

JAVANESE PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE: LESSONS FROM THE ELDERS
by

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In 1987, I was awarded a Fulbright Scholar Award, to go to Indonesia. My previous research had been on gender role variance in American Indian cultures, and the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, which awarded me this grant, wanted to send me to Indonesia to teach Indonesian scholars how to do this kind of research. Most of my work has involved interviewing elderly people about their life histories, so as soon as I had settled into my new home in the classical court city of Yogyakarta, in the central part of the island of Java, I began doing this research. I trained a group of Indonesians from Gadjah Mada University to assist me in this task, and together we searched out elderly men and women to tell us their personal narratives. We spent the next year doing this research. Out of this effort came the book *Javanese Lives: Women and Men in Modern Indonesian Society*, published by Rutgers University Press.

Right from the beginning, I found Java to be one of the most totally fascinating places I have ever lived. Yet, I did not realize, as I began this research, that I would learn things from these Javanese elders, that would change my life. My own approach to life has been definitely influenced by my time in Indonesia. I consider it one of the happiest, and most fulfilling, years of my life. What I would like to do today is to introduce you to something about the values of the Javanese people, and suggest what we might be able to learn from them.

The island of Java, located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, is the site of an ancient Southeast Asian civilization. Even today, its people hold onto their traditions, chiefly in terms of their emphasis on artistic and spiritual traditions. Yet, Javanese people over age sixty have seen incredibly drastic changes in their lifetime, probably more than any other single generation in human history. They were born in the era of European colonialism, when the Netherlands still firmly controlled Java, in what was then called the Dutch East Indies. During World War II, the Japanese invaded, and a European occupying force was replaced by an Asian one. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Dutch returned,

After years of armed struggle, nationalists led by Sukarno were able to overthrow their Dutch colonial masters, and establish the independent nation of Indonesia. Sukarno was a brilliant political unifier of the new nation, but a disaster in terms of economics. After years of economic chaos, and a massive extermination of leftists in 1965, Sukarno was removed from power and a new regime was established under General Suharto. Suharto is still in power, and his control has brought needed stability to the nation. However, this stability has been bought at a price, of the suppression of dissent and of civil liberties. During the last decade, Indonesia has experienced massive industrialization and urbanization.

These years of upheaval and turmoil have seen massive changes.

It would be like an American living through the American Revolution, the Civil War, the era of industrialization, and right up to the modern computer age, all in the span of one lifetime.

The questions I asked, in interviewing these elderly people, is how they got through all this, and were able to keep their purpose of life, their happiness, and indeed their sanity. I think their answers will be of use to us, as we struggle with our own era of change in the 1990s. I came to my own genuine respect for them, partly in response to the reality that the elders are highly respected by Javanese people in general. Unlike in modern America, where the aged are often superfluous "senior citizens," Javanese elders are active, useful members of society. They serve their villages as sage advisers, spiritual intermediaries, and child-care providers. Because they are treated as important authorities by society, the elders have much confidence and advice to offer.

While not making any attempt to claim that these people are "typical," I would like to show some of the diverse responses, by listening to their own words.