

Introduction

If every event which occurred could be given a name, there would be no need for stories. As things are here, life outstrips our vocabulary.

John Berger, Once in Europa

RINI'S STORY

Rini is a factory daughter. She dropped out of school during the fifth grade, at age twelve, and helped around her parents' house. In 1978, at age fifteen, she looked for a factory job because, as she explained, she was "bored at home," where she spent her time performing household chores, taking care of her younger siblings, gathering fodder for the goat, and occasionally selling vegetables in the market. She had also helped her parents on their small parcels of wet riceland from time to time, but she did not like going to the *sawah* to do farmwork. She sought factory work on her own initiative, without asking her parents' permission. Indeed, her father did not agree to her new job; he "was angry and quiet for one month" before things returned to normal.¹

I met Rini (a pseudonym) in 1981, when she was twenty-one years old. Lively, funny, friendly, and very outgoing, Rini challenges dominant notions of Javanese females as reticent and shy. While single, she sometimes flirted with the drivers as she went to and from work. And she was known to stand up to the factory manager, a tough, forceful, and intimidating former policeman.

After two and one-half years of spreading cream on sandwich cookies in the biscuit factory, Rini, who was afraid to walk alone into the village after dark, quit because workers were forced to stay overtime to produce cookies for Idul Fitri, the celebration after Ramadan.² After she quit her biscuit job, she started working in an export-oriented garment factory,

sewing pockets on men's cotton shirts made for the European market. She was paid one-half cent (3.3 rupiah) per pocket and earned about 46 to 77 cents daily, considerably less than the already low daily minimum wage of 625 rupiah, or 96 cents. Work hours and wages fluctuated, depending on production orders from abroad; sometimes workers went home early, and other times they had to work overtime.

Rini lived with her parents and three younger siblings in an agricultural village about five kilometers from the factories. Her parents—open, warm, hospitable, and animated people—enjoyed telling me that this, their “seventh marriage,” was fated to stick. This was her father's third marriage and her mother's fourth, and it had lasted over twenty years.

Rini's family was poor by any standards. They owned one-eighth of a hectare of dry land (about one-quarter acre) and one-eighth hectare of wet riceland, half of which they rented out. They also sharecropped one-sixteenth hectare of wet riceland from the *Carik* (village secretary), and they were entitled to half of the harvest (1/32 hectare) from that piece of land. All in all, they received the harvest from only 0.2 hectare of land (less than half an acre), which was not sufficient for subsistence needs. In 1982, they lost their access to the *Carik*'s land when he decided to rent his land to a middleman who would pay him cash.

Their home was of a generous size, made mostly from wood with thatched bamboo walls in the kitchen and a dirt floor. They owned a radio, a pressure lamp, a watch, and one set of store-bought furniture (chairs and a couch) for guests to sit on; the rest of the furniture consisted of the plain and simple sort that poor people buy or make themselves. Their goat, a form of savings, was tethered inside the house. Chickens ran in and out of the house, often interrupting our talks by jumping on the coffee table and pecking at the food the family had offered me—boiled cassava, fried ricecakes, or fresh fruit.

Rini used some of her salary for herself and the rest to help her parents buy rice and pay for her siblings' education. My first income survey showed that in addition to saving one-quarter of her salary (less than \$2.00 a week) in a rotating savings association (*arisan*), she gave her parents more than one-third; at the same time, she consistently borrowed money from them to pay for lunch and transportation. During the first survey Rini thus managed to overspend her salary by half.

Some family members had made various attempts to get Rini married before she finally agreed to marry a young man whom her uncle arranged for her to meet. Rini, however, was unhappy after her fairly costly wedding and claimed that she slept alone, leaving her husband to sleep in a

brand-new, expensive, store-bought nuptial bed that stood in one corner of her parents' living room. She was distant from her husband, avoiding him whenever possible. Her mother said: "I advised Rini's husband to be patient and quiet. I thought that if he isn't strong, she can marry again later, but the next time, *I'm* going to choose her husband!"

Rini, though, insisted that her husband was lazy: rather than working, he sat around the house all day and even asked her parents for money. She also told me that she was embarrassed to have such a physically unattractive husband.³ This conflict quickly became primary material for village gossip. The more Rini rejected her husband, the more difficult I found it to interview other villagers, who preferred instead to discuss Rini's most recent reaction or pronouncement and the most recent story about her new husband.

Rini's parents made it clear that they would not mind if Rini wanted a divorce, since they had had five between the two of them, but they disliked her indecisive and angry behavior. Rini's mother was upset that her daughter wasn't fulfilling her wifely duties: Rini didn't sleep with her husband, nor did she take care of him by making him tea or washing his clothes. Out of embarrassment, Rini's mother washed her son-in-law's clothing.

Rini's husband waited for his wife outside the factory every day after work to escort her home. She so disliked seeing him that she stopped going to work a few days a week and instead went to a friend's house or a nearby market. Her already low weekly wage dropped even lower, and she began to ask her parents more frequently for transportation money; but since they were still burdened by wedding debts, they had nothing to spare.

The financial strain mounted, and finally Rini's parents forced her to quit her factory job. Her father began felling logs and sawing them into boards for sale, while Rini took care of household chores and her younger brother. (Until then, her father had taken care of the child.)

Everyone expected Rini's husband to leave her, but he stayed. When I left Java in early 1983, I thought that she would either get pregnant or divorced, or both. When I returned to the village in 1986, Rini and her three-year-old daughter greeted me with "Hallo, Mbak Dian!"

Not long after I had left, there had been a family confrontation, Javanese style. Rini's mother, unable to tolerate the tension and conflict in the family and unwilling to confront it directly, simply picked up and left without saying good-bye.⁴ She went to her sister's house in Jakarta. Rini was three months pregnant when her mother left and eight months

pregnant when she returned. By then, Rini had decided to “accept her fate,” and she and her husband were reconciled.

Rini returned to work in the factory when her child was three years old, and Rini’s mother was happy to take care of her granddaughter during the day. Rini’s expenditure pattern had changed; she spent little of her wage on herself and instead either contributed to the household purse, bought things for her daughter, or saved money to build her new house. Slowly the young couple was accumulating enough to build their own home. Bricks, boards, and shingles were piled up in a corner of her parents’ living room; soon these materials would be used to build a house in what was now her parents’ yard. Rini estimated that the house would cost about two hundred dollars, and she was reaching that goal more quickly because of her savings from factory wages. Soon she would be able to start her own nuclear-family household; and, indeed, by 1988 she was living in her own house, although parts of it were unfinished.⁵

MY STORY

When I set off for Java in 1981, I had a highly economic view of how households operate. The peasant studies literature in which I had been intellectually socialized focused almost exclusively on political and economic conditions—labor, income, and household production and reproduction, particularly the activities of women and children in poor households struggling to survive. Land, labor, income, nutrition, class status, and gender inequalities were quantified, what Clifford Geertz not so fondly refers to as “what you count is what you get” (1984, 522). I left Ithaca, New York, for Indonesia convinced that poor households basically react to structural economic changes, that such behaviors would be mirrored in the lives and work patterns of Javanese women, and that Javanese culture, while interesting, was a luxury that was peripheral to understanding household survival.

I viewed factory work as part of a household survival strategy. Given the poverty of the households I studied, I expected a close relationship between factory daughters’ wages and the households’ struggles to survive. In other words, I saw factory daughters as Javanese versions of the working daughters in early industrializing Europe depicted by Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott (1978); with this model in mind, I assumed quite naturally that the Javanese daughters, too, were working to help their families.

THINGS FALL APART, THE HOUSEHOLD DOES NOT HOLD

Although factory employment affects the availability of labor and capital within the family economy, I found that Rini and other factory daughters sought it without their parents' encouragement and even without their awareness or approval. Such an entry into the formal labor force did not indicate the daughters' acquiescence to a collective household strategy. Instead, Rini's father resisted and then accommodated his daughter's actions. Her borrowing practices also countered my assumptions about daughters' contribution to the family economy. Once again, the situation I encountered disturbed notions I had had about poor people, particularly the economic behavior of daughters from poor families.

Obviously, Rini's work, her wages, and her marriage were not part of a collectively or parentally conceived household strategy, even though her parents ended up benefiting from some of these decisions. Instead, Rini made her own decisions to which her parents tended to acquiesce, even if they initially resisted. When their debts mounted and Rini added to them rather than helped relieve them, her parents jointly forced her to quit her factory job. In general, however, she did not automatically defer to household needs or to the economic needs of household members; her reaction depended on the situation. In other words, her household-oriented behavior was fluid and could not be conceptualized in a fixed or static manner.

Despite this family's poverty, we find not strategies, but motley and assorted decisions and behaviors to which others respond by resisting, desisting, withdrawing, or accommodating—or some combination thereof. Rini's parents did not guide their dutiful daughter into factory employment and marriage, with continuous access to her income for household survival; rather, Rini withdrew her labor, income, and marriage from parental control as best she could.

The unraveling of factory daughters' stories over time marked the unraveling of my preconceptions as I grappled with understanding what I saw and entered into a dialogue with the household framework and with the peasant studies literature that had guided my questions and assumptions. The approach I had used, Carmen Diana Deere and Alain de Janvry's framework (1979), explained broader patterns but was not very helpful in accounting for the contradictory dynamics I observed within these domestic units.

As Rini's abbreviated life story suggests, my research challenges pop-

ular academic notions about how poor households operate and “strategize”; instead, I examine who makes decisions for whom and how such decisions are implemented, contested, or accepted. The actions and reactions of these young women raise important theoretical and conceptual questions about the economic organization of poor households as well as methodological questions about how to study “the household.”

To understand the Javanese case more clearly, I increasingly adopted a comparative perspective in my writing to illuminate the mediating role the kinship system may play as Third World women work within the system of industrial and multinational capitalism.⁶ A methodological shift is also part of this study’s nonlinear evolution and reflects the theoretical shifts just described. While working on my dissertation during the early 1980s, I gathered a considerable amount of quantitative data; during my follow-up visit in 1986, however, I concentrated almost exclusively on qualitative data, soliciting separate stories from parents and daughters in the same family and listening to their accounts of conflictual situations.

I have gratefully taken license from contemporary feminist scholarship (Mani 1989; Kondo 1990; Nielsen 1990; Joan Scott 1988; Stacey 1990) to integrate reflexivity and notions of self (what Kondo [1990] refers to as the “eye/I”) into my text. Although self-reflexiveness constitutes a very minor part of this book, occasional references to my own role and reactions as a researcher explicitly acknowledge the subjective nature of research since “any account is partial” (Kondo 1990, 8).

In depicting these intellectual and methodological shifts in my approach as well as some of my personal reactions in the field, I have underscored the processual aspect of research: struggling to consider as “data” individuals who have lives and personalities; attempting to reconcile these data with theory; jockeying between clarity and the depths of utter confusion; discovering and rediscovering; naming and renaming. Fieldwork and writing a book, like the lives of the women I studied, also represent a process of negotiation and renegotiation. Therefore, I include some discussion of this process of reconceptualization so that readers will feel less isolated by these dilemmas than I did.