hence, a certain amount of repetitiousness drove home the racial theme with crushing force. These were not political speeches in the Western sense of the term. They were evangelical harangues, with integral parts of compassion and bitterness. It was rumoured that Nehru had objected to this battery of speeches, and I can well believe it, but I doubt if even Nehru knew in advance what the overall impression of that outpouring of emotion would be.

RACIAL feeling manifested itself at Bandung in a thousand subtle forms. As I watched the delegates work at the conference, I saw a strange thing happen. Before Bandung, most of these men had been strangers, and on the first day they were wary towards each other, bristling with charge and countercharge against America and Russia. But, as the days passed, they slowly cooled off, and another and different mood set in. What was happening? As they came to know one another better, their fear and distrust

evaporated. Face to face, their ideological defences slowly dropped. Negative unity, bred by a feeling that they had to stand together against a rapacious West, turned into something that hinted of the positive. They began to sense their combined strength; they began to taste blood. They could now feel that their white enemy was far, far away. Day after day dun-coloured Trotskyites consorted with dark Moslems, yellow Indo-Chinese hobnobbed with brown Indonesians, black Africans mingled with swarthy Arabs, tan Burmese associated with dark brown Hindus, and socialists talked to Buddhists. But they all had the same background of colonial subjection, of colour consciousness, and they found that ideology was not needed to define their relations. I got the impression that ideologies were the instruments that these men had grown used to wielding in their struggles with Western white men, and that now, being together and among themselves, they no longer felt the need for them.



By SHEER chance I stumbled upon a little book that gave me an insight into just what the nature of Dutch and Indonesian relations were. This booklet was designed to teach the Indonesian language to Dutch officials, housewives, or just wandering Europeans. The first thing that one notices is that there are no Indonesian words in this booklet for polite talk, for civil intercourse; there is not a single sentence that would enable one to inquire of the feelings of another. Whether the author knew it or not, he was writing a book to instruct an army of invaders how to demean, intimidate, and break the spirit of an enemy people in a conquered, occupied country. All sentences are rendered in terms of flat orders, commands; an exclamation point usually follows each sentence, implying that one actually shouted one's wishes. For example, page 22, lesson 7, gave the following use of the Indonesian language. I cite the English equivalents of the Indonesian words which are printed in the lefthand column of each page:

Gardener, sweep the garden!
That broom is broken!
Make a new broom!
Sweep up in front first!
Washerwoman, here are the dirty clothes!
Don't ruin them, will you?
Babu, wash the clothes!

Then, on page 34, one gets in lesson 13, entitled *HOLD THE THIEF!*, a good look into the psychology of the Dutch, as it related to the humanity of the Indonesian. I quote a part of it, thus:

Didn't you close the window last night?
All the silver is gone.
The drawers of the sideboard are empty.
During the night there has been a thief.
What did the thief steal?
Where is the gardener?
He went to the pawnshop.
He took two spoons and received five guilders.
All the other goods were still in his pack.
He was arrested by the police.
All my stolen property has been returned.

The masterpiece is in lesson 24, page 56, and entitled: *THE MASTER IS CROSS*. Here it is, word for word:

Who is it?
Where do you come from?
Where are you going?
Why are you running about here?
What are you looking for?
Don't pass along here!
You must stay over there!
You are not clever enough.
You are stupid.
You'll get into trouble in a minute.
Be careful, don't do it like that!
Think first. Look for ways and means.
Are you ashamed?
I want information.
I don't understand.
I think you are lying.
I don't believe it.
Don't talk nonsense!
Speak straight out!
Don't be difficult!
Don't be afraid, answer!

Just why are you silent?
 Why don't you dare?
 I don't want to hear such nonsense. Be quiet!
 No, that's enough!
 The matter is already clear.

And today there are Dutchmen who complain that the Indonesians are "Dutch crazy."

EVEN among Indonesian intellectuals I found strong racial feelings. In an interview with one of the best-known Indonesian novelists, I asked him point-blank:

"Do you consider yourself as being coloured?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I feel inferior. I can't help it. It is hard to be in contact with the white Western world and not feel like that. Our people are backward; there is no doubt of it. The white Western world is ahead of us. What we see of the white West is advanced; what we see of Asia is backward. So you can't help feeling inferior. And that is why I feel that I'm coloured."

Yet he holds the most violent attitudes towards the Japanese.

"Those *yellow* monkeys!" He spat as he referred to them.

"But they are coloured too," I reminded him.

"But we Indonesians are *brown*," he told me, proudly.

SINCE all progress and social change are measured in terms of the degree to which Asian and African countries resemble Western countries, each tiny alteration wrought in the traditional and customary habits of the people evokes in them feelings of race-consciousness. Said a young Indonesian bureaucrat to me;

"We Indonesians are just discovering the week-end. We used to hear about people going away for the week-end, but it was an experience we had never had. We saw American movies in which people went away from the city to the seashore or the mountains for week-ends. Now we are doing what we saw those white Americans do in the movies. . . ."

DEPRIVED of historical perspective, feeling his "racial" world broken, the new Asian makes a cult of action, of dynamism to fill the void that is his; hence, motives for action are neurotically sought for. Racial insults, slights, and offences, no matter how trivial, are hugged and nursed. If the past is shameful, and the future uncertain, then the present, no matter what its content, must be made dramatically meaningful. Rendered masochistic by a too-long Western dominance, carrying a hated burden of over-sensitive racial feelings, he now rushes forward psychologically to embrace the worst that the West can do to him, and he feels it natural that the West should threaten him with atom or hydrogen bombs. In this manner, he accepts the dreaded bombing as a fact long before it comes, if it ever will. Europeans told me that if an atomic bomb ever fell on Asian soil from Western planes, every white man, woman, and child in sight would be slaughtered within twenty-four hours.

"But why," an internationally important official asked in worried tones, "do these people keep on talking and feeling this racial business when they are now free?"

"They can't forget it that quickly," he was told. "It lasted too long. It has become a way of life."

The Western world set these mighty currents in action. And it is not for the Western world to say when and how these currents, now grown turbulent and stormy, will subside.

Alberto Moravia

The Witness

THEY say that one day we'll all be masters and there won't be any more servants. They say that this profession of domestic servant is unworthy of a man who is really a man, because one man should not wait on another. They say that one day we'll all do everything by ourselves, without servants, like the savages. I'm not going to argue about it. Man never stays still, everything that's in him feels it has to change, and eventually it will change—for the worse. But then he comforts himself by calling it progress. But *here's* where I get you: out of ten men, at least as far as I can see, maybe two are born masters, while all the others are born servants. And the master who is born a master, he likes to give orders from the diapers up; while the others are not happy until they find a master to order them around. What can you do? Men are different, and with all your progress there will always be masters and servants, only they'll call them by another name; and, everybody knows, names count a great deal to people.

As for me, I was born a servant, I have lived until today as a servant, and maybe I'll die an old gaffer, but still a servant. I like to serve; I like to obey; I like to rely on somebody else's will. To serve: perhaps the word can deceive you. Properly looked at, while I serve the master, he serves me. In fact, I claim that if there wasn't a master, then I couldn't work as a servant. And what would I be then? A grave-digger?

So from one master to another, quitting one time because I didn't like him, the next

because he didn't like me, and again for some other reason, I finally landed in a villa on the Via Cassia, where it seemed I had found a good position. In this recently constructed villa there lived a couple recently married: she, a blonde, with a long, handsome face, a set of huge intense blue eyes, so very thin, tall, and finely made that, with her golden hair cut short à la Napoleon, she looked like a young boy; he, a small but hefty dark man, with shoulders that were too wide, a square face, a loud voice, his whole person bursting with authority and self-importance—one of those short men who take revenge for being short by domineering and bullying everybody in sight.

He surely must have come from some peasant family, to judge at least from his mother who turned up at the villa one day and whom I almost mistook for one of those peasant women who travel about with a basket of fresh-laid eggs on their arm. She, however, was from a good family; I think she was the daughter of a judge. Now I've said that it was a good position, but I didn't say that it was ideal. To begin with, we were isolated, twenty kilometres out on Via Cassia, and for a servant who didn't possess a meditative character like mine this would have been a great drawback. Then the villa was large, the ground-floor all living-rooms, the second-floor all bedrooms, and, not counting the gardener, there were only three of us to do the work: the lady's maid, the cook, and I. Finally, and this was the worst of it for me, neither he nor she were real masters, that is to say, born