IN THE SURAU

Seven Islamic Short Stories from Indonesia

Edited by
Soenjono Dardjowidjojo and
Florence Lamoureux

Southeast Asia Paper No. 21

Center for Southeast Asian Studies
School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies
University of Hawaii at Manoa
1983
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Introduction

Although Indonesia as a legal state is not governed under Islamic law, the ways of life of its people, who are predominantly Moslem, quite often reflect Islamic teaching and tradition. Many of the patterns of normal daily life as well as traditional ceremonies and rites are determined, or at least guided, by Islamic principles. This is true not only among santris, who faithfully follow Islamic teachings, but also among abangans, Moslems simply by virtue of birth.

The seven short stories presented in this volume are fictional renderings of some of these patterns. They were selected not so much on the basis of their literary merit as for the insights they provide to the Western reader. At a time when Islam asserts its role more significantly in world politics, economics, and cultural awareness, we believe it is appropriate to present these short stories as vehicles that may clarify certain concepts, views, and outlooks that underlie the behavior of many Moslems.

"Becoming a Santri," the first story in the collection, was written by Djamil Suherman, born 24 April 1924 near Surabaya. Many of his stories depict Moslem life and may be reminiscences of his childhood. Before entering and graduating from the Academy of Public Administration in 1964, Suherman worked as a teacher of Islam in an elementary school. He subsequently entered the military and has most recently been working in the Postal Service. "Becoming a Santri" is the story of a young child who faithfully and diligently follows a step-by-step procedure to become a true Moslem.

The second story, "The Legacy," is similar to the first in that it describes the process of "Islamization." In this case, however, the end result differs significantly. Despite his ability to swallow a huge banana glazed with uncooked rice, thereby predicting his future success as an Islamic scholar, the young man in "The Legacy" finds his life turning out quite differently. Unfortunately, we are unable to give any biographical information on the author, A. D. Donggo.

The third and fourth stories in the collection were both written by Kuntowidjono, a graduate of Gadjah Mada University who holds a Ph.D. from an American university. He was born in Yogyakarta on 18 September 1941 and began writing stories while still in high school. In "A Tree for Allah" he tells the story of a poor old man who tries to repay Allah for His gifts by donating a huge tree trunk to the villagers who are building a neighborhood mosque, a surau. Although
his plans are thwarted and the tree trunk lost, he cherishes the hope that the vanished log has in fact found its way to Allah.

Kuntowidjojo's "A Nest in a Tree" tells of a Moslem scholar, an ulama, who could not get to his surau in time to lead the Friday prayer on account of a child who was crying over a small bird in a tree. The debate over religious obligations versus economic responsibilities that goes on in the scholar's mind as he passes the vendors in the market reflects a rather common phenomenon among certain members of the Moslem community.

The fifth story, "Her," was written by Titis Basino, of whom we know only that he finished his undergraduate education at the University of Indonesia before 1964. The story describes the feelings and emotions of a woman who must share her husband with another woman in the traditional Islamic practice of polygamy. Her ability to cope with this may be incomprehensible to Western readers, but the story reveals how she arrives at an emotional acceptance of the situation.

"The Grave," the sixth story, was written by R. N. Ratmana, who was born on 6 March 1936 in Cirebon, West Java, but grew up in Pekalongan in Central Java. He graduated from the Academy of Physics in Semarang and has been a high school teacher since 1961. "The Grave" illustrates differing attitudes toward the dead and how those attitudes divide a family into warring camps. The conflict arises from one side's tenacious insistence on tradition as it is practiced by true Moslems, and the other side's obsession with a practice rooted in non-Islamic custom. The wailing of a grave is not permitted under strict Islamic law but is very often done by those who are less rigid in the interpretation of religious rules.

The last story, "The Collapse of Our Surau," was written by Ali Akbar Navis, born in Padang, West Sumatra on 17 November 1924. He received his education at the Indonesisch Nederlandsche School during the colonial period and is now serving as a member of parliament in West Sumatra. The story in this collection illustrates a rather common misconception of the meaning of Islamic teaching. Devotion to Allah is indeed demanded of any Moslem, but there are also other responsibilities. Failure to perform any of the prescribed duties is a failure in one's obligations to Allah.

The collection of these stories began as early as 1972 when Steve Walker took a course in directed language study from me. As more and more students became interested in translation work, I thought that rather than doing random translations as classroom exercises, it would be better to select stories with an aim toward publication, so that those who do not know Indonesian would be able to share the product. Except for the last story, which I translated myself, the rest are the works of my students in Hawaii, all of whom have now graduated.
One of the difficulties that I encountered in collecting these stories was the rarity of the stories themselves. Despite the high percentage of Moslems in the population in Indonesia, I was not able to find a sufficient number of stories from which I could choose. I do hope, however, that the collection presented here will give at least a glimpse of what Islamic life is like.

S. D.
Listening to the persistent throbbing of the drum on an evening such as this reminds me of my childhood, when I still diligently read the holy books in Kyai Sjafii's surau. How could I possibly forget it—the drum that makes my heart tremble. The sound still fills me with an overwhelming sense of bliss, a sensation that suddenly tugs at my heart, bringing a desire for closeness with Allah and my Prophet. I have heard this sound since childhood, but it still reverberates in the corner of my heart day and night. It spreads through my body, becoming one with my flesh and blood, giving me a peace of mind and happiness. It will stay with me until the day I die. As I reminisced, sacred religious figures lingered in my mind, calling me to thank Allah. And then I said it: Alhamdulillah.

The drum is beaten a little longer than usual at sundown at the beginning of the fasting month, or in the middle of the night to wake up those who want to pray or eat the predawn meal. After the evening prayers the drum is again beaten with a special rhythm, while the santris, the scholars, in their sarongs, clean shirts, and pičis loyally and devotedly read the holy books aloud in the surau.

In front of us Kyai Sjafii sat meditating, his white turban dangling over his neck, gazing intently into our faces as if wishing to determine how close we have been to our Allah. We read in turn
from the holy books, rotating verse by verse, chapter by chapter until far into the night. And whenever we heard the midnight drum, we stopped for a while. After finishing our prayers, we continued reading until it was time for the predawn meal.

Such was our custom. I was one of Kyai Sjafii's most diligent students. Everyone, including Kyai Sjafii, liked me very much. Since I was one of the oldest students, I often took Kyai Sjafii's place when he was unable to conduct the prayer services in the surau. In this position I received the greetings of the devout, those who had just finished reciting the confession of faith. My hand would be taken most reverently, although I was barely an adult and had just left Ibtidaiah's Islamic school.

Kyai Sjafii's surau was not far from my home. It stood in a compound that made up a religious training center for Islamic learning. It was located in the village of Kedungpring in the subdistrict of Tanggulrejo, which was renowned for its peaceful inhabitants. The surau had been built years before I was born—in fact, while Kyai Sjafii's father Kyai Achmad was still young and my father was his student. It was very old-fashioned and, because of its age, was falling apart in many places.

Nevertheless, the people of Kedungpring did not ignore their sacred surau. Each year they worked together to fix everything that needed repairing. Since this was the only large and important surau in the village, it was filled with activity. Many santris came from the surrounding area to recite the holy books, making the surau a very lively place. Not only was the surau in constant use by these assemblies for carrying out their religious obligations and performing their five obligatory prayers, but every Friday and on each day of religious significance it was used just like a mosque. Behind the surau stood the house of the learned Kyai Sjafii and, adjoining that, a long barracks for the students who came from every corner of the country to study at the boarding school for several years.

Kyai Achmad's greatness had been inherited by his son Kyai Sjafii, so that seekers of religious knowledge everywhere had great faith in him. The name of Kyai Sjafii was well known both in and beyond the village, and people considered him a very great teacher. He was even called sheikh, a title reserved for learned or wise scholars.

I still remember the great teachers who once came to visit Kyai Sjafii's boarding school at the end of the fasting month: Kyai Hasim Asjari from Tebuireng, Kyai Mahfud Sidik from Surabaya, Kyai Mahfud from Sidoarjo, Kyai Bakri, Kyai Abdullah Ubeid, and many more. The fact that so many great religious teachers came to Kyai Sjafii's boarding school proved that Kedungpring was a place of religious and historical significance.

I was born and raised in Kedungpring, but it was in Kyai Sjafii's surau that I learned the holy books and gained my religious knowledge. I remember how, long ago, after the early morning prayer I would sit
at the small table under the dim light of the gas lamp, dressed in my sarong, white collarless shirt, and my pici. With devotion I went to the surau to perform my religious obligations. Taking the cold green holy water from the pool, I participated in the prayers and the divine service. I also remember how I once called everyone to prayer and joined others in beating the drum. I was very proud of my melodious voice. Each time a sentence ended in Allahu Akbar, I sang the words with a gentle rhythm which echoed to the mountains. And when the services and readings were over, we all walked home together in the dark, enjoying the clip-clop sound of our wooden slippers. On Fridays we recited prayers for the dead with food provided by the families of the deceased. Below the gas lamp we sat cross-legged on the floor, our backs against the wall. Every space against the walls of the room was filled. I still remember how naughty Dja'far was, ogling the food in front of him.

When I had finished learning the thirty chapters of the Koran, my elder brother took me to Surabaya, where I attended Mufidah's Islamic school in Sawahan. Here I met our master, Kyai Mas Mansur, who was a prominent figure in Muhammadijah* and a graduate of Al Azhar University in Egypt. His dress was simple—a sarong, a collarless shirt, and a pici.

Although I was already eight years old, I had my first instruction in reading and writing in Arabic in this school. However, since my father had previously instructed me in Arabic pronunciation and intonation as well as the fiqh I didn't find the lessons too difficult. So it wasn't too surprising that within a few years I had progressed to the highest grade. From that time on I received more advanced lessons, such as the interpretation of the Koran, arithmetic, Arabic grammar, history, and other rather general subjects.

For seven years I stayed at Kyai Mas Mansur's boarding school. During my final year, I joined the recitations of the adults that followed the afternoon prayer. I can still hear Kyai Mas Mansur's beautiful voice as he read the Koran with a steady and smooth rhythm. I knew his family very well, especially his three mischievous sons: Aunur Rafiq, Nuh, and Ibrahim. After early morning services, Nuh and I would often stop to have green pea porridge at the village of Ketapang Besar.

It was during my residence in the boarding school that I became acquainted with the bustling world and with all kinds of people, knowledge, and ideas.

I came to know both the person and the mind of Kyai Mas Mansur very well. He was both great and broadminded. He still haunts my thoughts; his voice constantly reverberates in my heart. He awakened my sleepy soul and stirred my interest, so that I again understood myself and Allah. It was he also who planted in my heart the essence

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*A Moslem organization considered progressive in Indonesia.
of holy teachings. Though he is now dead, His face is continually before me.

It wasn't strange at all that my fellow santris in Kedungpring and I did not look at things in the same way, for they had never been to school. Old people also got very upset if a student of Islam could speak Dutch. But I tried to give clear explanations in our discussions, especially if the topic could lead to serious differences. However, deep down in their hearts my fellow students, just like Kyai Sjafii, liked me because I was always ready to meet their arguments.

On Thursday evening in the surau, when we had finished the evening prayer, we usually read the Koran to the elders, who constantly longed for Allah and the hereafter. Without fail, I was the one who was asked to read. I don't know why the elders enjoyed listening to my voice so much, but they said that I read in a beautiful and touching style. All of this made both my parents and me proud.

There was one custom of the village of Kedungpring that I cannot forget. Any young man who was respected and admired, especially if he was handsome, inevitably became the object of friendly gossip among the village families. There would be many among the elders who wished to take him as a son-in-law. But, of course, they wouldn't marry just any girl to him; and unless they were rich, kyais, or respected people, they wouldn't dare to engage in this match-making at all. However, sometimes they were so subtle in trying to win his heart that they would eventually trap him. And how proud they would be, for it was a great honor for the aspiring parents-in-law to be successful in this task. In this manner I also became a candidate of the religious-minded girls and mothers of the village. Whenever I passed their houses, beautiful eyes followed me from behind the screens. Quite often I was teased by those hopeful mothers, but I was just sixteen and couldn't be bothered with such matters. What's more, my progressive father, a former member of Tjokroaminoto's United Islam Party, did not like customs of this nature.

One time my grandfather whispered to me: "Say, you know Zainab, the daughter of Haji Tajib, don't you?"

I knew the purpose behind this question, but still I replied, "Yes. Why?"

"Yesterday Haji Tajib came here and asked about you."

"About me?"

"I only promised to mention this matter to you."

I was silent, for I knew what he meant by "this matter." Seeing me fall silent, he just smiled.

As was the custom of the santris in my village, besides the readings offered by Kyai Sjafii, we often sang the marhaban and the
qasidah. These could be sung anytime in the evening, either in the surau or in the houses of those who wished to honor the Prophet Muhammad. This ceremony of praise to the Prophet was performed loudly, either sitting or standing, and was occasionally accompanied by tambourine.

One Thursday evening my friends and I were invited to sing the marhaban in the home of Haji Tajib in Ketapang. The moon shone clearly as we left the surau following the evening prayer. The Tajibs welcomed us as warmly as if we had been hajis just returning from Mecca. We were invited into the front room, which was decorated with figures inscribed with sacred verses, and we sat on the carpet under the bright light of a gas lamp. As soon as everyone was seated, we enthusiastically began the marhaban. First we solemnly told the story of the Prophet Muhammad from his birth to his adulthood. Then we stood and sang the story of the Prophet's greatness, told in the form of rhyming quatrains. When each Moslem welcomed the arrival of the Prophet, we sang vigorously:

Marhaban ya nuru 'aini marhaban.
Marhaban jaddal husaini marhaban.

Finally we sat again. The marhaban was led by the beautiful voice of Idris, Kyai Sjafii's nephew.

As usual, before the main dishes of food were brought out, snacks were served, giving the guests an opportunity to perform the qasidah where each of us was to sing individually. Rhythmic and sentimental Arab songs were usually sung. After several of my friends had their turn, mine came. I thought a moment, and then decided that it would be much better if I sang a popular Arab song: "Lailah wa Lailah." And so I began.

While I was singing, I sensed someone watching me. I saw eyes peeping at me from behind the curtains. Among them was an especially beautiful pair, staring flirtatiously, twinkling like fireflies. "Oh, you're really gorgeous," I thought. For a while I stared back at those eyes, as they seemed to grow lovelier. I remembered what my grandfather had said several days before. Maybe it was Zainab—the daughter of Haji Tajib, the most beautiful girl in the village. I became nervous and my voice trembled. Sweat began to trickle down my forehead. A moment later I finished the song and as I bowed my head I wiped away the sweat with one hand. Suddenly a girl's voice arose from behind the curtains:

"Once again! Again!" I stared in the direction from which the voice had come, and I saw a face hidden behind a veil. Then I heard whispering from other girls, and I knew they must have enjoyed listening to the sentimental Arab song. "Again!" they repeated. I became panicky.

A man in a yellow turban appeared from behind the curtain. He stood on the threshold and looked at me. Then he gazed fixedly at the other santris. We followed his gaze, anxiously awaiting what the old man would say.
"Gentlemen, I wish to ask you something" he spoke slowly and hoarsely. "Who among you would like to read the Book of Joseph?"
He glanced at me. Wouldn't you know that my friends began screaming "Djamil! Djamil!" while pointing at me. Again I panicked. I tried to refuse, but the pressure from the Hajî and my friends forced me to acquiesce to their request.

"Yes, the Book of Joseph," said the girl behind the curtain. I wiped my brow again and coughed in order to catch my breath. Everyone grew quiet. Hajî Tajib sat crosslegged in the corner, his head bowed devoutly, as if ready to receive a revelation from Allah. I began with the opening chapter of the Koran and then read the first sentence of the Book of Joseph. I recited slowly and deliberately at first and then allowed my voice to grow high and swelling. At the end of each verse, I was accompanied by all of those present in singing "Allah."

I was filled with a sense of mystery that night. I could see in my mind's eye a handsome servant of Allah--the Prophet Joseph--bursting forth from the clouds in the sky. Accompanied by Princess Zulaïha from Egypt, he came to us smiling, with open arms; she was as beautiful as a fairy--so beautiful that the girls who watched from behind the curtain were enchanted and jealous. Soon Joseph was trapped by his jealous brothers and thrown into a well. Later, a caravan of Bedouins on camels arrived, lifted Joseph from the well, and carried him to Egypt, where they sold him.

I glanced at Hajî Tajib, who was caught up in the story, mesmerized by the atmosphere of the evening. His head kept nodding and every now and then he mumbled something. Truly, that night was mysterious and holy.

The image vanished when the reading about Joseph's love for the Egyptian princess ended. It was this book that the girls in my village loved and enjoyed the most. I saw Hajî Tajib open his eyes slowly, as though awakening from a beautiful dream. His face radiated the sweetness of the story as he turned to look at me. I bowed my head. I thought of all that had been depicted in my reading.

From within the house came the sound of pots and pans jangling. Not long afterwards the main dishes arrived. My friends began to joke loudly, many of them teasing each other. The dishes were passed from hand to hand, until they had circled the room. Finally, at the invitation of Hajî Tajib, we dug into the food with relish, leveling a mountain of rice and roast chicken.

And this I still remember well, and will never forget: After we had eaten and wrapped up packages of the left-over food to take home with us, a very thin man suddenly entered from behind the curtain. Carrying a large package, he approached me. My friends all stared. When the man had extended greetings, he sat down in front of me, set the package on the floor, and taking hold of my right hand, placed another, smaller package in it. He said nothing; the packages delivered, he stood up and left.
As surau go ours was a relatively simple building. It was located in the middle of the village, and its style, like the majority of such buildings where Moslems around the world gather to worship Allah, showed Arab influence. The shape being rather foreign-looking, it stood out among the village houses, where it seemed almost like a large toy. It was tightly enclosed by a turmeric wood fence about one and a half meters high. There were always cattle roaming around the village and this fence kept them away from the surau along with the inevitable filthy dogs. The walls were made of rough wooden planks closely fitted together, and the floor tiles were crudely made. But this wasn't important. What mattered was that the surau was Allah's house, a place for restless souls to seek peace. However, it wasn't very peaceful there during the five times each day when santri's must pray or on Fridays. On this holy day all work came to a halt as the hour neared for us to attend the service. The entire village population, throngs of people, flooded into the house of Allah like Islamic pilgrims approaching the Holy Stone in Mecca. Indeed, on Fridays the surau is as sacred for Moslems who have not yet fulfilled that tenet of Islam that urges each follower to make the holy journey to Mecca, as the pilgrimage itself would be.

During the week the main purpose of prayers is to make more merit in Allah's eyes. The faithful must, however, gather at the
surau on Fridays and listen to a sermon that a khatib delivers. His theme is always a variation on the greatness of religion and the glory of Allah. The evil enter hell because they sin, and the good enter heaven because they do kind deeds and keep the faith through prayers offered with their fellow Moslems.

Inside the surau is a speaker's platform flanked by two green flags. Each is emblazoned with striking yellow Arabic script that reads:

"There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is his Apostle."

It was near these banners that my father and I sat together each Friday. He chose this place close to the khatib so that he could hear every word of the sermon. He concentrated on the spoken words with his very soul, as though he were alone and not amidst that sacred assembly. I'm sure that at those times my father did not see himself in a small, simple surau in a village in Sumbawa, but rather kneeling at the Sacred Stone in Mecca. Father devoutly believed that the words of the sermon were the true teachings of Allah, and in order to extol the virtues of the Almighty, who created man from the dust of the ground, we creatures must pay homage to Him. Of course my father could never understand what the khatib was saying. The sermon was always delivered in Arabic because it is said that the language of Allah's apostle is closer to that of the Creator than any other.

My father believed that we should accept unquestioningly all that Allah decreed, and that we should implement His plan with devotion so that we might be prosperous here and in the world hereafter. Only those prepared to kneel and bow their heads to the ground in worship of Allah could receive His teachings. To ignore Him or to deliberately shun understanding of His teachings would result in our becoming strangers in our own land. That's what my father said.

As for me, what did I know of Allah's words? I was just a child, only about seven years old. I would sit there meditating with the other worshippers, the only difference being that I was there because of my father's coaxing and because he would promise to let me ride the horse when we left the service and went down to the rice field. My older sister also used to bribe me to go with my father by offering to buy me new clothes. That would really make me feel important. When I walked beside my father people were always noticing me. They would say, "Look at our beloved teacher's grandson. He's so cute in his embroidered piai and new Buginese sarong. Doesn't he look grand, so proper and so bright? He is a true grandson of our Guru Moa. He's certain to follow in his grandfather's footsteps and no doubt one day he'll be a very respected man."

Guru Moa, my grandfather, had been a learned man and a well-known religious leader in our village. He had earned a reputation as a steadfast old gentleman who enjoyed helping people, and the villagers wanted me to grow up to be like him—one who spreads the light of Allah's word to unbelievers still living in darkness.
There were dozens of Islamic students in places outside of our village who had studied with my grandfather. My mother often spoke of his stature in these places. She always said that my grandfather had had a unique approach, one that differed from that of his fellow teachers. He had believed that the teacher should go to the students and not the other way around. This belief took him from village to village, a constant traveler whose compassion toward his fellow man had been inexhaustible. He never tired. The more distant the villages he visited, the more strength and courage he gathered. He had believed that working in far places offered the opportunity to increase his heavenly reward. Grandfather felt that each footstep had a proportional reward and for this reason he refused to travel on horseback. Although some of these villages were a considerable distance away, he always walked to them. His legs were no longer the legs of an ordinary man, but Allah had surely strengthened my grandfather's limbs.

Grandfather had always said that those who were unsure of the teachings of Allah should not be compelled to come to the teacher, but rather that the teacher should convince them to open their hearts and let the lamp of His understanding shine in. He felt that there was no one on earth incapable of accepting genuine kindness if it were offered to him repeatedly and in a spirit of love. Indeed, Allah blesses the souls that bow to Mecca.

One day my mother announced to me, "You must follow in your grandfather's path."

"Must I then be good at reciting the holy books?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Of course you must be good at it. You would have to study hard to become a great ulama like that, gaining a reputation throughout all the villages as one who spreads the mantle of Islam."

With this goal in mind and dressed in the customary clothing, I went with my parents to the home of a well-known Islamic teacher—one of my grandfather's former students, as a matter of fact. On that occasion I had with me a new copy of the Koran which, according to custom, I had carried on my head from my home to the teacher's house. This was to show respect for Allah's word. The book had been purchased especially for me to mark this milestone in my life. My brand new clothes included a destar, a beautiful shirt, and a new checkered sarong. I mustn't forget to mention the gifts I brought along for the teacher: glutinous rice dyed yellow, pink, and black with some left white that was shaped into a cone that reached to my elbow; a bunch of large Amboinese bananas; and a tray of toasted rice covered by a piece of unbleached cotton. These things were offered as a tribute to the teacher.

Oh, but wasn't I proud with my new Koran and my specially bought clothes! In all my life I had never been so well turned out, except maybe on Fridays or on Lebaran, and then I could only wear the clothes
for a little while. When that day was over I always had to take them off and return them for safekeeping. I wasn't supposed to show off with those new clothes. But not this time. These clothes were mine to keep forever and no one could take them away from me. They were a gift because I was about to become a student of the Koran.

My friends discussed my new venture at great length. Some were surprised and some were certain that I would do my grandfather's memory proud. But there were others who bet I'd never make it. They said there was no guarantee that a grandfather's intelligence would be passed on to his grandson. The adults were more positive. In their minds I would emerge from Islamic school and fill the void created when my grandfather passed away.

When we reached the teacher's home my parents handed me over to his care with the traditional ceremony. My mother began, "We came to give our boy to you. We hope that you will accept him and that he will be a good student in the ways of Allah and that the holy word will fill his soul. Esteemed teacher, who has already received the legacy of this boy's grandfather, we pray that same legacy may be passed on to our son." This was truly my mother's desire.

After delivering her speech my mother offered the food to my teacher. He selected a banana, which he peeled and coated with the puffy toasted rice. He then offered it to me, indicating that I should swallow the thing whole. I willed my throat to open in anticipation of the large fruit. If I could swallow it in one piece, without it getting stuck, it would be a sign that I would be clever and my tongue fluent in reciting the verses of Allah's holy book. Anxiously I picked up the banana the teacher was offering me. My poor body was trembling. There was a big question in my mind as to whether I could swallow a fruit as large as my arm--one that was covered with dry pieces of rice. I could imagine that banana getting stuck in my throat and suffocating me.

"Don't be afraid," said the teacher who couldn't help but notice my trembling. "Try it."

I didn't answer. Then I looked at my mother and I lifted the fruit to my lips. I was sure the space inside my mouth would never be able to hold that banana. I wanted to chew it, to just mash it up, but I quickly shut out that thought as I remembered that chewing was forbidden. Then gathering all my strength I concentrated on swallowing it. Both my parents, and the teacher, watched me with total absorption. Each must have been considering the outcome--can he do it or not? It was me alone, however, who was involved in the life or death struggle of forcing that enormous object down my throat. Meantime my eyes began to bulge out. The banana was now caught and was actually choking me. In my heart I accepted the fact that I would die just as soon as my breath was used up. Nevertheless, I tried hard to muster up more strength as I pushed at that thing with every muscle in my throat. Finally, I could feel it move, and I began to be able to swallow. Then all of a sudden the banana was in my stomach. Instantly I felt sickeningly full and my eyes started to run.
The toasted rice had failed to go down with the banana and was sticking to the inside of my mouth. Without realizing it I began to chew it and then with one gulp it was all gone.

The three adults beamed at me with expressions that said I had succeeded. They were beside themselves with my performance, especially my mother who envisioned a glorious future for our family with the birth of yet another famous ulama. For a religious family there is no glory greater than having an ulama in the home. It meant that the house would always be full of people coming to ask for blessings. My mother could already smell the sweet fragrance of piety and glory. She was certain that in ten years grandfather would live again.

"Has your son been circumcised?" asked the teacher.

"Not yet," answered my mother.

"How old is he now?"

"Seven years old."

"Well, you don't have to have it done before he graduates. Why not wait and have the graduation and circumcision ceremonies at the same time?"

"That was our intention," answered my mother.

"Well, now, did you hear that, Firdaus?" said the teacher.

"You can't be circumcised if you don't graduate. For this reason you must study hard. You can't be lazy. You must follow in your grandfather's footsteps. You realize that he was a great ulama--famous throughout our village and the surrounding ones. In many a faraway valley and remote ravine your grandfather's name is still esteemed by those who know the greatness of Allah's mercy and of His teacher's service. His blessings have reassured many doubtful hearts. People still remember his kindness and his prayers. He gave guidance in difficult times and held high a lamp to illuminate the way to Allah's greatness. You, as his grandson, are a true extension of this unselfishness. May Allah give you a fluent tongue," prayed the teacher as he finished his little speech.

I had listened carefully to his advice. I couldn't imagine anyone not wanting praise and respect. Everybody wanted to be loved and appreciated, but what about people for whom the road to such glory would be far from easy? What about me? Was it really possible that in a few short years I could actually complete the reading of all thirty chapters of the Koran? Just a look at the letters in the Holy Book told me that I, who could make absolutely no sense of the script, would certainly have a hard row to hoe. The strange looking letters would have to be memorized by each student. I was worried that it would be many years before I'd finish reading that noble book. My uneasiness had further increased when the teacher had announced that my circumcision would be postponed until I graduated. How could they do that to me?
"Suppose I'm fifteen before I graduate," I thought. That's pretty old to be circumcised. I would be embarrassed. My friends would laugh at me and say that not only had I failed to inherit my grandfather's brains, but I was old enough to be a father before I got circumcised.

Nevertheless, beginning that very day the teacher introduced me to the Arabic letters—alif, ba, ta, sa, the letters in which were written Allah's Holy Book, which He had given to His servant Mohammad. Day after day I struggled with this alphabet trying to memorize its foreign shapes. If we knew all the letters, we could then learn to make words from them. After mastering this skill one would be able to read the verses of the holy Koran. Even then he would be a long way from understanding what they said. Our teacher never explained the meaning of the words, so we couldn't translate the verses. Allah's language is for Him. His True Word is exclusively His and not to be interpreted by just anybody.

Two years had passed since I entered the pondok, and I had only been able to read five chapters of the holy book. I was obviously stupid. I had certainly not been blessed with that clever tongue that my mother and teacher had so hoped for. There were boys in my class who had already finished their first reading of the Koran and were back on chapter one, starting the second time around. Damn, they were smart. They memorized and spouted the holy words like water recycled in fountains. They were even able to chant the verses in their own unique styles. Their tongues were as clever as those of true Arabs. It was almost as though Mohammad had visited them at the outset of their studies and assured each one that he was chosen to spread the word of Allah throughout his lifetime. But when this gift had been given, I had been left out. I never even tried to manipulate my tongue's twistings and turnings to produce the genuine Arabic tones. The holy words always came out in my ordinary voice and I ended up sounding like a hick, a boy born in the middle of a rice field somewhere in Sumbawa.

Even though I was self-conscious and felt left out where my reading and memorizing were concerned, I had to admit that part of my problem was the fact that I lacked the necessary desire to struggle to reach the others' level of accomplishment. I studied as much as I did for my mother's sake. This whole thing had been her idea, not mine. So what if I missed out on a guarantee to enter heaven because I was lazy? I had no regrets. The heavenly world would not be for me anyway. It was probably a foreign place inhabited by people of another world.

There was one thing, though, that bothered me a great deal. If I failed to graduate would my mother forbid my circumcision? This had become almost an obsession with me. It may seem odd that one so young should be so consumed by this thought, but I was. I wanted to experience that painful sensation my friends said occurred when the foreskin was removed, when the bamboo knife cut away this skin. I didn't fear the pain. On the contrary I anticipated it because they said that once circumcised a boy would soon become a young man and
before long he would know a woman. How could such thoughts fail to arouse me? Becoming an adult and falling in love with a woman appealed to me far more than learning the holy verses.

After a while the people in our village began gossiping about my lack of progress at the Islamic school. They shook their heads and said that it seemed that grandfather's blood did not flow in my veins after all (meaning of course my mother's blood, as he was her father). They said that the Amboinese banana I had swallowed whole that day had been a useless prediction. They agreed that I took after my father. No descendant on his side of the family would ever have the intelligence to become an ulama. However, they added that such a descendant would certainly not be lacking in obedience to Allah or in offering prayers to Him. But such a man would be more apt to care for horses and water buffaloes or other grazing animals than to cultivate a fluent tongue for reciting the Koran. Indeed, cattleman's blood flowed in my father. If I had truly inherited his way with animals it must assuredly be Allah's will.

This became increasingly evident as the two years passed and I made so little academic progress. I became bored with the confusing foreign script. Each day I faced the same thing. There was nothing new except the twists and turns of the letters. My boredom made me daydream and drift from Allah's holy words. I couldn't help it. My interests were changing.

It was true that I told Mother I was going to school, but that wasn't really my plan. In the valleys and fields far from our village there were people who tamed wild horses. Had she looked for me I could have been found there. My ears can almost hear the sounds of those times—sounds that cause my blood to rise in excitement. The horse tamers had usually greeted me with an eager welcome. They realized that the ulama's grandson and the horse keeper's grandson had truly been given a legacy.
The sun was already high over the countryside as the old man lay on the bamboo lounger in front of his house. He had been relaxing all morning. There was no one to bother him. His wife was not at home. "Thanks to Allah, I fathered a child and that child fathered a child." Several days ago, the old woman, his wife, told him that she longed to see her grandchildren. So, the fussy woman had left. She went on the early morning train yesterday.

He was alone. If his wife had been there she would have nagged him as soon as he lay down as he was doing now. "Get up, you lazy old man," his wife would have said, but she wasn't there. The old man stretched his legs and inhaled his pipe smoke deeply. Now he was truly free, and he would do just as he pleased: lie in the chair and enjoy the sky, the trees, and his garden.

His house was on the edge of the village, far from neighbors. There was no one who could see him lying there so long. In back of the house was a small river. His garden sloped down to its edge. Trees decorated the yard, but how heavy his work was. If his wife had been home, she would have ordered him to work in the yard. There was always something to do. "Firewood! No more firewood! What a messy yard!" He would have to move quickly or she would spray him with water. Of course, he knew the work was necessary; it was his wife's fussiness that he couldn't stand. With all his gray hair he was still considered lazy. Damn it! Well, his wife wasn't there now.
"I'm not lazy," thought the old man. "I am the descendant of hardworking people. I'm industrious from the tip of my toes to the top of my head." He pulled on his pipe. "Then prove it, grandpa," he thought suddenly. Yes, it was easy to say. Proving it was difficult. Yet he didn't know what work actually had to be done at the time. There was no need to get firewood since there was plenty in the kitchen already. He had piled it there himself. What about raking the yard? It was useless; there was no one to see it. His house was hidden from view.

He jumped to his feet. "For God's sake," he cried. "No one should waste time!" He remembered something he should do. Lazing about was not the thing for a good Moslem. He had heard that the village people were building a new surau. Many people had contributed materials for it. Boards, roof tiles, and lime had been collected. School children had looked for stones and sand from the river. It was hardly proper for a life-long Moslem like him to be lazy. One must serve Allah with one's wealth and soul. He was worried. If his wife were home, he could discuss it with her. All of his money was with his wife. All that was left in the house was enough food for him until she got back. What could he contribute to the building of Allah's house? Would he have to pass up the opportunity to do a good deed simply because his wife wasn't home? "Certainly not," the old man thought. There was nothing wrong with his brain; it was just that habitual scolding from his wife had made him afraid to think. Thinking was difficult for an old man like him.

He looked at his house and yard, and stepped down from the porch. The sun shone on the wind-blown leaves, its rays occasionally falling warmly on his back. He was happy. He enjoyed the freedom of walking among the vegetables in his garden. If his wife were home, she would be complaining. She was always quarrelsome when she saw him walking around the vegetables, although it was he who had planted them. The peacefully flowing water of the river in back of his house was enchanting. If his wife were home he wouldn't have the chance to be by the river for long. He never tired of the river. It was only because she forbade it that he was no longer friends with the river. He would catch a cold! He didn't even fish anymore. Rod fishing was lazy man's work. Sometimes his wife would order him to fish, not with a hook and rod, but with a net.

He stopped near the river's edge. In front of him stood a jackfruit tree. The huge tree was dead. The top was dry and not a leaf was left on it. "Excellent!" he thought. "This wood is perfect for the building of the surau. The yellow wood will shine without paint or polish. Well, maybe just a little polish." And the log would be cut by his own hands. It would be good to kill time this.
woman, how happy she would be. "Our wood was contributed to the
construction of Allah's house, dear." His wife would be happy and
thank Allah. In the final days of their lives, they could still do
good deeds.

He had planted the tree himself. It was he who had faithfully
watered it. It had grown rapidly. His father ordered him to climb
it whenever the fruit was ripe. But the tree's death needn't be
mourned. Its wood would occupy a place of honor: the House of
Allah. Every day it would be seen by people praising the greatness
of Allah and His Prophet. What a beautiful way for a tree to end
its life! It was far better than to end in a fireplace, especially
one where pagans cooked the forbidden rejeki. Actually, it was only
natural since the tree was first planted in the name of Allah. And
since his poverty wouldn't allow him to do another good deed, the
tree was especially valuable to him—a jackfruit tree planted by his
own hands, nurtured by his own hands, and felled by his own hands.
He would prove his service to Allah, his Creator, with something
enduring. For once in his life he could contribute something to Him.

He thought about the tree all day—could he really chop it down
himself? The circumference was almost twice the span of his arms.
It was big—not quite two armlengths to encircle it. He could chop
it, but did he have enough energy to fell it? Maybe he could hire
someone. But his wife had not left him a cent. Only rice and
enough side dishes to last until she came home. He couldn't pay
anyone, much less feed him.

Realizing how big the tree was, he abandoned the plan to cut it
down himself. But there was a way. The branches that he didn't
need could be given to the woodcutter as wages. He wouldn't lose
anything except the mess from the twigs and branches. He was happy.
He could imagine how his wife would praise his wisdom. This kind
of good work was everlasting. His reward would last until the log
decayed. In another week, when she returned home, he would tell
her. First, he would invite her to walk in the yard and ask her to
guess what was missing. "The jackfruit! Where did it go?" She would
never guess. "The surau, dear. The House of Allah." She would
smile. "No, it's not necessary. Old people don't need kisses
anymore." That would be the best way to inform Mrs. Quarrelsome!

So he looked for a woodcutter. He promised that the branches
would be his wages. The yard would be clean and the earth flattened
again. The woodcutter knew the old man's intentions and refused to
accept any wages, but the old man insisted and explained that it was
part of the amal. It was proper that the branches be shared among
neighbors.

Thus the robust woodcutter came to work in his yard. He arrived
very early, readied his axe, tied the ropes, and climbed the tree.
The old man couldn't help in any way. He was unable to climb, never
mind that his wife had forbidden him to, no matter how low the branch.
He himself realized that his hands trembled and could no longer grasp
anything firmly. Climbing was dangerous; it could shorten his life.
He just watched the woodcutter, his brown skin sparkling in the sun, the sound of the axe reverberating. All the world could hear. Perhaps Allah's angels had already noted what was happening that day. Every echo of the axe was an echo of amal to the old man. He didn't have to feel bad because he couldn't help. People knew he was old. It was enough to supervise. The first day of work passed without his physical contribution.

The log would make him smile on the day of his death. His body would be decayed in his grave by the earth, but what was clear was that the old tree would become a testimony that he had lived and contributed to a surau. It was not people but Allah who would make him happy. If only he could prevent people from seeing it: he wanted only Allah to know.

He watched as branch by branch fell from the tree. Just like people: one by one they died and were buried. But a fallen branch could still be useful. It could be used to provide fire for cooking or warm those who were cold. What could dead people contribute? Not a thing. In fact, death burdened one's neighbors because they had to carry one's coffin to the grave and bury it.

The next day he began to help. The woodcutter had started to cut the tree's base. Twigs and branches were scattered everywhere. He wanted to gather them so that the tree trunk could fall safely without any obstacles. The tree was now branchless and would topple easily.

There was something else he wanted to do. He thought of the axe in the house, but it had to be sharpened first. He brought out the grinding stone and a bucket of water. The woodcutter seeing what he intended to do forbade him, saying he was too old. But even a little child could be trusted to sharpen and swing an axe! Why not an old man? He would sweat just carrying water from the well. He had a good axe, shiny and sharp—iron alone could withstand an axe as sharp as his. "What kind of a woodcutter is this? He says this axe is no good. When it comes to axes, no woodcutter's going to tell me that this axe is dull. What woodcutter wouldn't want to use it?" The old man had used axes since he was young. No doubt about it, this axe was the sharpest in the world.

This was the way he fought his old age. He swung his axe vigorously, but his body shook violently. This worried the woodcutter and he warned the old man that what was going to fall would be his own body, not the tree. Besides, his axe didn't hit its target.

"Don't swing the axe straight, old man. Hold it at an angle," said the woodcutter.

"All right. Maybe he can teach me about woodcutting, but he wouldn't dare stop me from working."
The old man would prove that he wasn't lazy and did not have to depend on others. Allah's reward would lead him to heaven. And, there was no way that his wife could call him lazy again. Look at his contribution: a yellow jackfruit tree, shining in the sun. He would be able to say, "The jackfruit tree was cut by my own hands."

He worked hard and without anyone ordering him. On the third day, he woke up very early. How happy he was to point to his work when the woodcutter arrived. The axe had been swung strongly and had left a deep notch in the tree. The woodcutter said, "The wood must have been eaten by mosquitoes and not cut by an axe." He was mistaken.

"How could mosquitoes eat a jackfruit tree? Of course, it was an axe that did it!"

The woodcutter smiled. "Come on, grandfather. Enough is enough. Leave it to me."

No, it was his own wood. It was only proper that he should cut it himself. The woodcutter showed him how to chop properly. And how big the notch was becoming! The old man smiled. It was because his axe was sharp and he was still fresh. If he had been working since morning...

Quit? No, never. His wife would be right if he did. "Anyone who wants to work is not lazy. Don't judge a person by his output but rather by his intentions." And he fervently wanted to cut down the jackfruit tree. "What really counts is the intention!" He repeated it again. And remember, he started earlier than the woodcutter. And he expended more energy. The woodcutter sweated more because he drank a lot. And anyway, is work measured by the amount of sweat? That really wouldn't be fair. One could sweat without working.

He wanted to arrange it so that only Allah would know he had contributed the wood to the surau. He asked the woodcutter not to reveal his secret. A good amal is when your right hand does it, but your left hand doesn't see it! It wasn't necessary for anyone to know. He and the woodcutter agreed that the log would appear suddenly at the construction site as if it had come from the sky. How clever! As long as that fussy woman wasn't around, his brain worked wonders. In the dark, when no one was around, the log would be left at the surau. He would write on it with charcoal, "A tree for Allah." The sudden appearance of the log would surprise the neighborhood. And who would imagine that he was the anonymous donor? No one. Only Allah and His angels would know. Pride is better buried than revealed. Hidden pride makes people smile. Revealed pride makes people laugh. And a smile means more than a laugh.

He couldn't wait to bring the tree down. He forgot his old age, his weight, and the amount of energy he had left to spend. His mind was filled with a wonderful dream. Sweat poured from his body. The woodcutter cautioned him. Ah, at his age he needn't be
reminded about anything by anyone. No, neither his wife nor the wood­
cutter had any right to hold him back. Only his own mind guided him.
Good must be done, no matter what the consequences. He knew what he
could and could not do. He had every right to live his own life. It
was too bad his body couldn't support his intentions. At midday,
sweating heavily, he fainted.

When he regained consciousness many people were gathered around
him. The old man was annoyed. No, he was all right. "Go, it isn't
anything. I was just a bit sleepy, why did you come?" Then they
went home.

My God, the woodcutter must have revealed his plans to the
people who came.

"No, grandfather."

"Well, good for you."

"But your secret will be revealed if you work any more. If you
faint again, people will come back and they'll ask what the wood is
for." So the woodcutter suggested that he rest.

"All right," he agreed. It was for the better.

After that he didn't touch the wood again. Everything was left
to the woodcutter. The tree crashed down, and the woodcutter trimmed
it to make a yellow-golden beam. The old man didn't regret that he
couldn't help in the work. He had tried. What was important now
was that he had planned everything. It had required experience, and
he was the one who had to make the plan. The physical work could
be trusted to the woodcutter; that was his job. The old man was
just a little disappointed that he wouldn't be able to say that he
had personally vanquished the golden giant. Let it be. Much remained
to be done with the log--pushing it to the river's edge and sending
it downstream.

The old man wanted to float the log downstream in the evening
after the sun had set. They could leave it on the east bank and
early the next morning the woodcutter could come with a pushcart.
Very early, so that no humans, Allah's creatures, would see them.

The sky was red in the west that afternoon. Clouds hid the sun,
but a bright red glow shone through a crack and invaded the sky. The
two men tried to roll the log to the edge of the river. They both
pushed it with large sticks. It left scratches in the earth. Fre­
quently the old man could be heard to say, "Excellent!" At every
Rest awhile."

The sun was gone, leaving only the red color in the sky. Praying
time, but that could wait. The two men entered the water. There
wasn't any problem there. Both of them were country children who had
played in water since their mothers had first bathed them. A shimmering red reflection appeared in the water, then disappeared. The river water was the calmest the old man had ever seen it. He was wet up to his stomach. The yellow beam floated leisurely on the surface of the water. Their hands directed its course. They maneuvered it around the current.

They came to the quietest part of the village. There was no one to see them. Children's voices could be heard in the distance. "Allah, don't let those children come to the river! This log is only for You. Oh no, they're coming toward the river! What is bringing them down here at this time of the evening? They certainly aren't very well-behaved." The children gathered along the side of the river and watched. They asked questions. Oh, no! They undressed and jumped in the water. The old man was confused. He chided the children: "It's already dark, go home."

"We want to ride on the log, grandpa," they cried.

Naughty children! Water splashed everywhere. Head, hair, ears, his whole body was splashed. It was as cold as ice water. The children were jubilant. All right, as long as they don't ask what it's for! Should he chase them away? No.

They clambered onto the log. It bobbed in the water. The old man wondered why he didn't join them. The woodcutter could guide it in the right direction and he could ride. He suppressed the urge to act like a child. It would make them laugh. The children sprayed his body with water, and he retaliated. The river became noisy. In the dark the noise was like the voices of devils in the bushes. The splashing water drowned out the ordinary night voices—the gentle and continuous cries and calls of animals. Those sounds alternated with the sound of water and the children's shouts. But never mind, what was important was that he kept the secret from the children. "It wasn't for you that I cut the tree, grandchildren."

As if changing the subject, the old man tried to frighten them with hints of a coming flood. "Look, how overcast it is. You'll get washed away in the flood if you stay here."

"It's okay, grandpa. We want to see the ocean," they laughed.

What could you do with these naughty village children? He recalled that he was like that when he was small. Old people are forgivers and the children's presence made him happy. They eventually got bored and returned to the riverbank, put on their clothes, and ran into the darkness of the trees.

When the red glow of the water and sky had completely disappeared, they reached a place near the road to the village. They anchored there. It wasn't too difficult to bank the log. What good was a man if he couldn't handle a piece of wood? They pulled the log easily up over the sand with a rope. Well, now, the log lay there motionless on the sand at the river's edge as if it would
never be moved again. "Excellent," said the old man. "Don't forget. Tomorrow morning before the early morning prayer. Come with a cart along that road." They left the log there on the soft sand. "Good bye, log. Until tomorrow morning."

The old man went home and prepared dinner. How delicious food was after a day of hard work. How happy are those who work hard. He was ecstatic. The jackfruit tree was beached on the riverbank. "Eat, man, eat as much as you can!" Soon he grew sleepy. His body was cool and refreshed. When the body is tired, sleep is comfortable. He fell asleep thinking of the surau, the beam of wood, the woodcutter, his wife, the children, the river. He smiled as he closed his eyes.

He remembered the plan just before he fell asleep: he must wake up very early and go straight to the river where he would wait for the woodcutter who would come with the cart. They would push the cart together, and before people were up the log would already be at the construction site of the surau. The first person to see it would be surprised: "Where did this log come from?" But only Allah and His angels could give an answer. Sleep, man, sleep!

The night was cold and damp. The slow swishing of the river could be heard. The familiar sounds of night animals were everywhere--on the earth, in the grass, in the water, in the trees, in the air. The trees bowed in the darkness. It was these living things that defined the night. Quiet, cool leaves bowed, as if the world were an overgrown hill that had been forgotten.

The old man woke up at the appointed hour. Old men could do that. Wrapped in his sarong, he stepped outside knowing there wouldn't be anyone there to see him. He knew his village well. He reached the riverbank easily. "My jackfruit log, I'll be seeing you very soon."

There was a noise. What was it? Oh, the cart rattling. The woodcutter was a little careless. "Careful, don't wake up anyone." He was glad that the rattling didn't last long. He still reproached him, but it wasn't really the woodcutter's fault. No matter how careful one was, a cart would surely be noisy on that rocky, winding road. Good, there weren't any sounds of people up and around. This place would be quiet until people rose to fetch water from the river to wash or bathe in. Since getting on in years the old man couldn't stand the cold river water in the morning. If he had been a small child he would have swum in the river that morning.

He thought of his wife. If she were at home, she would be waking him up now. "Pray, Moslem. Allah is waiting for you. May He give you long life and good health." That morning he felt very healthy. He wasn't even a little cold. It was probably because of his sarong. Yes, but also, his happiness erased any feelings of cold or anything else! The log was more important than the cold.

He imagined the surau and where the log from his yard would be placed. Surely, people would spend much time in the surau. Actually, it was nothing special. The wood came from Allah's earth, and now it
was returned to Him. When the old man was small, he often played
near the jackfruit tree. The branches were once good for climbing.
Now, the tree had become a beam. Surely, the yellow color had shone
through the night!

When the people discovered the log, he would be home smoking his
pipe. He would smoke for a long time. Yes, the log was from his
yard, but they wouldn't know. The log might be cut into smaller
pieces. Or maybe it would be better to cut large pieces for the four
main pillars. They could do whatever they wanted, because once the
log left his hands he didn't have any rights to it.

If he had anything else, he would take it to the surau too, but
there were only a cluster of bamboo and some vegetables in his yard.
He would feel ashamed to return so little to Allah.

He reached the road near the edge of the village and went down
the path to the river. Later they would have to push the log up this
slope, but he had a lot of energy after a good night's sleep. The
cart approached and descended the path to the river. He wanted to
get there first, so he walked faster. He wanted to look at the log
for a while to say goodbye. In the darkness there at the riverside
it was like the final ceremony before soldiers left for the battle­
field. Or like a burial. "Stupid! Forgetful! You forgot the char­
ccoal to write on the log. Stupid!" Return? That would be worse.
Forgetfulness was the downfall of mankind! He hit his head. "Not
too hard or you'll be dizzy, grandpa. Let it be."

The sky was still dark. In a little while it would be dawn.
Soon it would be time for the early morning prayer. The earth under
his feet was cool and because it was close to the river, it was damp.
He continued on his way. Behind him the cart got closer. He
arrived at the opening in the bushes. This was the riverbank. He
couldn't see clearly because of the darkness. He wiped his eyes,
rubbing them until they were clear. But it was still dark. Indeed,
it was too dark. Oh, old eyes, old eyes.

The log wasn't anywhere in sight. Where was it? His eyes. The
woodcutter arrived. Something must have happened. The cart stopped
near the side of the river. "Come here," he called. But it was
difficult for the old man to get close to the edge. The ground was
too soft. The earth was cold. Where was the log? Must they wait for
dawn? All right, if it had to be that way. They just stood there.
They couldn't see it.

"Where's the log, woodcutter?"

"Where's the log, grandfather?"

It was not there. When the first glow of dawn appeared in the
sky, they knew the log was gone. There was debris along the banks
of the river. Look, look! No use. It was clear, there had been
a flood during the night. The log had been washed away. "Allah!
Did it go back to You?"
The old man and the woodcutter stood there. Something had been lost.

"No, nothing was lost," said the old man.

The woodcutter turned the cart around. "Grandfather, let's go home."

The old man stood a moment longer, then he smiled. "Did it return to You, Allah?"

NOTE

1. A song used to create a certain tempo so that people working in unison will have the exact same timing.
The old man made sure that nothing would soil his clothes. It was Friday noon, and the sun was bright over the roof of his house. It was time to go to the mosque. Today he had to give the sermon and be the imam. It was a long walk, but he didn't mind. There was a possibility that his clothes would get dusty during the walk, and he felt that would detract from the holiness of the occasion. He wanted very much for Allah to see him immaculate when he knelt there in His house. It was only because he knew that Allah had seen his clothes and knew his intention to keep them clean that he was willing to risk going through the marketplace. He was dressed all in white--his poci, his shirt. Only his sarong was striped with gold threads. There was a prayer scarf over his shoulder. It was the proper attire for the holy day.

Whenever he passed the market he felt uneasy. If it weren't to shorten the distance and avoid the commotion of the main street, he wouldn't have gone through the place. He looked at the traders with indignation. Could these people have forgotten Allah? They were always in a hurry, had greedy faces and wild looks. Money. How different they were from what he wanted them to be.

His serene walk, clean face, and peaceful composure were contrary to the bustle of the market. He was absorbed in thought. He couldn't
help thinking, "Don't they have even a little time to think about their Creator? He doesn't ask much, just one hour on Friday, like today." He fingered the little copy of the Holy Book in his pocket, as if to cling to the esoteric. "Keep me from being ungrateful, Allah," he prayed. He wanted to tell them, "Just one hour, brothers. One hour for Him who created the sky and the earth!"

Why did they object? It was beyond his imagination, even as a professor of taufid. Or was it because he taught at a university that he couldn't understand such a life? Leaving the university for one hour didn't mean much to him, but leaving the market--how much money would these people lose? Nevertheless, he couldn't excuse them for their infidelity. It was clear to him that the awareness of Allah made humans different from other creatures. And that awareness must be demonstrated through action. Allah Himself had prescribed some of these actions. Truly, the merchants had forgotten Allah. But obviously, He had forgiven them. They were healthy, had children, were alive and happy. If Allah could forgive them, why should he concern himself?

Now if he were the merchant and saw someone in white clothes calmly walking through the hubbub while he was selling his merchandise or counting money, perhaps he would wonder: "White clothes in the marketplace? How foolish. Why is he strolling? Doesn't he work during the day? Lazy bum. Oh, he must be going to the mosque. Ah, it's useless and a waste of time. Empty peacefulness in an asylum called a mosque!"

He sighed. This thought disturbed him. And he said to himself: "Allah, keep me from the evil of spirits and man." But he didn't have the heart to curse them, because they didn't understand. They just didn't know. "Oh, Allah, please forgive them." When he was past the marketplace, he was relieved to find his clothes still clean. There wasn't a speck of dust on them.

He reached a quiet section of the city--several clusters of houses, an empty field, and trees. There was a path through the open field. Here and there the trees would shade him from the sun. Although the day was hot, the grass made him feel fresh. He liked to walk through the field because the green trees and grass gave him a peaceful feeling. It was very appropriate for the journey to the house of God.

Suddenly he started. He had spent too much time thinking of the market people, trees, empty land, and the sun instead of reciting prayers. He began to pray, but thoughts of the marketplace returned to bother him. Those market people. "Why don't they thank Allah? But, on the other hand, why must Allah take them away from their work? Doesn't He think about His servants? Doesn't He like to see people in the markets, in workshops, in the streets? Is it really necessary for them to leave work and go to the mosque?" He was confused. He felt in his pocket for the Holy Book again. It had been easy for Allah to create men, but it was difficult for men to remember Him. Pray, pray. He remembered how he reassured people
about Him in his sermons. An old man, small in build and enthusiastic, he could inspire his listeners. He was embarrassed to face God. How strange were these thoughts. Why were they coming to him now? It was a weakness for a professor of *tauhid*. He had attended many *pondok*, he had gone to the Holy Land, and had stayed in the Prophet's city for some time. It was not a meaningless journey for a pious man, but he must be more devout as he grew older. He remembered again, as if it were just yesterday, seeing the Kābah.

His thoughts bothered him, and he no longer felt peaceful. The wind rustled the trees, shaking the leaves and casting shadows on the grass. The road was deserted. He should have asked a friend to come along so that they could chat along the way. No, he was right to be alone; he had to recite his prayers, not talk, on his way to the mosque. Why chat, if what Allah wanted was prayer? Why dwell on strange things that divert his concentration on the Creator? He mopped his brow and a drop of perspiration fell on his shirt. He wanted to throw off his worries just as he had wiped off the sweat on his forehead. He longed for peace. For as long as he could remember he had wished only for peace of mind. Until now, he had been peaceful. But the market! He could still hear the commotion. Then he remembered that Allah also made men dependent on food. Going to the mosque was easy, but could he do the work of these people? Perhaps if he didn't teach at the university, he wouldn't be able to go to the mosque during the day either. His livelihood depended on his university. With sudden clarity he realized how wrong his judgement had been. If he didn't go to the mosque and wasn't pious he would be fired from the university and would probably never be able to work again. The market, the factory, the workshop, the rice fields—he looked at his thin white hands. He couldn't even unfurl the sarong merchandise the way the market people did when he passed them a while ago. Clearly, he could never work as they did.

We can close a university and still be prosperous, but we can't close the market, the workshop, or the factory. But why then did he feel so superior when he passed the market? Simply because he was going to the mosque and the others weren't? He had been very careful picking his way through it as though the market were filthy. He was careful, fearful that the merchants' indifference to Allah would stain his clothes. That was cruel, he thought. He felt he had insulted them. If Allah, the Great Judge, allowed them to be safe and sound, why did he disdain them?

He looked at his shirt, still as white as when he had started. This was proof of how he had treated the market people. His obsession with cleanliness was based in sin. It was more than guarding his clothes; he didn't want to be touched by the market people. Supposing that he were the trader—wouldn't he be offended? Would he go to the mosque? He could answer very complicated questions in his field, but this one was difficult even for him. He wiped his forehead; sweat and dirt stuck to the embroidered handkerchief that his wife had made. A yellow leaf fell on his shoulder; he shook it and it fell to the ground.
He wanted to return to the market. Why, he didn't know. To beg for forgiveness or to tell them something. He must preach Allah's message to them until they felt compelled to leave the market for a while and go to the mosque. He must deliver the message! But how? He had to go to the mosque. Allah, it is Your decision. He could visit the market later in the day after he returned home. But he was worried: Would they listen to him? Well, whether they did or not, it didn't matter to him. At least he would have delivered Allah's message. If they didn't go to the mosque, it was not Allah's loss.

But then he thought: If He didn't lose anything by it, why did He want them to go the mosque? He didn't need anything, did He? Forgive me, Allah, but are You in need of praise? No, no. It is Your right, for we are only Your servants. Truly, servitude can only become glorious if it is offered to You. But the merchants, who do they serve? Their own needs, perhaps. But then, who provides for them if not they themselves? For my subsistence you have provided me with the job at the university. For these people, it is the market that provides for them. The market will not give them money, if they leave it. Isn't it too much for You to demand that they go to the mosque? It is too much, Allah. They wouldn't have to go if You didn't require them to, would they? And those who are suffering—beggars and all the poor common people—must they also come to You?

He felt as if his heart had melted, and his perspiration was the liquid of his heart. He forgave the market people and everyone else that Friday noon. It was their choice. He must pacify his thoughts or else his sermon would be confused. He prayed, hoping he wouldn't think of the market people again when he stood at the speaker's platform. His strength for prayer returned. But, he heard someone weeping and he stopped. Who was crying?

Under a tamarind tree, there was a boy looking upward. When the old man looked at him, the child pointed to the top of the tree. The tree was tall and dense, and it was cool beneath its branches. "What is it, boy?" he asked. The blue sky, inlaid with silver sunrays, hurt his eyes when he looked up at the limbs of the tree. He squinted. "What is it?" he asked, stroking the child's head. The child pointed.

"Bird," he said.

"Oh, yes. I hear it. It's a small bird, grandchild."

The boy was young enough to have been his grandchild. He looked at him for a long time. The child's eyes were extraordinarily clear. He knew what the boy wanted. "Be quiet, and don't cry," he said. The child stopped crying. He looked up and saw a bird's nest among the leaves on top of a branch. He remembered when he was a naughty young boy as small as this child. He, too, had liked birds. He had gone from one neighborhood to another in pursuit of them. The hunt had been even more satisfying than owning the birds.
Once he had taken care of a bird his father had brought him from the market. His father had returned from a long business trip with a loaded horse carrying a bird nest. He had been very happy. He had smiled the same smile that was on his lips now. But he couldn't leap and skip anymore. The child saw him smile. He had played with his thrush then. Yes, it had been a thrush. He wanted very much for the little boy to feel what he had felt years ago and to see the boy as happy as his father had seen him. How had his own father felt when he had given him the bird? He looked at the child standing near him and said, "Wait, boy." The bird chirped. His heart stirred as he thought about catching it. He felt almost happy, a different sort of happiness from the kind he had felt just before. Something that had been buried in him rose again. He was absorbed with the happiness of the past. The charming little boy gazed upward with his mouth open.

When the old man thought about climbing the tree, he panicked. The white clothes he was wearing for the day reminded him of his mission. But the happiness he felt and his urge to catch the bird suppressed those thoughts. He slipped his sandals off, removed his scarf, folded his sarong, and ascended the tree. It was a skill that had been long forgotten, but the tree was not too difficult for him to climb. In his childhood, he had been a brave climber. The boy below was overjoyed; he screamed and pointed to the nest. They both laughed, but the old man had to be very careful. The yellow leaves drifted down around him like rain blown by the wind. He perched comfortably on a branch near the tree trunk. One more move and he could reach the nest, but he liked sitting there.

He looked at the ground beneath him: the view from the tree was quite different from the view at ground level. The sky opened up above him. The child screamed from below—an expression of uncertain joy. The baby birds cried, probably because they were hungry. Where was their mother? "There," he said, as he saw a bird pass above his head. He seemed to be in a world of birds, surrounded by birds. The mother bird alighted on a branch. He looked at her. "Yes, I am the one who will steal your children." First the baby birds must be taken, then, he would look for a way to capture the mother. It would not be difficult to catch them, as he was older and smarter. Even when he was small, he could do it.

He called to the child below: "Get a bird cage, boy. Quickly!" He would put the baby birds into the cage, and then he would catch their mother and put her with them. The mother bird was nervous. She had yellow feathers and a gray body—a thrush, like the one he had a long time ago. No, it was not the very same bird returning now, but another one. He looked into the distance. How beautiful the world was. There, far away, was a range of blue hills.

After crawling along a limb he reached the bird nest. He saw two little birds with trembling feathers and red beaks, chirping at him. "I am not your mother, stupid little birds. I am stealing you." Had the child brought the cage? What was taking him so long?
In another day, the birds would be able to fly and sing. Carefully, he took the nest in his left hand and with his right hand held on to the branch. He was afraid he would damage the nest. The mother bird swooped through the leaves over his head, then perched on a nearby tamarind tree, to watch. He jumped down from the tree. His clothes were covered with yellow leaves. He laughed as the child appeared with a cage.

How funny the trembling little birds were! He and the boy were fascinated. The cage was forgotten on the ground as the bird's nest was passed back and forth from the old hand to the young hand, from the young hand to the old hand. The little birds were fat and rather damp; in several places red skin was visible, and in other places there were soft gray feathers. "Let's put them in the cage," said the old man. The child picked up the cage, opened its door, and placed the bird's nest inside. The old man held it while the child, hands behind his back, watched.

"Hold it," he said, giving him the cage. The child obeyed. "I'm thinking of a way to catch the mother." He glanced at the mother bird sitting in the tamarind tree. She was an excellent bird. He hadn't heard her sing, but every well-nursed bird could sing well. "This bird eats fruit, boy." Yes, he would catch the mother bird. Don't worry, bird, in a little while you will be with your young ones in this cage. Then you will live peacefully in here, there will be enough food for you, and you need not fear a time when you will be hungry, and you need not worry that a wild bird will capture your children.

"Get some rope." The child put the cage down and ran. Before he was lost from sight, the old man shouted, "A very long rope!" He looked around for a place to hang the bird cage where it could be easily seen by the mother bird. He would tie a rope to the cage door, and then watch from a hiding place and be ready to close the door when she entered. This kind of work was not difficult to do. How many times he had done it in his childhood? His hands could still do it, even with his eyes closed. There were many trees in the field; there was a tanjung tree. He could hang it there and from a distance, let's see where—oh, yes, over there—he could watch. He had made a decision.

The child reappeared, hands crossed behind his back. "Where's the rope, boy?" A small hand emerged clutching a length of rope. "Very good. Where did you get it, boy? Mother's supplies? Well done." Where was the cage door? Yes, here. Quickly, he unrolled the rope and tied it to the door. The cage would be installed in the tree with the door left open. When he was as young as this child he was already good at luring birds. The child looked at him with admiration. No one nowadays could do it as well as he could. His childhood returned again.

He had many childhood experiences and almost every day was a play day, that is, before everything changed. As soon as his father
felt that it was time for him to live more seriously, he sent him to a pondok. His childhood was over. It was replaced by a life that knew no respite. He memorized verses from the Koran and sayings of the Prophet as easily as if he were merely flying kites. All that he studied entered easily into his receptive soul. He forgot all about children's pleasures. He anticipated a different kind of life. Living in a pondok filled him with wisdom that made him strong and happy. His was miserable when he couldn't fulfill his praying time or if he forgot to recite his verses. But all of that vanished now before the bird cage he was holding.

The rope was attached. Followed by the child, he went to the tree and hung the cage there. He had to climb a little, so that the bird would feel safe and wouldn't feel that she was being watched. So, the cage hung there. The baby birds chirped. The mother bird watched from a distance, flicking her tail restlessly. The old man loosened the rope. It was very long, so he didn't have any difficulty finding a place to hide and watch from. He nudged the child and motioned him to hide in a stand of trees. The child was enthusiastic and wide-eyed. He didn't know what would happen. This experience was a first for him. And it was given to him by someone who could be his grandfather. No, they were the same age. This kind of happiness, long unknown, affected the man's heart and made it throb while he waited for the mother bird to enter the cage. Nothing was more important than the bird that was to be caught.

The mother bird flew over the cage several times. "Wait, boy. Soon she will enter." Whenever the bird came near, he felt tense. The child was about to applaud, but the old man seized his hands. "Ssh, don't be noisy, or she won't go in." The bird passed by several times without alighting on the cage. They became impatient. "Darn it, they're your children, get in!" The child heard him and was about to repeat it, but the old man clamped his hand over the boy's mouth. "Look she'll enter soon. Just be quiet."

"Will the cage fall, grandfather?"

"Ah, no. I tied it securely. Even if there were a storm, it wouldn't fall."

They were tense again. The bird jumped from the top of the tamarind tree to the tanjung tree. Then she perched on the cage. The two hearts, old and young, beat rapidly.

"Get in," said the child.

"Hey, just be quiet," the man admonished.

The bird hopped to a branch just in front of the door. The small birds cried. They looked at each other. Mother bird shook her wings. The man and boy below waited to pull the rope. The bird flew away. They were disappointed and slackened the rope again.
"Don't worry. The mother will return with food. She saw that her children don't have any food and she thought she would look for some."

"The bird doesn't know that we are going to catch her?" the boy asked.

"No, not really, boy. We are careful so that she won't know we're going to catch her."

"But the cage belongs to us, doesn't it?" the boy questioned.

"That's right, but she loves her children. That's why she will go inside regardless of the danger," the old man said.

"Then the bird knows, grandfather?" the child asked.

"Yes, a little. But only humans have true knowledge," he answered. His heart skipped a beat with the words "humans" and "knowledge." But never mind, the bird had returned. The old man laughed.

"Not too loud, grandfather. The bird will hear. Can the bird hear?"

They were silent for a while, then the old voice answered, "She doesn't hear the way we do. There is a warning instinct in animals. It's different in humans. Man is a perfect creature."

"Silence, grandfather. The bird!"

The bird flew by and perched on the tree. There was something red in her beak. "There must be papaya in her beak, boy."

"Or mango, it's reddish-yellow, grandfather."

"Yes."

The bird approached the cage and settled on the small branch just in front of the door. The chirping became louder. The old man whispered, "Wait until she is really in." The creatures in the cage became more active. With one leap, the mother entered. Trapped! The cage door closed. Not one of the birds realized they had been captured. Rather, they cried louder. The mother divided the food among her children.

"If I'm trapped, will my mother bring me food too, grandfather?" The old man just looked.

"No, people don't get trapped in cages," he said. But if you are stupid, you will be held back, so study diligently.

They relaxed and breathed freely. When the old man rose, the child also rose, brushing the grass from the back of his pants. Hand in hand they approached the tree. The rope was loosened. They looked
at the birds in the cage. The baby birds stopped crying for a while, then began again. The mother bird attacked the side of the cage.

"She knows we have captured her, grandfather."

"It's nothing. As long as you give them food, they will forget that they live in a cage and not in the free world."

The old man handed the cage to the child. The rope was wound up and a knot tied at the top of the cage. "This bird eats fruits. Papaya, or banana, or mango."

"Or oranges!"

"Mmm, yes." The old hand stroked the boy's hair. "Go home, now." The child looked at him, then ran. He watched the child until he disappeared behind a stand of trees.

Where were his sandals? His praying scarf? How hot it was! He tiptoed, looking for patches of grass. He perspired profusely. The sweat dampened his sarong, shirt and pici. The sun was getting low and he knew it was already past noon. There were his sandals and scarf. He looked again in the direction where the child had disappeared. He remembered something, but it would have to wait. His clothes must be tidied. There was dirt, perhaps dust or tree sap, on his clothes. They were wrinkled as well. His sarong was askew and couldn't be straightened. Several strands of gold thread hung from it. He fixed it as well as he could and then scanned the sky. Midday had passed. He had forgotten his holy duty.

More than regretting it, he cursed. What was this sin? Yet, he did not curse too harshly, because the happiness he had just experienced hadn't yet been destroyed by any feeling of regret. Before he left, he wanted to see the child again and perhaps curse him. Who was the child, anyway? Satan, angel, or human? He had touched his skin; it was of the same material as his own body. He had observed the child's clear eyes and pleasing behavior. Was it possible that the happiness brought to him by the child came from Satan? He had forgotten—it was Friday. If he were an angel, what was his intention? Ah, but angels appear only to prophets. He would have been very happy if it had been a dream, not real. But the wrinkled sarong really could not be fixed; certainly, it wasn't a dream. He would be late to the mosque. Did Allah still wait for him at His house? Had he been forgotten by Him? Would He forgive his tardiness? He rushed across the field.

People were already leaving the mosque and dispersing in the street. They all saw him. He felt odd with them watching him. It's me, the khatib and imam for the day, who is arriving late. But he wasn't brave enough to challenge their looks. Those eyes! He felt as if he was stabbed in the heart. Several people stopped and greeted him. Was it proper for him to accept their greetings? Don't pay any attention to me! Leave me alone. Surely some of
them were his friends. It was a disgrace for a professor of tauhid to arrive late at the mosque. But why? If others arrived late, they didn't get such sharp looks. We are the same, aren't we? They were cruel to treat him that way. How happy he would have been to be unknown at that moment.

What's Your opinion, Allah? And was the child a child of man? The child's hand had been warm. He arranged his clothes. It wasn't proper to face Him in these rags. He had several sets of clean clothes at home. The clothes he was wearing really were clean when he left his house. Maybe they wouldn't notice his dirty clothes and his late arrival would not become a big issue; it was just an unfortunate incident. Yes, they could think that way. If they asked him, he would answer calmly. Lying once in a while is all right. The one who could not be deceived was Him. Certainly He alone constantly noted his behavior. That was the biggest torture.

Now, more than before, he hoped for pardon. When he stood in front of the mosque, he was hesitant. Was it proper for him to enter the house of God? He was confused. Those outside the mosque formed groups and watched him. They were amazed: a pious man, late to the mosque, and in dirty clothes. Although they stood at a distance, the old man could catch what they thought about him. To hell with them! They must be whispering. Of whom was he afraid? Of that group of people or of Allah? He decided it was better to be afraid of Him. With that he felt a little peace. Now he must face Allah. The important thing was how Allah saw him. It was those people who had raised him to the position of khatib and imam; it was also they who now brought this torture on him. Respect was always accompanied by humiliation. It was not his fault. It was that weeping child. It was the child who made me forget.

He remembered the market people he had just cursed. He was ashamed. That was it. He should have prayed the whole way to the mosque and cast aside other thoughts. Once you forget Him, you will always forget Him. Once you leave His law, you enter another law and that is the area of God's enemy.

Does that mean that the market people and the child are the enemies of Allah, too? He recalled them: the sugar merchant at the market corner, near him the snack seller, the bird who shook her feathers, the mother bird who passed by, and the little child who was overjoyed. If they were all accursed, why didn't Allah destroy them? No, he was going to cry as he did when he saw the child's happiness. Perhaps they were also like him. The birth of his soul had happened merely by chance. He himself didn't know what had happened until now. He felt sad standing at the door of the mosque. Not peaceful as before. He reflected on his feelings as he stood in the mosque, but they were very different for him. Only recently had he experienced a different emotion, when he was with the child.
To avoid more sharp looks, he had to enter the mosque quickly. He would pray alone. He was reminded of the sweet child who disappeared into trees, carrying a bird cage. Perhaps the child was now climbing into the tree. "The baby birds are from a tamarind tree," that was what the child would tell his mother. He wanted to play with the child, not to suffer this torture. It was only that when he entered, Allah would be angry with him. That was unbearable. The peace of mind he had expected when he left his house had turned into fear. His heart raced in anxiety. Where does that child live?

Then, he thought, He, the Great One, directed all of this. It was His own mistake. No, He was not wrong. Of course, it was because He wanted to show him something. He understood. Then, he wept.

Someone approached him. "Grandfather," he said. He tried to smile, to reassure the person that he cried because he was happy. "It's nothing, son," he said. He went to take holy water. His face shone. People still swarmed outside as he went in. The day's experience surely was by Allah's will. He didn't doubt that. How miraculous was His method of pointing the way. The little child was the child of humanity. He longed for the child, the birds, even the commotion of the market, as he now longed for Him.
Just like that I let him leave. I listened to the steadily fading sound of his car as he drove away. The motor grew fainter and fainter until it was finally drowned out by the children's voices. At moments like that I felt that he accepted the freedom I had given him with too obvious relief.

For a while now he could live without demands from his fussy children and his immature wife. I knew his routine so well. As he came to the bend in the road past our house he would look back at the ten children lined up in front of the door. He would wave at them, but no one would wave back. They well knew that their father was not going to his office, but rather to another home, one where someone else would welcome him with that special warmth a wife reserves for greeting her husband.

The car disappeared into the distance and still the children continued to stare up the road. They seemed mesmerized, waiting there on the chance that he might turn back. I wished there were some way to make them forget these scenes more quickly.

Johan, my eldest son, was the first to break away from the group. He bore a strong physical resemblance to his father, but I was certain that he would never behave like him. He was terribly embarrassed whenever we had guests and they asked him where his dad was. He always
got flustered and stammered as he tried to think up some excuse. It's not easy for a child to speak frankly about a painful subject. It was more than he could bear to just come right out and say that his father was with his other wife.

Once or twice he actually lied, but gradually the secret became a farce. Indeed, among those friends who visited us most often our situation had become a main topic of conversation—especially for those who had, or thought they had, the most faithful husbands.

The other children remained by the door, their sober vigil finally broken when one of them pinched another and they scattered in all directions.

Each time he left I felt a terrible loneliness. It was almost as though I had a wound that left no scar. I tried not to let my health deteriorate, however. There was no question about what would become of the children if I were to die. They would be taken to their father's other wife. It was for this reason that I was careful to disguise my emotions and maintain the harmony in our home—a home without my husband. Whether or not the children understood this sacrifice I'll never know; they were too young to express such thoughts. I simply went about life swallowing my pride with my rice.

I did not want my children to think that their mother was too weak to cope. I was determined to appear capable and intelligent in my own right. It was fairly easy for a woman who had yearned to be considered an ideal wife to maintain this charade. I had always been dependent on my husband and because of this I had worked very hard to keep him happy, albeit in vain.

The evening of my husband's second marriage I tried to reason with him. His voice sounded so strange I could hardly recognize it.

"So you married her?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Couldn't you have stopped short of marriage? You already have one wife. I can deal with all your needs, can't I?"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Aren't I enough to make you happy? I've already given you children, an organized household, home-cooked meals, immaculate clothes, a warm and ready welcome for you and all your friends. All you've ever wanted I've given you before you've had to ask twice. Think about it." I droned on in my maternal tone while he remained silent, giving no response at all. "Aren't you embarrassed in front of the children?"

"Of course you're right, but do I have to thank you for all of these things? I don't expect you to understand because you can't look
beyond the tremendous effort you've put into this marriage, which nevertheless has failed. I'm not satisfied with this life any longer. I'm tired of waiting for you to take an interest in something, like a club or anything outside of this family. Surely you must be aware that I've been encouraging you to do this for some time. I used to ask you to join me in some activity away from home, but you always laughed at my attempts. You seem to forget that when I fell in love with you, you were an involved and interesting woman."

"Is that the only reason you've taken another wife?"

"No, there are other reasons, but I don't feel that I must itemize them for you. They would be much too painful for you to hear."

"Tell me. I want to hear them." I pushed him on this point even though he was already married and any argument was futile. I wasn't sure why I was pursuing this questioning; it may have been just to annoy him.

"Enough, you must get the picture by now. I give you my promise that I'll never forget our children, but I will go to her—although less frequently than I come here."

"Why does it have to be like that?" I pulled myself together and shut out my despair. Why infrequently? Why at all? It isn't fair.

"Do you accept the fact that I go to her?"

"Why not, if it gives you pleasure?" I stared intently at his bowed head. "Do as you please, and I will remain an ideal wife."

"You are indeed the proverbial good woman."

After that night the word "her" took on a unique meaning in our conversations.

I continued to carry out all of his suggestions, whether for his benefit or for mine. At the time he married her we had five children; over the years I gave birth to five more sons.

On the nights when my husband was with me and talked about "her," I listened to him with an odd mixture of patience and dejection. Deep down I begged that he would become tired of "her," but he never did. I began to be bored with his stories, and I frowned and became sullen each time he started talking about "her." Finally I learned to tune out his chatter and heard almost none of it. There are some things that simply try a person's patience too far.

I had a lot of time after my husband took his second wife, so I joined a woman's club in our city. I was soon appointed to the office of vice-chairman. It wasn't that I was all that active, but
rather that I was the wife of a high official. My husband occupied an important position, and as his wife I received this sort of recognition. I bustled about here and there as a representative of our organization. I felt like a new woman. The longing I usually felt when my husband was with "her" became almost nonexistent. It was easier and easier to welcome him with a smile because I no longer felt so desperately lonely when he was away. At first he was surprised when I greeted him with such enthusiasm. Perhaps he wondered about the contrast to my earlier self-righteousness. But hadn't it been my prerogative to be upset with him each time he left me to go to his younger wife?

Once he questioned my embracing him when he came in, and I answered that I was no less passionate than she. I even displayed an open-mindedness by saying, "Ah, but isn't it your right to have two, three even four wives, if you take care of them?"

He became quiet. It appeared that my intimacy had unnerved him. I looked upon it as something normal, as a test. A husband has the right to practice polygamy, and this was a test of my tolerance for it. I devoutly believed that as a woman I was destined to accept and to protect. Had I not believed that, and also considered the fate of my children, I would merely have asked for a divorce and left him.

Sometimes as he lay asleep beside me I felt revolted looking at his bare chest with its sparse sprinkling of hair. It was loathsome to me to think that not only had I embraced him, but in another bed another woman had caressed this same broad chest. However, moments like that quickly passed. They vanished when I heard the children stirring and heading for their morning baths. I always got up and met them at the kitchen door.

One morning one of the children announced that his shoes were worn out and that he needed a new pair. Another one asked for a school uniform. I smiled, promising to buy them next month if they were good children and studied hard. In my heart I added: Don't you realize that your father has additional responsibilities now? He has new small mouths to feed and others for whom he must buy clothes and shoes. I kept these thoughts inside and tried to present a cheerful front. I didn't want to burden the children with my problems. I felt that they were too young to understand the situation, so I just went my way trying to keep things running smoothly.

Then something happened that took the wind out of my sails. I don't know if there were some invisible bond between "her" and me, but what happened was strictly by chance and not the design of either of us.

Our club was to have a convention, and as usual I was to represent our local organization. The site chosen for this convention was "her" city. She was active in the organization there and I was certain that she would attend. I was prepared for a face-to-face encounter with
her. I realized that my friends who knew what to expect were watching me closely. I heard them praise the resolution with which I accepted what could only be an uncomfortable situation, but don't think there weren't those who derided and ridiculed me. Some said that I had no shame and little self-esteem to go into her territory like that. But their cruel gossip only went in one ear and out the other.

I came into the convention hall rather late, so I knew neither where she was nor what her function there was. But I suspected she must be the leader. I was always the chairman in these meetings whether in my city or in any other, and I saw no reason for it to be different this time.

When the meeting was called to order and Mrs. Hamid was elected chairman, I assumed it was me being named. It had completely slipped my mind that she, too, was Mrs. Hamid. It was like a scene in a stage comedy, a scene where the audience failed to laugh. They fell silent as both of us began to walk toward the rostrum. Realizing the confusion, we looked at each other with mutually understanding smiles and went back to our seats.

That hall was a beehive of activity. The committee was blamed for not having organized things carefully enough. However, I sat quietly in my place in the front row. After a moment, when the hall was quiet, I heard the staccato clicking of high-heeled shoes approaching me.

"Please Madame, come to the rostrum." I heard a gentle voice and looked up into a lovely young face.

"Do you mean me?" I asked.

"Yes," was all she answered.

Somewhat reluctantly I made my way to the speaker's platform to the accompaniment of applause. "Why do they applaud me?" I wondered. Possibly this rather impressive reception was a joke or possibly it was praise for her graciousness in handing over the chairmanship of the meeting to me.

Nevertheless, the applause had a special meaning for me. It was like a rousing chorus in recognition of all the agony and sacrifice I had suffered in the name of respectability. It seemed to say that my rejection deserved to be acknowledged and now I was being vindicated by the very one who had been the cause of my misery. I appreciated her where I had once feared her. Had I met her earlier I would have been impressed with her cunning at capturing a husband; now I was impressed with the graceful manner in which she protected her rival's feelings.

Everything had turned out for the best. I was now much more content when he went to her, because I was convinced that she was no less dedicated to making him happy than I was. She also had a right to a husband, even though fate decreed that he also be mine.
In the beginning, I knew Uncle's family to be "abangan," meaning that although they professed to embrace Islam, they did not practice it beyond the ceremonial requirements for marriage and death. But after his wife died early in '45, Uncle became a devout Moslem and a member of the Muhammadijah. His children, who were still very young at this time, received a firm religious upbringing, while those who were already grown and married remained "abangan." Whether this change resulted from the realization that a man might be summoned to meet his Maker at any moment or because of other things, I'm not sure. What is clear is that one year after his wife died, Uncle married again—a faithful Moslem from Jogya. So far, there haven't been any children from this marriage.

Uncle lives in Magelang now, with his wife and his unmarried children. Those who've already married live in different cities—Surabaya, Blitar, Jogya, Bandung, and Jakarta. Uncle's situation is depressing. You can imagine how it is with a small pension, lots of responsibilities, and married children who don't help very much. They live very simply.

The only child really able to help to any extent is mas Hari. By his own efforts, and due to his perseverance and determination, he succeeded in graduating from the University of California. He is
an engineer now and lives in Bandung. He resides in a luxurious hotel at government expense and, all in all, lives quite comfortably. Sad to say, there had been some sort of dispute between mas Hari's family and Uncle's. The problem lay in the attitude of mas Hari's wife, who objected every time mas Hari helped Uncle. Uncle himself probably wouldn't have known about this if he hadn't been told by mas Harto, his son who lived in Jakarta. Mas Harto found out about it during a few days' stay in Bandung, when he overheard mas Hari's wife sharply criticizing the members of Uncle's family.

"I hear nothing but demands and complaints from your family," said Mrs. Hari to her husband. "Not that I disapprove of your helping your family, but you must also consider our own needs. You ought to think of our prestige in the community. It's enough they ask for this or that whenever they like--now here comes your brother with a million complaints!"

Hearing this, mas Harto quickly went home to Jakarta and told Uncle. After that, Uncle took the position that he would not request any assistance whatsoever from mas Hari, although he would continue to accept whatever was offered.

Having been told of Mrs. Hari's behavior, mas Hardjo, Uncle's son who lived in Blitar, quickly reacted: "If you need anything, Father, tell us. Allah willing, with all of us cooperating, we can meet your request."

Nevertheless, the rift could still be considered trivial. On holidays, mas Hari almost always went to Magelang, and likewise, Uncle was invited to spend a few days in Bandung. Moreover, correspondence still passed easily between them. In brief, the dispute was limited to material assistance only.

Lately, however, a serious controversy has arisen involving nearly all of Uncle's children. The strange thing is that this controversy has been carried on solely by mail. They've never met with each other to discuss the matter. But the letters have already gone too far, hurting everyone's feelings and making any possibility of meeting more difficult.

It began when mas Hari told Uncle that he wanted to renovate his mother's grave. The grave, like those of other family members, was in the city of Pekalongan, where my family resides. In his reply, Uncle asked mas Hari to postpone his plan until he could make certain that it was not proscribed by religion. "Remember that Islam has always prohibited the practice of polytheism, which among other things includes veneration of the grave," Uncle wrote.

Mas Hari waited a long time for a more detailed letter from Uncle, but nothing came. Uncle was, in fact, still uncertain. The several ulama whom he had consulted on this matter had different opinions. So, in agreement with mas Harto in Jakarta, mas Hari sent 5,000 rupiah to my family for whatever was needed to fix the grave. "Please build a masonry wall around it with terrazo inlay," requested mas Hari. "If there isn't enough money, I'll send more right away."
My mother was not unaware of the difference of opinion between Uncle and mas Hari on the matter of the grave, but she found it very difficult not to fulfill mas Hari's request, especially since there was a stonemason available capable of doing the work. Unfortunately, barely a quarter was done when it rained so hard that the work was left unfinished. What was worse was the fact that afterwards the mason ran away, making off with the cement and the money.

In the meantime, Uncle by chance came to Pekalongan on an errand. Was he ever angry at mas Hari! He more or less blamed my mother for not telling him about the matter. With the several hundred rupiah of mas Hari's money that Mother still had, Uncle sent a laborer to tear down the work already done.

When mas Hari inquired about the matter, mother told him straightforwardly what had happened. On a furious note, he wrote to Uncle: "I don't understand why you keep blocking my good intentions of honoring Mother. When can I show my devotion and respect for her if not now? Father, your reasoning is too naive. Just note how many thousands, maybe even millions, of the graves of the ulama have walls. Have those who have honored them thus sinned? Do you want to be considered more knowledgeable in the matter of religious law than the ulama? Permit us the freedom to pay our respects to Mother. The time when you always dictated to us is over."

Mas Harto also sent a letter to Uncle in the same tone: "Are you afraid of sinning, Father? Are you afraid of being tortured in hell because Hari walls Mother's grave? Father, we're willing to assume responsibility for your sin in this matter. Truly, by Allah or by Satan! It's not my intent to lecture you Father, but rather it's only out of sincere concern that I say religion has poisoned you. All religions have good objectives, but oftentimes their adherents are attacked by an accursed fanaticism such as that which now grips your heart. Father, what's the use of the prayers you perform five times a day if you are overcome by such feelings? Forgive me if this time I stand behind Hari, because I always support those I consider right."

Uncle replied spontaneously. He wrote the letter in duplicate and sent a copy to mas Harto and to mas Hari.

"I hope that you will reflect again upon your letters to me. Is this how you respect your parent? Now, at the age of sixty-five, I am struck such a heavy blow, and by my own children! I am all the more convinced of the truth of Allah's words in the Koran: 'I say unto you, men of faith, there are those among your wives and children who are your enemies. Beware!' If I have laid the grave to ruins again, it wasn't for the reasons you think. Rather it was because of my love for your mother, and because I don't want to betray my faith. I regard the walling of the grave to be a sin; therefore, I am obliged to prevent it. A man's sins can never be borne by another, not even by his own children. And don't you compare me with others--for example, the ulama dare do this or that, why doesn't Father? Each person is an individual who assumes responsibility for his own actions."
Mas Hardjo, informed by Uncle of the above incident, wholeheartedly lent his support. He wrote mas Hari: "Although you are my elder brother, it doesn't mean that I have to approve of everything you do. I earnestly praise your intention to honor Mother. We must admit that we did little for her when she was still alive. But remember that we have two parents. Is it right to honor one in such a way that we hurt the other? Perhaps you excuse yourself on the grounds that father is hardheaded. Nevertheless, you've taken the wrong approach. Our mother is already dead. There's nothing more in this world that we can do for her but pray. Our prayers, mas, not the prayers of others, nor the prayers of any ulama or kyai, either. The only way to express our respect is through our untiring prayers, so that her soul will be well-received by Allah. But perhaps the concept of prayer is too old-fashioned for you, too abstract for an engineer like you. Well then, I'll point out what's concrete. Why do you think about Mother's grave when you don't give any thought to Father at all? Are you going to show your devotion and respect after he's dead as well? I think that this is where the philosophy of life of men like mas Harto and yourself lies. It would be very helpful if you were to give Father as much as it costs to wall Mother's grave toward the expenses of putting Edi, Asih, and Eni through school. Have you ever thought of this? I don't know whether or not everything you do is already under the reins of that beautiful wife of yours, whom you obviously adore."

The reply that mas Hardjo received came not from mas Hari, but from mas Harto: "Djo, it seems you want heroically to support Father in everything without considering that you've become reactionary. What's it to you if Hari walls Mother's grave? That he's given little assistance to Father up to now is another matter. There's no need to be reproachful. We ought to be thankful that a man so meek toward his wife has the heart to do something good for his mother. Djo, don't close your eyes to the value of life behind a mask of religious arguments."

Mas Hari's response to the letters that he had received was resolute. He came to Pekalongan, bringing with him three bags of Gersik cement and a mason. For three days he watched over the walling of his mother's grave until it was completed. He beautified the grave with cement walls finished in terrazo inlaid with all kinds of colorful glass chips. At the head was a trapezium-shaped mound, and at the feet was a nice gravestone. His mother's name and date of death were inscribed on a slab of marble placed on the mound.

"Let Father or anyone else feel guilty for the walling of Mother's grave on the basis of their belief in the world hereafter," said mas Hari. "What's clear is that I'd feel guilty for reasons of my own if it remained just a plot of dry ground with two crumbling gravestones. That it's respectful to let someone's grave disappear doesn't make sense. I don't know what would become of our heroes' graves if Indonesia was full of people like Father and Hardjo."

What happened after the walling of the grave was completed was something we'd never have guessed. On the holiday just past, mas Hari
and mas Harto didn't even send Uncle a Lebaran greeting, much less come to Magelang to kneel for his blessing. The only son who came was mas Hardjo. He stayed there a week, among other reasons, to see for himself that his two elder brothers were really no longer willing to ask for Uncle's blessing. From Magelang, he came directly to Pekalongan.

"Enough, Djo, what's done is done," my mother said, restraining mas Hardjo's intent to demolish his mother's grave. "Don't disturb your mother's grave."

"I have no choice but to destroy it," he replied. "Aunty, there isn't one among the graves of our grandmothers, grandfathers, or other relatives that has walls, much less terrazo walls. Why should Mother's grave be made conspicuous by meaningless splendor? The man who walled it is a first-class egotist."

"Say that as you may, Djo, but it seems the other heirs regard the wailing of the grave to be an act of respect. Although none of us are of that opinion, we don't feel that Hari has offended us."

Mas Hardjo didn't reply. Mother continued: "To destroy the grave takes money, doesn't it?"

"Of course, Aunty."

"Well, I feel it's better you put the money to a more useful purpose."

"Aunty, this isn't an idle expense. By demolishing Mother's grave, I am preventing a further waste of money. Hari hasn't wasted money just in this matter. As a matter of fact, Hari's whole life has been a waste. Isn't that true? So, if you want to prevent him from being wasteful, you had better change his outlook. I regard what I'm about to do as an attempt to change his view of life—at least, to lessen his conceit."

"Conceit? Yes, you could look at Hari's actions that way. But it's not right that you counter them with destructive measures."

"It's not destructive at all," mas Hardjo quickly retorted, "in the same way that the destruction of the idols by the Prophet Muhammad cannot be called destructive. On the contrary, it was even constructive. It awakened people's faith."

Mother was taken aback. Then, in a low voice, she said, "You aren't going to succeed by forcing your opinions on others. It's better you think it over calmly first, Djo."

"Last night I prayed for guidance, Aunty. I am certain that I must destroy the grave."

"In my opinion," Mother spoke again in despair, "destroying the grave will only intensify the dispute between you and Hari and Harto."
"But Aunty, to allow the grave to continue to stand means to uphold the symbol of a child's arrogance toward his father, a childish, self-righteous conceit."

In brief, my mother's efforts to dissuade mas Hardjo were in vain. With two hired laborers, he demolished his mother's grave. Thus, the grave was restored to its original state, the same as the graves to each side of it—the graves of our grandparents, my father, and our other relatives.

I don't know if mas Hari still wants to rebuild the grave. Neither do I know how Uncle's other children, such as mbak Ati and mbak Ning, feel. I feel, as my family does, that I must view this controversy with great sadness.
If you had come to my birthplace by bus a few years ago, you would have gotten off near the market and proceeded westward along the main road for about a kilometer and then you would have come to the road to my village. At a small intersection, the fifth from the market, you would have turned right. At the end of the road you would have seen an old surau with a fish pond in front of it, the water flowing from four bathing fountains. On the left of the surau you would have seen an old man sitting there, behaving like old men do and showing his devotion to Allah. He had been the custodian of the surau for years. People referred to him as Grandpa.

As custodian, he received no salary. He lived on the alms that he got every Friday. Every six months he got a fourth of the profits from the sale of the goldfish in the pond and once a year people came to give him Fitrah. It was not so much as a custodian that he was known, however, but as a knife sharpener, as he was really good at that. People brought their knives to him and yet he never asked anything in return. The women who came to him with their knives or scissors to be sharpened would give him some spicy food. The men would give him cigarettes and sometimes money. What he received most, however, were thanks and smiles.

Grandpa is no longer with us. He died. And so the surau sits there without a guardian. Children now use it as a place to play,
and sometimes women who run out of firewood rip boards from the walls or the floor at night.

If you visit the place today, all you will see is holiness on the verge of collapse. And that collapse is fast approaching, as fast as the children running around inside the building and the women ripping out the boards. Saddest of all is the indifference of the people who simply don’t want to take the responsibility of preserving the surau. The cause of this collapse is a story no one can deny. It goes as follows.

As I had often done before, I went to see Grandpa one day to have my knife sharpened. He usually received me happily as I often gave him money, but this time he looked depressed. He was sitting right at the corner of the surau resting his chin on the palm of his hand with his elbow on one knee. He stared straight ahead, as if something were disturbing him. A milk tin containing coconut oil, a fine whetstone, a leather strap, and an old razor were lying at his feet. I’d never seen him so sad before, and never had my greetings been received so gloomily. I sat down next to him, and picking up the razor, I asked, "Whose knife, Grandpa?"

"Adjo Sidi's."

"Adjo Sidi?"

He did not answer. Then I remembered Adjo Sidi, the yarn spinner. I hadn’t seen him for a long time. I would have liked to meet him again. I enjoyed hearing his tall tales. Adjo Sidi could hold people spellbound with his nonsense for an entire day. But this hardly ever happened anymore because he was so busy with his work. His success as a yarn spinner was due mainly to the fact that the characters in his stories were the butts of jokes and that the stories became part of local tradition. There were always people in the village whose personalities mirrored those in the stories. One day he told us a story about a frog,¹ and it so happened that there was someone resembling this frog in the village who was hankering to become a leader. From that moment on we called him the Frog Loader.

Suddenly my mind went back to Grandpa and Adjo Sidi’s visit. Was it possible that Adjo Sidi had made fun of him? Was that what had made him so dejected? I was curious. Then I asked him again: "What did he say, Grandpa?"

"Who?"

"Adjo Sidi."

¹This is the story of a frog who boasts that he can be as big as a cow. When his friends refuse to believe him, he begins to puff himself up so much that he explodes and dies.
"Uncouth, he is," he replied wearily.

"Why?"

"I hope this razor I've sharpened will slit his throat."

"You are angry?"

"Angry? I would be, if I were still young, but I'm old now. Old people restrain their passion. I haven't been mad for a long time. I've been afraid it'd ruin my faith, my religion. I've been doing good deeds so long, praying and placing my trust in Allah. I've surrendered myself to Him for a long time. And Allah loves people who are patient and trusting."

My conjecture that Adjo Sidi had told a story that had upset Grandpa prompted me to ask him again, "What did he say, Grandpa?"

But he was just silent. Perhaps it was hard for him to talk about it. My persistence finally made him question me.

"You know me, don't you? I've been here since you were a child. Since I was a young man, right? You know everything I've done, don't you? Am I accursed? Has Allah cursed all that I've done?"

I didn't have to respond because I knew that once he opened his mouth, he wouldn't stop.

"I've been here since I was young, haven't I? I never had a wife or children, no family like other people, you know that. I don't take care of myself. I don't care to be rich, to build a house. I devote all my life to Allah. I never cause trouble. Reluctant to kill even a fly. But now I'm considered a cursed man. Fit only for hell. Do you think that Allah would be angry at what I do? Would He curse me if all that I do in life is serve Him? I never think of what will happen to me tomorrow, because I'm convinced that Allah exists and that He is forgiving to those who place their trust in Him. I wake up early. I do holy things. I strike the drum to awaken people from their sleep so they can worship Him. I pray all the time, day and night, morning and afternoon. I mention His name always. I adore Him. I read His book. Alhamdulillah is the word I utter when I receive His blessing. Astagfirullah when I'm startled or surprised. Masyaallah when I'm amazed. What's wrong with all this? But now he says I am cursed...."

When he paused, I interrupted him with a question. "Did he say that, Grandpa?"

"He didn't say it outright, but that's what he meant."

I saw tears well up in his eyes. I felt sorry for him. In my heart I reproached Adjo Sidi. But I wondered what he had really said that had hurt Grandpa so much. So great was my curiosity that I couldn't help asking him again. Finally, he gave in.
"Once upon a time," said Grandpa, repeating Adjo Sidi's story, "in the world hereafter, Allah was examining people who had returned to Him. The angels were on duty at His side. In their hands were lists of sins and rewards for human beings. There were many people to be examined. It was understandable since there were wars everywhere. Among those to be examined was a man known on earth as Haji Saleh. He smiled continuously because he was sure that he would be sent to heaven. He stood with his chest puffed out and arms akimbo, his nose in the air. When he saw people being sent to hell, his lips twisted in derision. And seeing people on their way to heaven, he waved his hand as if to say "I'll see you later." The long queues seemed to have no end. As the front of the line moved, the back filled in. And Allah examined the waiting people with all His might. Finally Haji Saleh's turn came. Smiling proudly, he knelt before Allah. Then Allah put forward His first question:

"You?"

"I am Saleh. But because I have been to Mecca, I am called Haji Saleh."

"I did not ask for names. Names for me are insignificant. Names are only for you on earth."

"Yes, my Lord."

"What did you do on earth?"

"I worshipped you always, my Allah."

"Anything else?"

"Every day, every night, indeed all the time, I mentioned Your name."

"Anything else?"

"I followed Your instructions. I never did anything sinful, although the earth was full of sins spread by the cursed devils."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, my Lord, there was nothing I did but pray and kneel before You, mentioning Your name. Even when I was ill, Your name was all my lips uttered. I prayed that the generosity of Your heart would convince Your people."

"Anything else?"

Haji Saleh could think of nothing else to say. He had told Him everything he did. However, he realized that Allah's question was not a casual one. There must be something else he had not mentioned. But to the best of his knowledge, he had told everything. He did not know what else to say. He was silent and bowed his head. The fire of
hell suddenly blew its slow heat all over his body. He cried, but each tear drop was dried by the hot air of hell.

"Anything else?" Allah asked.

"I have told you everything, O Allah the Almighty, the Merciful, the Just, and the All-Knowing." Haji Saleh, who was now frightened, tried the tactic of humbling himself and exalting Allah, hoping that He would be more gentle and would not pursue this line of questioning. But Allah asked again:

"There is nothing else?"

"Oh, oh, yes, my Lord. I always read Your book...."

"Anything else?"

"I have told you everything, Oh, my Allah. But if there is anything left out, I am thankful because it proves that You are the Omniscient."

"Are you sure that there is nothing else you did on earth except the things you have just told me?"

"That was all, my Allah."

"Get in there!"

And the angels took hold of his ears and quickly dragged Haji Saleh to hell. He did not know why. He did not understand what Allah expected of him, and yet he believed that Allah could do no wrong.

How stunned Haji Saleh was when he saw that many of his earth friends were roasting in hell, groaning with pain. He became more perplexed when he realized that all the people he recognized in hell were no less religious than he was. There was even one man who had been to Mecca fourteen times and gained the title of Sheikh. Haji Saleh approached them and asked why they were in hell. But like Haji Saleh, they did not know either.

"What's happening to our Allah?" asked Haji Saleh later. "Weren't we supposed to be constantly pious, firm in our belief? And we were! But now we have been thrown into hell."

"Yes, we agree with you. Look at those people! They're all from our country, and they were no less faithful in their religion."

"This is really an injustice."

"Indeed injustice," echoed the people.

"If so, we must request evidence of our guilt. We must remind Allah just in case He inadvertently made a mistake when He put us in hell."
"Right. Right. Right." Haji Saleh's idea was applauded.

"What if Allah is not willing to acknowledge His mistake?" a high-pitched voice asked from the crowd.

"We protest. We make a resolution," said Haji Saleh.

"Shall we stage a revolution, too?" asked another voice, apparently someone who was a leader of a revolutionary movement.

"That depends on circumstances," replied Haji Saleh. "What's important now is that we must stage a demonstration in order to meet with Allah."

"Wonderful. On earth we achieved a lot just by having demonstrations," one voice put in.

"Agreed. Agreed. Agreed." They applauded noisily and then departed.

When they came before Him, Allah asked: "What can I do for you?"

As leader and spokesman, Haji Saleh stepped forward. With trembling voice and beautiful rhythm, he began his speech. "Oh, Allah, our Great Lord, We who are now in front of You are Your most devout followers, faithfully worshipping You. We are the people who always mention Your name, adore Your greatness, tell of Your justice, etc. We know Your book backward and forward. We read it and miss nothing. But Almighty Lord, when You summoned us to come here, You then sent us to hell. Before anything terrible happens, on behalf of the people who love You, we ask that the punishment You have meted out to us be reconsidered, and that we be placed in heaven in accordance with the promise in Your book...."

"Where did you all live on earth?" asked Allah.

"We are Your followers who lived in Indonesia, Lord...."

"Oh, in that country with fertile land?"

"Yes, that's right, Lord."

"The soil is extremely rich, full of metal, oil, and other minerals, isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. That's our country."

"The country that was enslaved for a long time?"

"Yes, Allah. The colonialist was indeed accursed."

"And the products of your land, it was they who scraped and took them to their own country, is that correct?"
"Correct, my Lord. We have nothing left. They were indeed cursed."

"The country that is constantly troubled, where you are always fighting each other while someone else steals the products of your land. Is that true?"

"Yes, Allah. But worldly things are not our concern. What is important for us is to kneel and worship You...."

"You do not mind being perpetually poor, do you?"

"True. Not at all, Allah."

"Because of your not minding it, your children and grandchildren will also remain poor, right?"

"Although our descendants are poor, they all read the holy books. They learn Your books by heart."

"Just as with you, none of what they read goes into their hearts, isn't that right?"

"No, it is in their hearts."

"If that is the case, why did you allow yourselves to be poor and all your children and grandchildren to suffer, while letting others take away your wealth for their own children? And you prefer to fight each other, deceiving and hurting each other. I gave you an extremely rich country, but you are lazy. You prefer to pray, because praying does not take sweat or hard work. You all know that I asked you to do good deeds besides carrying out the religious practices. How can you do good deeds if you are poor? You think that I am fond of adoration, wanting only worship, so you did nothing but adore and worship me. No. You must all be sent to hell. Here, angels, drive these people back to hell. Put them at the very bottom...."

Everyone grew pale, not daring to say another word. Now they understood the course of action on earth that Allah approved. Haji Saleh still wanted to know if what he had done was right or wrong, but he lacked the courage to ask Allah, so he just asked the angels who were herding them along.

"In your opinion, is it wrong if on earth we worship Allah?"

"No. What was wrong with you was that you were too selfish. You were afraid of ending up in hell, so you did nothing but pray. But in so doing you forgot your own people, forgot the welfare of your family, and they ended up neglected. That was your big mistake; too egotistical, even while knowing very well that you had friends and relatives who depended on you, you did not care for them at all."
That was Adjo Sidi's story that I heard from Grandpa. The story that made Grandpa so miserable.

The next morning, when I was about to go down from the house for a bath, my wife asked if I would not go to pay my last respects.

"Who died?" I asked, startled.

"Grandpa."

"Grandpa?"

"Yes, early this morning he was found dead in his surau in a very terrifying condition. He had slashed his throat with a razor...."

"My God. Adjo Sidi's work...," I said, running as fast as I could and leaving my stunned wife behind. I went to Adjo Sidi's house, but only his wife was there. I asked her where Adjo Sidi was.

"He's gone," she said.

"Didn't he know that Grandpa died?"

"Yes. And he asked me to buy a seven-layer cloth for Grandpa."  

"And now...." I was at a loss, hearing about this whole thing, which was due to Adjo Sidi's irresponsible act. "And now where is he?"

"Work."

"Work?" My voice was an empty echo.

"Yes. He went to work."

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2For a ground burial a corpse is wrapped in white cloth, usually one or two layers. The author may have intended the seven-layer wrapping for respectful (or sarcastic!) purposes.
GLOSSARY

alhamdulillah, an exclamation of gratitude meaning 'Praise be to God.'

Allahu akbar, "God is Greatest"

Amal, "good deeds"

destar, a triangular cloth folded into a head covering

Fiqh, Islamic law

Fitrah, uncooked rice or money given to the poor at the end of the fasting month

Haji, a title given to someone who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca

Imam, a religious leader; a man who leads a prayer

Khatib, a man who delivers sermon in a mosque

Lebaran, the first day after the fasting month. This is celebrated as the biggest religious day of the year.

Marhaban, songs praising the greatness of the prophets

Mas, an honorific prefix used before a man's name; elder brother

Mbak, an honorific prefix used before a woman's name; elder sister

Peci, a kind of hat, rectangular in shape and black in color, worn usually by Moslems.

Pondik, a king of boarding place where students live and study Islamic teachings

Qasidah, Arabic poems presented as songs

Rejeki, a fortune believed to be given by God

Rupiah, Indonesian currency; the rate of exchange at that time was around 400 Rupiahs for one U.S. $1
santri, a person who follows and practices Islamic teachings and regulations faithfully

surau, a house or building used as a praying place; a neighborhood mosque

tanjung tree, a small tree with small leaves and yellow flowers

tauhid, science dealing with the oneness of Allah

ulama, a person who is considered knowledgeable in Islamic matters
About the Editors

Soenjono Dardjowidjojo is professor of Indonesian at the University of Hawaii, where he was chairman of the Department of Indo-Pacific Languages from 1980 to 1982. He has published extensively in the field of language and linguistics and is the author of *Sentence Patterns in Indonesian*.

Florence Lamoureux, formerly a student of Bahasa Indonesia while pursuing a master's degree in Asian studies, is currently Outreach Coordinator for the National Resource Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii.