

Pak Taib

1982

Pak Taib didn't speak English, and my Bahasa Indonesia was at an equal level. This is not to say that we didn't each know a few words & phrases of the other's language. But as scholars tell us, very little is communicated through words.

On that day a few of us had walked over from the Bubun village project in North Sumatra to see how the project was going in Pangkalan Biduk, the next village down the river. When we arrived, my colleagues rushed over to the jetty to look at the day's catch that was being unloaded and iced down waiting for the commercial pick-up.

Pak Taib spotted me and with a grin invited me over. As I headed towards him, he sent a little boy scurrying off on an errand. He made the gestures that said quite clearly that I was invited into his home. It was an invitation to which "no" was not an option. I went.

Though headman of his village, Pak Taib, like the rest of his constituents, was desperately poor regarding stuff and things. His house on stilts over mud flats had minimal furniture – I sat on a wooden crate that once had held bottles.

The little boy returned with two bottled drinks – yellow colored sugar water of an unfamiliar brand. In that situation, it was a gift of immeasurable graciousness, probably entailing the sacrifice of several meals.

Then he began talking in earnest and emphatic, modulated, gestured speech that, even despite his few remaining teeth, would have done credit to a Shakespearean actor. I listened intently, maintaining eye contact, smiling and nodding, and occasionally catching a phrase. It was a skill I had mastered in graduate philosophy classes while understanding very little of what was said.

He was describing a poster he had made for the village to communicate five values essential for development. After the talk and our drinks, he took me out to the village centre where the poster was standing. On it was a hand with each of the five fingers displaying a value.

The value in this episode was Pak Taib's passion. If anything drove Pangkalan Biduk towards development, that was it.



-- John Epps