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Niels Mulder



This article was originally written for the 8th European Colloquium on Indonesian and Malay Studies. I like this biennial colloquium, yet I do not like its name. Indonesian clearly refers to a country, and therefore has a political meaning; the word Malay has a cultural connotation and may refer to that far-flung oceanic world that stretches from Madagascar to Easter Island. Whereas for most of the participants the word Malay seems to pertain to the territory of contemporary Malaysia—and thus excludes Pattani in Southern Thailand, while including, for instance, the Chinese of Malacca and Penang—I prefer to understand Malay in its cultural sense. For this reason I have insisted that I contribute material from other places in the Malayo-Polynesian culture area.

In spite of different historical experiences and divergent high-cultural influences originating from India and Islam in Java, and Roman Catholicism and the West in the Philippines, my research made me increasingly aware of the basic compatibilities of the Javanese and the Tagalog Filipinos. These appear starkly when comparing religious mentality and practices, the fundamental principles of everyday life, and can even be found in basic political conceptualization. These compatibilities lead to suppose the existence of "Malay-ness." In a preliminary fashion I have begun to elaborate the early results of the quest for shared culture in my *Inside Southeast Asia: Thai, Javanese and Filipino interpretations of everyday life* (1992).

This note is about some of the fundamentals of everyday existence and begins with a survey of the principles that guide interpersonal relationships in the innermost circle of life. Subsequently, it explores

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how urban, educated people live with conflict in everyday life situations. Conventionally, however, everyday life is thought to include many more situations than can be reflected upon here. In order to limit the discussion, the face-to-face relationships that have a marked moral content, will be brought into focus.¹ This largely excludes the areas of life that are businesslike, that is, the amoral or technical-legal areas where conflicts arise because of power and property, in short, the rather anonymous areas of politics and economics.

The moral, personal area of (everyday) life is exemplified by family relationships, but also includes relationships with neighbors and friends, sometimes extending to cover a known community. Beyond this area one finds the contest for power and possessions where relationships are subject to different rules, that is, rules that seem to be at odds with the rules of solidarity that should characterize life in the moral area. Thus everybody knows that one should avoid doing business with relatives, that one should leave politics out of doors, and that inheritance settlements are potentially divisive and threatening to solidarity.

The generic element that sets the area of moral action apart is the demand of solidarity; it is persons relating to persons, in which the relationships themselves are valued. Consequently conflicts of solidarity among persons are different from conflicts of competition for power and things. Conflicts of solidarity involve persons per se and thus have remarkable moral and emotional dimensions.

Nature of the Most Primary Relationships

The Exemplary Mother

Both Javanese and Tagalogs have a bilateral system of descent and a preference to live in (extended) nuclear households. As far as the children are concerned, these households are matrifocal, that is, tend to be organized around the mother and her relatives. Mother is the prime source of nurture, goodness, dependability, teaching, and authority; she is considerate, anticipating the feelings of her children and knows what is good for them.

In this thinking the child is always on the receiving end. Mother has given it life, she sacrifices herself for its welfare, she is the place it can always return to, she accepts her child unconditionally. All this

places the child under a moral obligation, the obligation of gratitude that is primarily expressed in obedience. Although Javanese and Tagalogs will generally be reluctant to describe this relationship of love in terms of a *utang budi/utang na loob* (moral debt), such as is common in Thai culture, there is no doubt that it is obliging, yet impossible to repay.

Consequently, this gives rise to the cult of the mother, the children being indoctrinated in the idea of her moral exemplariness. According to the Javanese, "heaven is located under the sole of mother's feet," meaning that to be devoted to her is one's basic and ultimate fulfillment. In the Philippines, the inviolability of the mother is powerfully expressed in the symbol of the Holy Mother. Submission to Mother, honoring her, expresses respect for the moral hierarchy that She epitomizes.

Going against the mother equates with not knowing gratitude, is being morally defective, is denying goodness, and is thought to be the worst of actions. Such behavior is thought to be punished by unavoidable supernatural sanction (*walat/mabusong*). So, whereas the mother is the nearest, the closest of persons, she also is the moral pillar of the universe, requesting unwavering loyalty. Going against her is sinful indeed. Consequently she succeeds in impressing herself firmly on the emotional economy of her children and evolves to become the primary superego representative.

In this construction a child's relationship to its mother is not only the most special but also the most exemplary from which we can derive a few principles of relating to others that are entirely relevant to understand how people live with conflict. The relationship to the mother is one of moral dependence. This moral dependence is to a concrete, living person and contributes to the formation of a dependent conscience, a conscience that is other-directed, a consciousness of others, of their eyes, ears, and opinions.

To be a good person or a bad person depends on how one handles one's relationships and is therefore highly particularistic. Primary relationships are obliging, demand (unequal) reciprocity, and they are thus not morally neutral. Since every person is suspended in a network of such particular relationships, it makes sense to keep them in good order and to avoid situations that may upset them. Consequently pleasant manners, sensitivity for the feelings of others, consideration, indirectness, withdrawal, and dissembling make sense.

The Distant Father

The good order of the family is headed by a normally authoritarian father, in most cases a distant person with a great claim to respect. The father represents order and hierarchy, he is also the representative of life outside the home which, for the Javanese, is well structured, having a clear hierarchical order, and, for the Tagalogs, is a rather loosely structured and often unruly wider world.

The father's claim to respect is backed up by supernatural sanctions, but his distant position is very different from that of the approachable mother. In Java this distance is underscored by the use of High Javanese (*krama*) and institutionalized avoidance behavior; matrifocality in the Philippines is reinforced by that distance and the sheer amount of time that males spend outside the home. Both Javanese and Tagalog husbands generally prefer to leave matters of the home in the hands of their wives.

Respect for parents' authority and goodness is exemplary for the principle of respect for age, a principle that also prevails in nuclear family relationships, relative age spelling out rights and obligations among siblings and bestowing a mild hierarchical flavor onto their mutual relationships. Such a clear pattern of relative authority may be conducive to creating order and avoiding conflict.

Living With Conflict

However well structured, in the closeness of the family conflicts arise and have to be faced and solved. Quite early in life people learn to suppress their negative feelings and to master their emotions so as not to disturb each other unduly. The initiative is with the nurturing mother, or her representative, who takes much care of the child, sheltering it from disturbance and pleasing it at the slightest signs of displeasure. Consequently autonomy is late in arising, dependency a positive good, and attuning one's being to the presence of others becomes innate.

In other words, people not only learn to side-step confrontation but also give it little opportunity to arise. Siblings learn to share, to play games for the sake of playing and not of competing, and if quarrels break out, all involved are most likely punished. Quarrelling among siblings is disgraceful and eventual negative feelings should be suppressed.

Whereas conflicts with parents are almost sacrilegious and characteristically denied—if such conflicts burst into the open they are experienced as socially most shameful and destructive of one's self—conflicts among siblings should also be veiled, although they may often be vented in the private company of a good friend. Since mutual avoidance in the family is almost impossible, parents may take an active role in reconciling their children with each other and in restoring the semblance of peace and harmony. However, where suppression of conflict is a norm, normalcy may hide true feelings and conflict may be long in simmering on, "Yes, we forgive, but never forget."

Although somewhat more so in Tagalog society than in Javanese, people learn to experience themselves as members of a solidary group that defines part of their identity and from which they derive a good deal of their self-assurance. Within that group they enjoy a rather low degree of ego autonomy and accept hierarchy and deference for age as unquestioned moral criteria. Consequently, they accept a measure of interference in "their" affairs, including criticism from relevant others from whom they also derive part of their self-security. Interference may include criticism as long as it is voiced privately and not in front of others, let alone, outsiders.

The relative dependent identity and other-directedness make for a high measure of vulnerability at the hands of others, of the easy arousing of feelings of shame and wounded dignity. Since people know this of themselves and of each other, they are given to be cautious, to avoid and tolerate frustrating behavior, and to be wary of each other. Sensing the feelings of others becomes an art, the art of avoiding trouble and, of course, of getting one's way.

Emotion and feeling, intuition, empathy and sympathy, self-consciousness and appreciation of each other's dignity, these are the valid guides in interaction next to the suppression of conflict, the denial of frustration, and the mastery of one's negative emotions. Often one's own strong negative emotions are felt to be as threatening as the presumed negative opinions of others.

Whatever the case, tensions and frustrations may build up and need to be released. While Javanese have recourse to friends to talk about negative experiences, their culture fosters a more self-centered way of releasing tension in the practice of *kebatinan*, that is, the cultivation of the inner self and a calm mind. By declaring the inner self to contain a truth superior to whatever may be true in the social world, many Javanese are able to handle their bad experiences,

learning to accept (*nrima*) rather than letting themselves be overwhelmed by them. Their safety valve, so to say, is within themselves.

Tagalogs need more social space to release frustrations. To them friendships are a very vital element in organizing life and restoring disturbed equilibrium. Gregariouness is especially celebrated in friendship groups (*barkada*) that allow for the letting off of steam and the voicing of opinion, generally encouraged by a good helping of liquor and a good measure of tolerance. A second way of dealing with the frustration caused by conflict is to seek help and guidance in prayer to the saints or the Holy Mother, the consoling power of deceased grandparents and parents also being thought to be efficacious.

Avoidance

In a private world that is conceived of and experienced as highly interpersonal and interdependent, it pays to spend much attention on the avoidance of open, solidarity-threatening conflict. People develop great skill in interaction, sensing others' sensitivities, measuring their own sentiment, anticipating trouble and thus withdrawing, and controlling deep anger through inaction. Often they stay out of trouble by not involving themselves at all, by indifference. If, on the contrary, they are involved it may make sense to avoid contact with the adversary, to act as if that person is thin air, to refrain from all unnecessary dealings.

Although avoidance behavior suits people who do not share a common roof, within the house silence may also be practiced as a way of softening or fighting a conflict. Often talking about it, or trying to get it out of the way by deliberation, is felt to be confrontational and difficult to handle. In all sorts of relationships one may find that people are rather inhibited, guarding themselves, and normally unable to pinpoint what precisely plagues their feelings. Consequently negative feelings need to soften up over time, avoidance and the use of intermediaries being excellent means.

Wives may avoid husbands, that is, not talk to them for days on end or retire for some time to mother's. Often there are many reasons for such sulking behaviour, infidelity, trouble with in-laws, conflict of loyalty (to own parents or to spouse), spending too much time away from home, "affairs" and drinking parties, being at the root of marital discord and conflict. Yet, precisely there the need for

reconciliation, or at least peaceful coexistence, is high, and thus many wives choose to confine themselves to their roles of housekeeper and mother (rather than spouse and lover) and men opt to be mere providers rather than emotionally involving themselves with their woman and the affairs of the children.

Geertz (1961) reported about a young married Javanese man who did not talk much with his wife which was, according to him, a good way of avoiding trouble. A Filipino friend remarked that "we never seem to agree" and has grown very reluctant to broach any subject that she may consider controversial. Some Javanese colleagues almost mocked my efforts to get at things Javanese by way of interviewing, which they found extremely naive. "We are closed, we never show what we think. At best we'll give you the information that [we think] you want to hear." Quite a few of my Filipino colleagues whom I have known over many years and who know that I am sincere in my efforts to understand Philippine culture, found it very difficult to discuss a paper that I circulated and that they found negative in tone.

Direct (oral) communicative interaction appears to be difficult because it can be felt to be confrontational. If it occurs, it is top down, parents telling children what to do, etc., and children are not supposed to answer back and so it is in life outside the home. Criticism or rebuke of children should preferably be done in private and never in front of others, and so it should be outside the home. People are very vulnerable on "face" and may feel that their dignity, for which eyes, ears, and opinions of others are vital, is at stake. A small request—"See to it that there is always a rag hanging here for wiping my motorcycle"—caused panic to the servant of my Javanese housekeeper; he left the house the same day. A midnight request, through the mediation of one of the boys at my Lucena hotel, to tone down the radio of my lower floor neighbor caused so much upset that my life was threatened.

Direct interaction carries the seed of conflict and yet people need to work together and cannot keep away from associating with each other. Keeping each other at a certain distance helps, and so do good manners, indirectness, shyness and giggling, sensitivity to the mood of others, respect for authority, tolerance and low privacy requirements, conformity to expectations, and fear of gossip and backbiting. Altogether, to keep relationships in good order and operational takes a lot of conscientious effort. Neither Javanese *rukun* (harmoni-

ous relationships) nor the famous Philippine SIR (smooth interpersonal relationships, Lynch 1973) come for free, and people are very conscious of and sensitive to the quality of relationships.

In short, the way in which Javanese and Tagalogs live with conflict in the moral sphere of everyday interaction is very much colored by the effort to avoid it and not to involve oneself in situations that may provoke or challenge others. The other's anger is often felt as physically or magically threatening, in the same way as bad words or talking about an inappropriate subject may cause upset. Whereas gossip falls among bad words, it is sometimes also positively appreciated as a means to get to know about the neighbors' irritation at one's ways so that one is warned and can adjust one's behavior. The best thing, of course, is to give no cause for gossip, and people feel morally good when others have no bad things to say.

Strategies

A common strategy to live with or to avoid conflict is (unconscious) denial of its existence, which sometimes leads to psychological problems that are subsequently drowned in overactivity or (excessive) gregariousness among Tagalogs, or side-stepped in the self-centered practice of *kebatinan* among Javanese. Another way, cultivated among both groups, and particularly among women, is to live up to one's obligations, even in adversity, by complying with the wishes of others, known as *sumarah* among the Javanese² and the *inang martir* (self-sacrificing mother) syndrome among Christian Filipinos.

Other strategies to live with or avoid conflict that are less overtly psychological, are staying away from where one has no business, being tolerant or indifferent to what happens around one, withdrawing from contact when anticipating trouble or controversy, evading or acting as if everything is normal, acknowledging the moral right of superiors and following (*turut/sunod*, i.e., to be obedient), or passivity and inaction even in the company of others. In most of these things Javanese and Tagalogs behave in a very similar manner and both societies are familiar with the person whose self-defensive strategies have failed and whose silted-up frustrations explode in the frenzy of *amuk* (in Tagalog also known as *huramentado*).

Differences

Apart from the often different personal reactions to conflict that are expressed in *kebatinan* versus overactivity/gregariousness, the Javanese limits to tolerance, even in near relationships, seem to be more firmly marked than in Tagalog society that has sometimes been commented upon as having a great measure of "ambiguity tolerance."³ Recourse to avoidance behavior is highly institutionalized and high in the consciousness of the Javanese, divorce a most common occurrence, and when the limits have been reached, repudiation, even of a child, is not uncommon.

Often the Javanese explain this unforgiving attitude with reference to the *wayang* stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In wayang one wins or loses, one kills or is killed, and that "solves" the conflict. They also emphasize that the supernatural punishment (*walat*) that follows on the infraction of parental expectations is automatic and unavoidable.

The relative rigidity of the Javanese contrasts with the more compromising attitude of the Tagalogs whose moral universe is softer. The repudiation of a child is a thing difficult to conceive of and acceptance in the circle of the family seems unconditional. The extreme consequences of going against parents are talked about as "God will withdraw his blessing (*pagpapala*)," which is thought to be unavoidable. Yet, the Christian God can forgive and the more forgiving ("understanding") attitude of Filipinos in matters concerning near others may be related to the influence of Catholicism.

Conclusion

In this note conflict in the inner, moral circle of life was related with the nature of familial relationships and early socialization that may also be exemplary for life in wide society. This exemplariness is far more relevant in the case of the well-structured "bureaucratic polity" of the Javanese than in the rather arbitrary arrangements of the Philippine state. However wide this scope may be, we found an authoritarian orientation in the two cultures, exemplified at home in the familial hierarchy, its demands for respect and honor, its sense of obligation and unequal reciprocity, that are all the very subject of morality and ethical behavior.

The inner circle tends to revolve more around the mother, who

is the moral center of life, than around the father who, as a male, is not subject to the same moral rules and whose sex life is often not felt to be a moral issue. Moreover, in spite of their (distant) position of authority, males are often thought to be female dependent.

Early socialization makes for a slow development of individual autonomy and places individual security in group membership and the ability to handle relationships carefully and considerately. This fosters the experience of the self as a member of solidary group while placing self-esteem in the hands of others whose acceptance of one's person is psychologically important. The other-directedness is also guiding one's conscience; one's superego seems to be located in relationships, in the consciousness of others. Consequently it is there, in these relationships that one is vulnerable and thus it becomes imperative to avoid conflict and promote solidarity.

Conflicts that arise are side-stepped rather than faced, and although there is a lot of satisfaction in handling one's relationships skillfully and in reducing tensions by elegant, almost intuitive means and avoidance strategies, for some perhaps less skillful or particularly powerless people the side-stepping of conflict and the repression of feelings may lead to typical, culturally induced psychological problems.

It may still be helpful to clarify by contrast. In much of the western world children are trained to make a nuisance of themselves. They are under constant pressure to prove their autonomy and independence, which may often be quite frustrating, but finally learn to achieve a measure of self-sufficiency. Consequently, self-esteem and self-confidence are less dependent on the judgement of others and conscience is not confined to concrete social relationships but also located in more abstract principles that transcend such relationships.

As a result modern westerners need more room for their self-expression, enjoy a measure of moral autonomy and self-awareness, tolerate a considerable amount of nonconformity, and are comfortable with a measure of confrontation. In married and family life, also in friendships, anger and conflict are expected to occur, and normally faced squarely (Mulder 1990, vi-vii). Within bounds, they are not felt to be particularly threatening to relationships but are rather a means of deepening them since they are typically dealt with in an active communicative fashion. The side-stepping of conflict is thus less important than solving it and getting it "out of one's system" by a meeting of hearts and minds.

Notes

1. Anthropological literature about conflict in the moral segment of life is rather scarce. Consequently this article largely relies on my own fieldwork and subsequent interpretations (Mulder 1992, pt. II). For Java, I found Hildred Geertz's (1961) analysis of conflict most useful. It is of interest to note that there exists a vast literature about harmonious relationships (*rukun*) in Java. The most relevant literature about conflict with near others in Tagalog Filipino society has been written by psychologists, such as Bulatao (1964) and Arellano-Carandang (1987), and the psychiatrist Lapuz (1977). Also Lynch's (1973) classic article on smooth interpersonal relationships remains useful.

2. The *sumarah* attitude is elaborated and idealized in two male-authored Javanese Indonesian novels, Umar Kayam, *Sri sumarah dan bawuk* (1975) and Linus Suryadi AG, *Pengakuan pariye* (1981). Often the pressures of having to *sumarah* lead to the negative hopelessness of *pasrah*, self-surrender, that contrasts with the grateful acceptance of one's lot, *nrima*, that is highlighted in those novels (Mulder 1989, 61, 73-74).

3. The idea of "ambiguity tolerance" was voiced by Frank Hirtz in the discussions about his Philippine research at the University of Bielefeld (1988-89). It seems to correspond to Alfredo V. Lagmay's findings that the Filipino has an "improvisatory personality that allows him to cope and be comfortable and adapt even in unstructured, indefinite, unpredictable and stressful situations" (Enriquez 1989, 62).

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