

INDONESIA

ASIAN EXPOSURES & COMPARISONS



SHORT STORIES

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ASIAN EXPOSURES & COMPARISONS: INDONESIA

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PART ONE: INDONESIA, YOGYAKARTA

There are no such things as calm and tranquility. People are dynamic; they move like being in a beehive. Or, they escape from it to form one of their own. Picture then Yogyakarta on the island of Java in Indonesia, Yogyakarta is a thriving city with a renowned pas, a city which enjoys lively attendance from tourists. These do not only savor the culinary delights so prominently present along ordinary streets and high class restaurants, but use this famous town as a springboard for a journey into the rich history of the land, a journey to the Borobudur. Borobudur is a large Buddhist temple which was recently restored to former glory, is the target to focus on. Though a fascinating story in its own right in Yogyakarta, a prime example of a human beehive indeed, is where things happen in the more contemporary sense. Not long ago along the always busy train station of Yogya was surrounded by shacks where all kind of women offered services of any kind and wish. A cheap place it was, for in itself the place looked very much like a shanty town till one day the local government decided that it was nothing more than an eyesore and decided to get rid of it completely. Especially because the cheap guesthouse area, an area that attracted the vanguard of tourism, yes the backpackers league, was just adjacent to the station then and it is now still. However, under the stimulating auspices of the Government the flesh trade changed venue in a remarkable way, unique because government organized. Though street prostitution has not been eradicated completely and the ladies of the train station shanty returned, the prominent presence of it was gone. How then do Indonesians and tourist's alike find the women who, since time immemorial offer pleasures of the flesh for a fee? A unique story indeed to be relayed here because it is both well planned in relation to the women's education for reintegration and tremendously hypocritically organized because of blatant corruption and abuse. An intriguing story it is too due to the goodwill created in organizing the women concerned to get ahead in life without being dependent on income through selling their bodies.

The Government as bordello owner; an experience

To find the women of pleasure is not very difficult as many betjak men

(tricycle taxis) know how to find the compound where they live, work and study and since it is a long ride also see it as a welcome contribution to their income.

“Mau perempuan, tuan?” is a frequently asked question here in the lively centre of Yogyakarta. (Do you want women, Sir?). My first exposure to the large compound which appears to be run like a village on its own was quite a surprise. Not because it would be a place full of prostitutes and customers, but because of its location. I stepped into the betjak thinking that it would not take long to get to that place where many are certain to find what they seek. After 15 minutes of rather fast cycling I dared ask if it would still be long. “Tunggku sidikit, tuan, mungking lima blas minites lagi” he answered. (patience a little sir, may be 15 minutes more). I noticed we were leaving the centre and when soon after on a road in the rice fields I started to get worried. What was going on here? So, I asked the betjak man this again. Unmoved, but kind of out of breath, he answered that we were not too far away now. A set of houses and other buildings appeared soon after and lights became visible. Then my betjak man stopped in front of a gate saying that we had arrived. Three men stepped forward and held tickets up in front of me. Apart from filled up parking space for primarily motorcycles and a few cars but more betjaks, nothing much was to be seen. A placard above the entrance said *resosialisasi project perempuan*, resocialization project for women. The three men smiled at me. One said, the cost is 200 rupiah (5 cents US then), Sir. “For what might that be”. I asked quite innocently. Hearing this the three of them plus the betjak man broke big smile, “Sir, the women’s resocialization is being financed through collecting money levying an entrance fee.”

The evening air is full of scents here outside town in the countryside among the rice fields. I inhale the odors of fresh fruits and blooming flowers and ask while paying the fee with a smile, “How so *resosialisasi gentlemen*?” I asked.

“Required and applied by the government Sir. Here is the daily program. All women living and serving here must oblige.”

(this full daily program entails sports for a good condition and classes to establish a level for women to be able to stand on their own so to earn an income outside the state run bordello)

I am pleasantly surprised and showed that. The men just laughed.

“Sir, realize that this establishment is meant for the women to return to society and make a good living there. They need the skills to do that

and we provide them with training here. You may enter now.”

After these words the man pulled the door located in a high fence open so I could walk in. At first glance it appears to be a large compound, something like a village but one that is rather say affluent as the houses are built in stone rather than thatch. Around the houses in the street, just like in a village or town, there are kaki ayams (literally feet of the chicken) men or women on wheeled carts that sell any kind of food and drink. It is not very busy, or just not yet. Only a few men walk around and enter the houses or reemerge from them. I follow. And then see that in every house there are women that serve Bintang beer or other alcoholic beverages that will help creating a mood. Bintang is star and is a subsidiary brand of beer of the Dutch Amstel brewery (Ironically enough a brand that has been bought recently by the now famous and more international Heineken beer)

I step down and face 5 women one after the other smiling and looking both attractive and accommodating. Almost it feels like visiting a normal home and being welcomed. I order a Bintang. A large bottle is brought and diligently poured into a glass in front of me.

I have apparently entered a house where no other prospective customers and thus I receive attention from all of them. I try to speak in Bahasa Indonesia, the language that is used by all nowadays, regardless whether the original tongue speaks normal high or low Javanese. I soon find out though that most of the ladies are not Javanese at all but are from any of the other estimated 10.000 islands.

The women giggle when I ask if they like it here.

“Oh yes. How can you ask Sir. This is very good, much better than working without protection. This compound is heavily guarded. We are safe. You too hahaahahaha.”

“And the vocational training is done well? You are learning a lot?”

“We learn every day. Would Sir be interested to see the schedules, so you can check? It is right here pasted on the wall for all to see. Or, would Sir perhaps be with one of us for a while? It will cost you though.” And right after her explanation burst out in a kind of pleasant, naughty is more like it, laughter. A catchy kind of laughter I could not refrain from. A kind of laughter that is both innocent where you know it is not and light but convincing. Drawn one is to it like a moth to bright light. Well that is how it felt, like fluttering angels that accommodate a man easily. So I smiled and asked about the conditions prevalent, “Sir, it is

easy, you choose one of us, or more than one and it will cost you 10.000 rupiah per lady. We will make sure your money is well spent.” And again the room filled with laughter. Yet, not just knowing that I still wanted to know more about how this government bordello operated. So I asked, “Would it be possible to see you being trained either in sports or while you have your classes?”

“Does Sir take that much interest in what we are being qualified for and has not that much interest in what we have to offer?” came the reply.

I smiled and waited a while before answering. Just looked a bit feeling a little tension was raised. Then, I said, “Yes and no. Yes because you are all such attractive women and I do not think it is easy to make a choice and no because I find it a very interesting idea that you are well provided for and would love to see how it all works in the way that it makes both you ladies and the government happy.”

“You do, then ask?”

“Lovely,” I said, “Apart from your lessons and sports, are you not a little far from town for if you want to go shopping? You probably need a betjak also then. And, that may be costly?”

“Yes it is and they do charge much higher going from here to Yogya then from Yogya back again. So, we do go with a few then. It is cheaper for you also to come here, but we are dependent on those betjak riders. Sometimes they do as they please.”

“Not just money wise, but also a free ride on both sides do you mean?”

“Yes, that is so, and it is difficult to say no then, I am sure you will understand that!”

“Then, perhaps this, tell me do you have to pay to be here. The lodging I mean and of course the training. Is it not so that most girls would like to have a shot at being trained and thus can start their own business sometime?”

“That is right, but not all that want to can be accommodated. There is a waiting list. And, in contrast to what you might think, most girls stay also after training. They find it far too good and it is still difficult to save money here, considering all the hawks that like a part of our earnings. There are many crooks”

“Is the entrance money then not sufficient to have the training financed?”

“It is, I am told, but then you know Indonesia. Not all that money goes to where it should be. There are of course government officers that,

without showing their face, too often are making a fine profit here.”

“So, you are saying that although it is essentially the idea to get you girls educated so you can look after yourselves, many stay because they are taken care of, but are also milked at the same time?”

No answer in words came but the roar of laughter that followed spoke volumes.

When the laughter had subsided the serious business of the day was discussed once more, “Now which one of us do you like Sir, be sure that any one of us wants to give you a very pleasant time!”

While we all laughed I asked for another beer and said that I wanted to relax with all of them. That very moment a man stepped into the room and sat down quietly. Not saying a thing at all but just looked at the girls like sizing them up. The girls did not speak with him nor paid attention in any other way. As I found that odd, I spoke to the man who was obviously Indonesian.

“Hello, come, share a beer with me, it is too much for me anyway. Let’s toast on a fine day. The eyes of the man lit up and he smiled then spoke in Bahasa Indonesia, “I am just here to find a girl for a good fuck.”

After he had said that he just nodded to one of the girls who immediately rose and led him to a backroom.

“So, this is how it is done?” I asked the girls who remained with me. “No talking, pointing out and off you go? No conversation?”

“Yes Sir, that is how most of the men that attend this brothel do. And they are fast too. Up, up, up and then after the shot go.” Again the now four of us laughed.

I wondered how it would be with anyone of them and suggested that I would look around the compound and see them later. Both I said that as an escape so that I would no longer be lured into agreeing to go with one of them, but also because I thought that when I would do that then we would be able not talk so openly anymore.

“Let me have a chance to see what this brothel is all about, girls, and when I know enough I will return, all right?”

“Please come back Sir, we do like to talk as well. But, please do not reveal our names, not even our nicknames, okay?”

That I promised then left the house to explore more of this wondrous brothel. Pitting myself on a stool to have some nasi campur (rice with vegetables, herbs, and meat of any kind) I overlooked the scene. Two rows of houses and one row across I had in view now. Busy it was not and very

kind of normal looking, for there was no soliciting or flashing lights to attract attention. Men were seen to be walking about and leisurely. The women (some but not many) were either in front of the house or inside a house. There were some but again not many ads for beer, Bintang primarily. All was kind of well under control or should I say easy going. Men were seen, not that many, to go from house to house. Certainly they did not stay as long as I did inside. They would drink only drink when they were sure to go with a woman. Some, especially young men, were rather excited though, not knowing whom to be with and being in a group of friends, were talking about that in a geared up manner. After the fine meal I followed a group of those youngsters in one of the houses and sat down. The girls there hardly talked to them or presented themselves in a seductive manner, but were talking amongst themselves. The young men looked and appraised, talked, measured up, but showed themselves baffled. Something like being utterly pleased with the hands moving into the cookie jar, heated faces!!

I observed and smiled. The girls still did not pay much attention; they just briefly peeked up every now and then. Then when there was a clear feeling of who would be with who the atmosphere changed. One of the young men looked up and said clearly, "You I choose girl." And, he dished out his wallet and started to take out bills with a big smile. The chosen girl came forward slightly timidly and posted herself next to the young man and gently took the bills then folding them and putting them away in a communal box, the kitty of the house. The other young men became loud then. Boldly the first one had decided and had acted upon that decision, but what now about the others. Clearly not all of them liked the remaining girls, yet they did not want to leave their friend alone either. So, what to do? Well, one thing for sure could not be done; taking a girl from another house into this one. Confusion rose for the first young man, the decision maker, proved adamantly that it was up to the others now to find a solution. Knowing that they would not leave him alone in this house or any house for that matter, he took the girl by the hand and moved towards the rooms behind for the main one that was clearly designed to receive and serve people, this of course due to the small bar prominently present.

Now a little commotion began. The young men restlessly started to act like boys. Nervously they started to talk amongst themselves. That moment one of the girls, a good smile on her face came forward put a

hand on one of the man's arms and said, "You are welcome to wait for your friend so you can keep an eye on things. Meanwhile the others can go to another house and find a girl, if you do not like any of us?"

One of the girls, attractive she was and very hospitable, came to me to fill my glass. She smiled both at me and the boys. One of them noticed it and seemed only now capable to make up his mind. He spoke in Indonesian to her in a way it was clear that he now wanted her. She looked at me briefly as if she were to ask permission. She might after all have thought that because she was paying attention to me, that I would have first choice. The boy then in his unruly quest to be fulfilled sexually unwittingly breaking the code of conduct of this brothel. I nodded to the girl to confirm to her that she was free to go. She smiled in acceptance then turned to the boy, who sported a sigh of relief and quickly disappeared into one of the rooms

And then there were three. The boys that were still with me and the girls were looking expectantly while the boys now eased a little feeling that there was nothing to worry about. Not really. Then a big man entered and loudly ordered a Bintang. His request sounded like a command and all were startled by the diversion. Now the boys tensed up again, but the man took no notice of them, looked at the girls for just a moment and pointed his finger at one of them.

"You, now," he said in a way that no one present dared to contradict. I felt tensed up too and looked at the man. The girl he pointed at changed appearance. Was she until then relaxed and kind of open and friendly, now she became humble and shot into a mode of obedience. She got up and moved towards the man to sit beside him. I decided to smile at the man and talk.

"You do know whom to choose," I said, with a smile on my face still. "You are a decisive man and of few words. Are you part of the army, Sir?" I asked with the smile lingering on my face of course, as I wanted him to reveal a bit about himself.

He turned towards me and sized me up before speaking, then also smiled and said, "Aaaaahhh, we have orang putih (literally white man) here now too. Do you like our women?"

"I do," I said to encourage him, "Some of them are exquisite, I think. But, perhaps to you this is common ground, though I think you made a fine choice, Sir."

"Yes, I am a captain of the Indonesian Army and kind of connected

to this set up to oversee if all is running the way we projected it. So, of course I have to taste the proceedings. I am sure you will understand. If you like this girl here and I came in snatching here from your very eyes then please have her. I did not mean to be rude. I am just in a bit of a hurry,” he then smiled at me.

“No need Sir,” I answered truthfully and convincingly. To tease him a little I said then, “Perhaps one of the boys might like her, their friends already took two others and are having fun, they are kind of left behind.”

The man sipped from his bottle of Bintang while the smile disappeared from his face, then said while at first looking at me then while talking directly to the boys, “These are just boys, never mind them, they are here to learn and should know their place,” he then turned to me again and asked now in a more gentle voice that showed more respect than he paid to the boys, who were silent since he entered, “Where are you from Sir, and may I know what you do?”

I did not think it would harm to tell him my nationality, although Indonesians knowing about the Dutch colonization of their land, might not only like a representative of a former colonizer. Since he was not candid either and defrosted instantly I decided to tell him.

“I am a Dutchman, Sir, and a photo journalist. So you think I need some permission to portray this fine resocialisasi program?”

He was clearly taken by surprise He looked at me intently for a moment, kind of sizing me up, like he was thinking how to weigh this revelation. Then a smile broke on his face, “Ahhh, a belanda and a wartawan. Man, man, no you do not really need permission to do that, as long as you do not photograph the customers. Some girls may not like it either. Well, to tell you the truth, most people don’t like, but there is no official policy that says you need permission. It is a public place run by the government. Be discreet and you should not have any problem.”

He appeared to be more than just a customer and the girls recognized that by swiftly turning their attention to both of us. The expectant boys were no longer their focus and the now beaming fat man did not show any reservation to them but to the girls and me. He pulled the girl on his lap as if he was teaching how things are done, then looked at me again saying, “I can see you are curious, so have another beer on me and I will tell you all about the place after I have returned. I will take you around and introduce you to some people, okay?”

When I nodded to let him know I would he got up and left with the